

# “Institutions Don’t Define Us, Our Relationships Do”: Navigating Burnout, Relationship Building, and Collaboration as Graduate Students

Natalie Shellenberger and Nataly Dickson

**Natalie Shellenberger** is a PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition at Texas Christian University. Her research interests include community literacies, whiteness studies, critical race theory, and cultural rhetorics. She has a professional website, [nataliemichelle.org](http://nataliemichelle.org), that contains a link to her podcast as well as current research projects.

**Nataly Dickson** is a Mexican-American, PhD candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at Texas Christian University. Her research interests include writing center studies, composition studies, and writing program administration. She has a website, [languageinthewritingcenter.com](http://languageinthewritingcenter.com), and is the co-host of The PhD-to-Be podcast.

**Abstract:** Using autoethnography as methodology, this article draws on the experiences of two graduate students and their attempts to navigate burnout, relationship building, and collaboration in their graduate program. They illustrate how burnout has led them to be more intentional in their relationship building in order to combat the institution’s predisposition to individualize, isolate, and promote competitiveness among graduate students. Ultimately, the authors hope to encourage graduate students to consider how collaboration can be used to tackle burnout and build relationships in the process.

**Keywords:** graduate school, relationships, burnout, feminist co-mentoring, collaboration

In the final paragraph of Leigh Patel’s *No Study Without Struggle: Confronting Settler Colonialism in Higher Education*, she states, “institutions don’t define us, our relationships do” (170). This statement, following an examination of the structural inequalities of higher education, is a reminder of the importance of relationship building while in the institution. This, however, is easier said than done. Since the institution operates as a capitalist meritocracy, everyone defaults to looking out for themselves, which doesn’t translate into relationship or coalition building. This is due to settler colonialism which, Patel argues, “has shaped epistemology, what counts as knowledge, and educational policy and practice via the emphasis on individual achievement” (21). Terms such as “achievements” or “achievement gaps” continue to “illustrate the ways that individual achievement is discussed and valued more than collective learning and well-being” (21). Therefore, these considerations and accompanying pressures do not support collaboration that can create work that will not only bolster the CVs of graduate students but also contribute to larger bodies of knowledge and alleviate the burnout experienced from coursework, exams, teaching commitments, and dissertation writing. As a result, graduate students experience exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inefficacy, all in the name of producing an original contribution to the field and

sacrificing relationships in the process.

It was not until we were both experiencing burnout that we realized how graduate programs pit graduate students against one another. These conditions are not helpful toward relationship building and collaboration which we argue is crucial to combating burnout caused by the institution. As a result, we have been more intentional with our relationship building and collaborating with our graduate student colleagues. To do so, we exercise two feminist co-mentoring practices. The first feminist co-mentoring practice is from Beth Godbee and Julia C. Novotny which “attends to the relationship and people involved in the mentoring” (180). This feminist co-mentoring approach is associated with “partnership, solidarity, empowerment, and agency” which are necessary toward “asserting the right to belong in higher education” (Godbee and Novotny, 180). The second feminist co-mentoring approach is what Sonia C. Arellano and Ana Milena Ribero’s call *comadrisimo*. *Comadrisimo* is a Latinx, feminist co-mentoring practice that works to “create mentoring relationships in Rhetoric and Composition that challenge hegemonic models of feminism while supporting the success and development of Latina academics” (343). We use these two feminist co-mentoring practices in hopes that we can be, as Patel describes, “less individualistic, competitive, and punitive with ourselves and each other” to combat the institution and build relationships with our colleagues (170). In this article, we use autoethnography to illustrate how our burnout has led us to be more intentional in our relationship building by narrating how our relationships came to be and how these relationships have been strengthened through collaboration. Ultimately, we hope to show how we used our burnout as an opportunity to grow and collaborate with one another instead of letting burnout be a barrier toward our successes and the successes of our colleagues.

