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Transcript for Culture Replicate, Season 2 Episode 1: Culture Replicate with Dr. Katie Wedemeyer-Strombel

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STEMculture Podcast:

[Intro music]

Dani:

Hello, hello. Welcome everyone to season two of STEMculture Podcast. So before we get started, we have a few announcements. We have a new host. It's Dr. Moncie Wright. Say hi Moncie!

Moncie:

Meow! [laughter]

Dani:

She's from Episode 11: Reviews, Reviewers, and Rejections and we are absolutely thrilled to have her on board. We also have lots of content planned for Season Two. Our first main series of the season will cover the process of preparing for, applying to, and succeeding in STEM graduate school. We have two exciting inSTEM episodes already in production. We'll be starting off Season Two with a new content type we are calling replicates, where we provide a good sample with the most pertinent information. Replicate episodes will revisit themes from our previous seasons.

Brooke :

With all this content coming out, we want to remind you that you can be a Patreon donor. [cheering from all] For just \$1 a month, you can support us and get a shout out. And for \$5 a month you can get access to extra content. We'd like to give a shout out to our current Patreon supporters. We have Moncie, Robert, Brian, Catherine, Shannon, and as well as a one time donation from Eric.

Will :

Very generous.

All :

Thank you!!

Brooke :

Thank you so much. We are so appreciative. All of the donations go directly back into the podcast to make it that much better. And to date., our Patreon and other donations have allowed us to purchase our audio equipment that we use for every episode. And currently, we are able to support our audio platforms' monthly payment as well.

Dani :
Yay!

Will :
So the extra content for Patreon members that we mentioned will include inebriated shows, where one of us imbibes and discusses science or science history, while a sober host tries to manage their ridiculousness. Another content type will be Dani's cursing corner where we curse. We will, in those episodes, answer Patreon questions and rant about what's trending on hashtag academic chatter, PhD chat, science, Twitter and others and get questions and themes from those. If you've ever felt that people are not reacting to your situation appropriately and wondered why the hell they aren't as upset about it as you are, then those are the episodes for you.

Dani :
I will curse for you and scream for you.

Will :
Paid cursing, it's beautiful. Our Patreon is @www.patreon.com/STEMculturePodcast, which is always available on our show notes if you need to find that link (which are on STEMculturePodcast.com). If you don't want to donate every month, you can do a one time donation and we will be infinitely grateful. Finally, we are curious if our dear listeners would be into merch with our logo. So if you are, tweet us at STEMculture or find us on our Facebook page, our Instagram, or our website.

Dani :
We are starting off right meow with our first ever replicate - a fantastic follow up to our culture series: Episodes One, Two and Three with Twitter's favorite graduate student advocate Dr. Katie Wedemeyer-Strombel. Katie contacted STEMculture Podcast back in December when we first started up, and we got in touch with her this summer for some great discussion. As you may know, if you've listened before, we here at STEMculture Podcast want to improve the culture of STEM. It's often known for being a place where toxicity can thrive - and we want to help change that. There are many amazing people out there in the world that are fighting this toxicity. And Katie is among them. She does this by sharing her own personal story, both the challenges she's come across as well as the amazing successes. In this first part, our conversation with Katie focuses on her journey and how she started graduate student advocacy and why she thinks it's important. On this episode you'll hear Brooke, Dani, and Will.

Dani :
This episode goes out to all the grad students who have fallen into toxic vats of bureaucracy. Keep on transforming the toxic waste into sweet sweet justice.

Brooke :
Today, we are covering Katie's story, including her experience with the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program (the NSF GRFP) and dealing with difficult situations in grad school. We get Katie's perspective on the culture of STEM and grad school and discuss work-life integration and other considerations therein. Enjoy!

Dani :
Alright, well, hi Katie. Thanks so much for joining us.

KWS :
Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Dani :

Now we want to start off kind of first thing, you know, STEMculture Podcast is all about talking about the culture of STEM and graduate students. And I wanted to first or we wanted to first talk about and hear about your story, because you're very open about it on Twitter. But we want to share with our listeners as well. We want to hear a little bit about how getting an NSF Graduate Research Program, no Fellowship Program, oh my gosh, the NSF GRFP, changed your life for the better. And then eventually how this led you to where you're at now with graduate student advocacy.