## Our Methodology

Our experiences in academia are shaped by institutional capitalism and settler colonialism in higher education. Therefore, our choice to narrate our experiences through using autoethnography is necessary to combat the belief that it is not a legitimate form of research methodology. As Michelle Fine states in *Just Research in Contentious Times*, “Given the troubling history of social science, one might reasonably conclude . . . that universities are too elitist and soaked in a long history of exclusion, stratification, and White supremacy to be of use for generating counter-stories, gathering counter-evidence, or fueling movements for change” (116-117). Moreover, Sue Doe et al. capture our purpose in their claim that “autoethnography testifies even as it also calls to action” (146). Therefore, this methodological choice is crucial to challenge the dominant voices that govern academic spaces and continue to perpetuate colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal norms that cause burnout and make it difficult to form relationships with one another. Finally, we echo Walker et. al in the belief that centering graduate student voices highlight the “experiences and needs of this special population” so that institutional policies can be created and revised with current and future graduate students in mind (170).

## How We Became “The Nataly/ies”

Before we discuss our experiences with burnout, relationship building, and collaboration, we believe it is important to tell the story of how the two of us met and how our relationship has evolved throughout the years. From the very beginning, we embraced the opportunity to build a coalition together, and ultimately, we created a support system that included becoming mentors and supporters for one another. Going forward, we will mark each of our narratives with our names (including the first initial of our last names) to avoid confusion. We also want to note that our different positionalities, Nataly is a Mexican-American woman and Natalie is a white woman, shape how we experience the institution and build relationships.

**Nataly D.:** I began the PhD program at Texas Christian University (TCU) in fall of 2020. Like many during the pandemic, my courses were online. I was living in Houston, TX (TCU is located in Fort Worth, TX) while I waited for my graduate courses to begin in person. I remember that the department, professors, and classmates made attempts to create community despite the circumstances, but it was difficult for me to make new friends and form relationships via Zoom or other communication channels. When we returned in person for the fall 2021 semester, I was eager to meet my cohort as well as the new cohort who were able to begin their programs in person. The director of graduate studies (DGS) at the time emailed me before the fall 2021 semester began and asked if I would be interested in meeting the new graduate students during their orientation. I happily accepted this opportunity and joined them during their lunchtime.

At this point, I had a year of the PhD program under my belt. I felt a level of confidence heading toward the new graduate student orientation that day, but looking back, I believe that this could have been an opportunity for me to use my seniority as power to separate myself from the incoming graduate students. I, however, agreed to attend the new graduate student orientation because I know how it feels to be in their position: new to TCU, overwhelmed by the information being given at orientation, and nervous about starting a graduate program. Therefore, I wanted to give them information they wouldn't be able to get from the DGS, who has never been a graduate student in this program. I wanted to make myself available to them right from the beginning and offer the incoming graduate students any information I could on professors, coursework, or TCU more broadly. It was here that I met Natalie, gave her my phone number, and thus began our friendship.

**Natalie S.:** I was so grateful that Nataly decided to attend the orientation luncheon for my incoming cohort. As an older graduate student, I was a little apprehensive about meeting the other students and if I would vibe with anyone, given my age difference. Right away, I felt comfortable with Nataly, and she was very knowledgeable about the program, courses, and professors — and she was willing to share that information with all of us. We realized that we would be in two courses together in my first semester, and I sat with her in both, and we began to grow closer as the

semester progressed. During these courses, we became Natalie with the “ie” and Nataly with the “y” by our professors. One day, a fellow student said, “here come the Nataly/ies” and now, when people see us together, that is how we are addressed. Ever since August of 2021, Nataly has been an integral part of my support system, and I hope she feels the same way about me.

## Breaking the Cycle: Our Mental Health Journeys

Results from a 2018 study showed that graduate students are more than six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety. In their article, “Graduate Student Burnout: Substance Use, Mental Health, and the Moderating Role of Advisor Satisfaction,” Allen et al., note that graduate students experience “high levels of stress, moderate or severe anxiety symptoms, and moderate or severe depressive symptoms” as a result of burnout (1130). At every stage of a graduate program, we are faced with different benchmarks that quickly deplete any of our mental replenishment from semester breaks and trigger those burnout symptoms. Whether it is assistantships, comprehensive exams, or dissertation work that is added to our plates, we still have the constant pressure to publish our work, present at conferences, and distinguish ourselves. If burnout takes over, we risk spiraling into a negative mental space filled with imposter syndrome, depression, and hopelessness. Given all these pressures, it is not surprising that “44% of graduate students who reported depression or anxiety during the past year faced academic hardship due to their mental health problems” (Allen et al., 1131).

There is no guaranteed way to avoid burnout, depression, or anxiety, but we were both able to find pathways to combat burnout that yielded useful interventions for us. Now we have our friends, professional mentors, and outside support systems in place to aid us, as Beth Godbee advises, “in building confidence after it’s been lowered -- helping one seeing that one’s not alone and navigating further traumas arising not only in graduate school but also through job searches and academic careers” (“The Trauma of Graduate Education”). However, before we discuss relationship building, mentoring, and collaboration, we will share our experiences with burnout, depression, and anxiety.

**Nataly D.:** In my second year of the PhD program, I noticed that my energy was running out quicker than normal, and I was losing motivation to do my work despite having interest in the subject matter. This was accompanied by negative, hopeless thoughts that made me think the work I was doing was not going to have an impact or that it was not contributing anything to the field. By the end of my second year, I could feel myself yearning for a break but finding sadness in the fact that summer meant I would have to prepare for my comprehensive exams. I also had to continue working as an academic coach to pay my bills, all while running on empty. My lack of energy caused me to fall behind on my reading. Then, the straw that broke the camel’s back happened during a stressful family visit that caused a panic attack. After this, I started looking for

a counselor. The next thing I knew, I was in my counselor's office where he confirmed that I was experiencing burnout. Things got worse before they got better. My stress, anxiety, and depression were at their peak during the fall 2023 as I was in the process of completing and defending my comprehensive exams. Slowly, however, I am on the road to recovering from burnout thanks to counseling, maintaining my relationships, and evaluating the expectations I have for myself and those that I thought others had of me.

**Natalie S.:** The first year of my PhD program was anxiety-ridden mostly from learning the system, the professors, and my specific interests. At our institution, the second semester of the first year is four courses, which is tiring and overwhelming, but doable. Knowing that the following summer would be entirely dedicated to studying for my comprehensive exams, I made a conscious effort to take off the entire summer break before my second year. Even though I took every precaution to store up as much energy as possible, similar to Nataly, I also noticed that during the second year of the PhD program, I began to feel unmotivated, lethargic, and in a state of constant stress. At the end of the Fall semester, I began to see a therapist because I was constantly anxious, depressed, and also experiencing guilt for not being able to accomplish everything and juggle my family and friend obligations. This was when I learned that I was experiencing burnout. For me, the final stressor occurred in the spring semester when none of my close friends were in any of my courses. I began to feel isolated and alienated, which added to my lethargy, depression, and burnout. Currently, I am working towards balance in my life, but it is an ongoing battle.

## Articulating Your Goals & Protecting Your Voice

As graduate students trying to make names for ourselves, we are susceptible to getting caught up in the machinery of the institution that can make it difficult to build relationships. In Patel's *Decolonizing Educational Research*, she argues that settler colonialism causes knowledge to be seen as property and limited in nature, leading graduate students to be competitive, even when attempting to collaborate with one another (35). We each have had first-hand experience where collaborative attempts were made, whether that be on a minor level with partner or group work or toward the possibility of publication that were unsuccessful and detrimental to our mental health. In reflecting on these moments, we note the need to be aware that not all efforts to build relationships and collaborate will be safe from the "unquenchable thirst for property that is core to settler structures" (Patel 35).

**Nataly D.:** A few years ago, a graduate student approached me about collaborating on a project. We were still getting to know each other but I thought of them as my friend especially because of their attempts to build a relationship. When they asked me to collaborate, however, I hesitated. I felt that collaborating on a project required a relationship where both parties knew about each other's work ethics and what they valued. They brought up the option to collaborate multiple times which made it difficult for me to say no. Eventually, after they asked multiple times,

I agreed. I didn't want to collaborate, but I thought that collaboration would be a stress reliever. I immediately saw that this would not be the case. Our goals for the project were not the same. I liked the project's topic, and our approaches were unique, but the process was not enjoyable. They would edit my language which inherently changed my writing voice and made me feel like I was losing myself in the process. I also felt that they were forcing this collaborative opportunity to be a publication which was never my intention. I believe that they were operating on the institution's notion that everything needs to be turned into a publication or else it is a waste of time. I felt that the entire process only damaged the possibility of us becoming closer friends. In the end, this experience was harmful to my mental health.

**Natalie S.:** In one of my courses, we routinely broke out into discussion groups for each class meeting. During one of these breakouts, I had a difficult interaction with another student that really shook my confidence and upset me. Essentially, a fellow colleague dismissed my thoughts on our readings as reductive, which was affirmed by another member of the group, who happened to be a friend of the colleague. The fourth member in my group looked at me and made a disgusted face at the other two's comments and behavior. She then mouthed to me, "Don't worry about them," and smiled at me. Shortly after, we were given a break, and before coming back together for group presentations on our readings, she took me aside and said, "those two were wrong for being so hateful and dismissive of you. They do the same thing to me, so I do not associate with them unless I have to. You made good points, so I would share them with the class when our group speaks." Even though she validated my hurt feelings, bolstered my self-esteem a bit, and attempted to help me brush off the uncomfortable exchange, I told her that I was so anxious from everything that I did not feel comfortable sharing anymore. She told me that she understood but that we could not be bullied and ultimately silenced by colleagues over their pettiness and competitiveness. When we returned to our groups, she mentioned that I had some interesting thoughts and hoped I would share them, which helped me to be assertive and find my voice. Without her taking the time to encourage and support me, I would not have felt safe to contribute and would have allowed other's settler colonialist mindsets to determine how I exist and function in the academy.

## **It Takes a Village: Meaningful Co-Mentorship**

As we have emphasized throughout this article, relationships are vital to our success and growth in academia. Not only do we turn to each other for support when things are stressful, but we also learn from each other in many ways that benefit us personally and professionally. Initially, the first relationships that we build in our graduate programs are the department advisor and/or our mentors. As Allen et al. state in their study, "positive relationships with a faculty advisor are associated with improved mental health, decreased stress, and less emotional exhaustion among graduate students" (1132). There is often, however, a social aspect missing from our faculty-mentor relationships, something that can be found in graduate student peer relationships such as



peer *comadres* (Ribero and Arellano 349). This is due to, as Godbee argues, the power relations between graduate students and faculty members who might serve as dissertation directors, committee chairs, etc. She states that “graduate students can benefit from dispersed and networked mentorship relationships, especially with mentors who don’t hold asymmetrical power over them” (“The Trauma of Graduate Education”). In this section, we reflect on how we have functioned as (co)mentors to our colleagues and how this practice has strengthened our relationships, created a sense of belonging, and fostered personal and academic growth.

**Natalie S.:** Personally, I have never considered myself as someone who functions as a mentor; however, after reading Godbee and Novotny’s article discussing feminist co-mentoring among graduate students, I began to reconsider how I view my relationships and experiences. As they state:

We see co-mentoring as feminist as it attends to the relationship and people involved in mentoring; carefully considers matters of status and power; and provides an alternative to, if not direct counter for, the traditional master-apprentice model that has contributed to inequities for women. Additionally, Bona et al. argue that co-mentoring is not a method but a relationship, and as a relationship, co-mentoring is associated with partnership, solidarity, empowerment, and agency—all important concepts for feminism and for anyone (men, women, transgender, cisgender) asserting the right to belong in higher education and other high-stakes settings (qtd. in Godbee and Novotny 180).

During the reflection on my co-mentoring experiences, I slowly began to realize that I was dismissing my mentorship practices as just being a good friend or classmate.

As Godbee and Novotny urge us to consider, “individuals might begin by recognizing where they are already involved in feminist co-mentoring, where it could be extended or tried anew, and how current mentoring approaches could be deepened” (191). For example, I generally tend to keep a small group of friends and share knowledge with those colleagues that I have built strong relationships within the program. Within my circle, I share any tips and tricks that I have learned in (and about) the program, about conferences, and for publications. I have also helped colleagues by offering feedback on any writing they share with me or ideas for projects and including them in panels for conferences. I did not recognize these actions as mentorship, only natural friendship components.

When I dissect the presence of co-mentorship with one of my newest colleagues, who joined the program in the cohort following mine, I definitely think of Godbee and Novotny’s discussion of “power with” mentor relationships. I am older, by age, than most of the graduate students in my program, so I was excited when I met this wonderful woman who is around my age and also has children. Once we got to know this about each other, it felt like an immediate bond formed,

and we wanted to help each other get through this program as easily and quickly as possible. So, in that very moment, without even being aware, our co-mentoring relationship began. Similar to a pairing in the case study that Godbee and Novotny share, our relationship reflects, “their collaborative (or co-) relationship shows how solidarity is built through *power with* — that is, not only through the direct or immediate sharing of knowledge, access, resources, and insights, but also significantly through the indirect and slower, sustained relational work that provides individuals with a sense of belonging” (186). By seeing ourselves in each other, we feel a sense of validation that we not only belong in the program but we can provide meaningful contributions to the field. We truly embody what Godbee and Novotny hope: “If we agree that feminist co-mentoring plays an important role in fostering one’s sense of value (i.e., self-empowerment, agency, solidarity), then individuals can recognize it as important to their own and others’ positions in academia” (191).

Another close relationship that I have involves the only other rhetoric and composition student in my cohort. During the second year in the program, we were in two courses together, and we both each had a separate third course. We were both really feeling the pressure of our projects and deadlines, so she suggested that we team up and create something together for a course final to help ourselves out. Given everything on my plate, it should have been a no-brainer to immediately agree. Unfortunately, in the back of my mind, I worried about sharing credit for a project, especially with the only other rhetoric scholar in my cohort, as well as abandoning the opportunity to start working on a publication draft (which was an option for our final project). As the last month of the semester approached, I realized that we were both exhausted and burnt out, and I was being silly to worry about the negative impacts of our possible collaboration. Thankfully, she had not started working on another final project, so we went on to create a wonderful presentation together. Interestingly enough, it was an amazing piece on feminist coalitional rhetoric that our professor asked permission to use in her future courses. Without that burnout, I would not have worked with my colleague and created such a meaningful project. This experience helped me reevaluate how I exist in the academy and ultimately participate in the “working with” aspect of feminist co-mentoring.

One thing that I became painfully aware of during this reflection is that institutional influences still plague my co-mentorship practices, even though I have a strong desire to dismantle the harmful structures that operate within the academy. However, I am working to unlearn those indoctrinated behaviors and realize it will take a concerted effort by all of us involved to exact change.

**Nataly D.:** Like Natalie, I also have a relationship with my colleagues where I refuse to gatekeep things like calls for papers or opportunities that can help us all grow professionally. I have found that sharing these things, especially with my younger colleagues, has strengthened our relationships because it comes from a place of vulnerability. I have been in many conversations where my younger colleagues have openly shared their fears of not being published by the



time they go on the job market. In these conversations, I have shared that these were once my fears too, so my inclination to mentor them comes from a place of understanding which we believe is important for relationship building. Vulnerability and understanding help unveil the stressors we experience as graduate students and unite us closer together.

However, vulnerability and understanding function differently from graduate student to graduate student. As a graduate student of color, I understand that there are specific approaches that graduate students like me need. One mentorship approach I have embraced is Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano's "senior comadre," which is an application of *comadrisimo* (345). A senior comadre is an older Latina graduate student who uses her experience in the program to mentor younger Latina graduate students. In experiencing burnout, I approach relationships with my Latinx, younger graduate student colleagues with this framework rather than falling into the institutional trap that could tempt me to be competitive with colleagues I share identities with. This framework also brings attention to the flaws of the system and uses them as *fuera*. *Fuerza*, or strength, is "an example of how to turn obstacles into opportunities for critical work," where a senior comadre can teach her younger graduate student colleagues to "push past the pain, to be productive through the tears" which requires vulnerability and understanding (346). Below, I share a narrative of how I became a senior comadre to a younger Latina graduate student, a relationship I still maintain today.

At the same new graduate student orientation lunch where I met Natalie, I met the newest rhetoric and composition Latina student. She spoke Spanish and was the oldest in her family, like me, and was nervous about graduate school. I thought about how I felt my first semester of the master's program almost five years ago, where I was the only Latinx person in the entire department, and what it would have meant to see someone like me. While we were eating lunch, one of the other Latinx students (male), who was from a different part of Texas, asked if we had experienced any racism or discrimination in Fort Worth. I nodded no, she nodded yes. Nonetheless, we knew that it existed, and there was a possibility we would experience it while at TCU. After lunch, me and the younger Latina graduate student walked over to a coffee shop where she would wait for her ride. I decided to wait with her so she would not be alone, and we continued to get to know each other more. We asked about each other's families and what part of Mexico they are from, and she asked about being a Latina at TCU. At one point in the conversation, I said to her, "we have to stick together!" Thankfully, we have. In these past two years, I have tried my best to support her as she navigates graduate school by giving her advice, listening when she is struggling, and being a friend.

## **Find Your People: Collaboration as Catharsis**

As mentioned earlier, the drive to differentiate ourselves in order to be a marketable commodity is conditioned deeply into the minds of graduate students. In our earlier narratives, we

shared our negative collaborative experiences that felt driven by competition. However, if developed in healthier, mutually beneficial ways, collaboration can not only produce work we would not have created in solitude, but it can relieve stress and burnout and help us cultivate our distinct voices. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede affirm these benefits as they reflect on their years of collaboration when they say, “In our experience, the act of writing together and seeking ‘identification’ allows us to better see ourselves as distinct. As a result, we have felt free to experiment in writing together, aiming for a seamless voice in one piece . . . and for clearly demarcated but communicating voices in another” (5). Collaboration is like any relationship; it can provide catharsis if you choose the right partner.

The difference between our collaborative experiences with other colleagues and this specific project is that we already had a close friendship prior to working on this article. We knew that we were both struggling with our mental health, so even though this opportunity meant one more thing on our plates, we both happily accepted the opportunity to collaborate because it would help us combat burnout and the institution, grow in our friendship, and work towards publication. Our work together in this project truly embodies Meeks and Hult’s objectives for collaboration which are, “Working in partnership, co-mentors empower one another, work as pro-active agents, and enter into a more holistic relationship rooted in a common goal. In this way, co-mentoring takes this concept of *power over* found in traditional mentorships and transforms it into *power with*” (qtd. in “Asserting the Right to Belong” 179). Through this article, we were both able to achieve our common goals of publishing an article concerning the mental health of graduate students and sharing our experiences of co-mentorship, collaboration, and relationship building in the hopes that it can help other graduate students.

## Conclusion

Although we argue for considering collaboration as a tool to combat burnout and institutional pressures, we are not suggesting that collaboration is a cure for either. We understand that burnout is a mental health condition caused by many stressors, some of which are imposed on us by our institutions. We also recognize that the institution is rooted in colonial and capitalist structures, making it difficult for change. However, as graduate students, we should consider how collaboration can be used towards coalition building in order to navigate our programs, contribute to knowledge-making, and combat the structures of our institutions — all of which can result in a positive effect on our mental health. In our experiences with collaborating for this article, we found collaboration to be an effective method to discuss these topics, grow in our friendship, and help other graduate students recognize why and how graduate programs have such an impact on one’s mental health.

Building coalitions, whether through mentorship, collaborative writing, or in other forms, allows us to reclaim agency over our education and do things on our own terms, not how the insti-

tution wants it. Lunsford and Ede speak to that agency in their collaboration by saying, “our writing together has given us a stronger sense of our own stylistic proclivities, our own ways of thinking, knowing, writing, organizing, and revising” (4-5). We soon learned that we each have our own unique writing styles and ways of thinking which helped us grow as writers together. Collaboration and (co)mentorship allow for graduate students to challenge dominant practices within our institutions, such as knowledge gatekeeping, competition, and burnout. Without these relationships to intervene and work to dismantle the system, graduate school will continue to function as the colonial, capitalistic, and patriarchal machine as it is intended.

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