KWS :

Yeah so, I started graduate school in 2012 working with a couple of professors and I was really excited to work with and at the beginning, everything seem to be going really well.. Somehow we got on very different pages about what is graduate school, what's expected of graduate students, kind of what the culture of graduate school should be like. I was hoping that it was going to be a very collaborative, constructive, challenging, but positive experience, but I was feeling like it was a pretty negative experience. And so it was a really unhealthy and unproductive environment for me to be in. And so, after a couple of years, two years, actually, when my program, taking classes, teaching, during a research project, I decided that I just wasn't going to be able to continue in that environment, because it was taking a serious toll on my mental health, on my physical health, I wasn't sleeping, I was having anxiety attacks all the time. And it was having a negative impact on my interpersonal relationships, as well with friends, with family, with my fiance at the time, who's now my husband. And so I actually left my first lab, the day that I got my GRFP. So that was a really, that was really for me, it was freedom. For me, it was knowing that one, I belonged in graduate school, because I had been told by several professors that I didn't belong in graduate school. And so the GRFP really gave me the confidence to say, you know what, I do belong here, I want to be here. And I can approach other professors that have the same, the same perspective, or the same idea of what graduate school should be, as I do, that want to create a positive, intellectually challenging environment, rather than a more traumatic one. And so I was able to take my GRFP. And I left my lab, right before the end of the semester. After my second year, that summer, all I did was teach. I had a teaching assistantship that summer, and then didn't find my new lab, actually, until that next fall. I was able to have that time over the summer to really take time and do due diligence (wow that was hard to say!) and really interviewing professors and labs and graduate students to find a better fit, which I ended up finding in my advisor. I finished with Carla Peterson, who was wonderful and positive and challenging, but in all the good ways. And so really, the GRFP is what gave me the confidence to stay in graduate school, and gave me the freedom to really approach other labs and say, hey, look, I have this funding, I have a project that I want to do. I had to start my project over. But I had already shown by having that grant that I could develop projects, and I had collaborations in place that I could build off of as well.

Dani :

Well, that's great.

Will :

So you mentioned that your graduate school experience was not all good. And also I understand that you have a policy that you won't name names, or get into too much of specifics about that. And as somebody who has had somewhat negative experiences as a graduate student, also, I think I can understand why that might be. But I'd be interested in hearing you describe the reason why you have that policy.

KWS :

Yeah, so you have to be really careful about how you talk about it, for a couple of reasons. I mean, for me, I've realized that it's a much more systemic issue. Yes, I had experiences with certain people, but really, it's not necessarily just them, it is a systemic issue. I've seen it at multiple universities at different scales, impacting different kinds of students. And so trying to, you can't, how do I say it nicely... You just

have to be careful of taking something that's a systemic issue and putting it all on one or two, or however many people. Yes, they, you know, are adding to the systemic problem. Absolutely. In my perspective anyway, but because they are part of the system, and because they have a more established career than I do, I have to be really careful about that, because I need to make sure that my career is not in jeopardy or connections that I need, or funding I need is not in jeopardy as a result of not working with them. And as it was, I mean, in my experience for me, I wasn't able to apply for certain things afterwards, because of the connections that people I worked with before had, but I wanted to really try to maintain strong relationships with other colleagues, you know, that knew us both. And so that was, that's the biggest reason is that that power dynamic between, you know, professors and students, and even though now that I'm graduated, it's still you know, I'm still early career researcher, or early career attack, or early career, whatever, I'll end up being quite landed on something yet. But, you know, I'm still not as established and I, you know, still want to be able to benefit and learn from and contribute to my network. And, and so yeah, so I'm careful, careful about it for all those reasons. And also, you know, I'm not, I'm not always successful in it. But a big goal for me is that when I talk about these issues in academia, I try to, I try my best to be constructive about it, or just to be transparent about this is something that a lot of people go through that I go through that I've noticed other people go through, or, hey, this is a problem, we should probably address it I, I try not to just be whining and complaining or angry at certain people. And so it's, you know, all that's part of it too, right is kind of taking the high road and just going, I'm going to learn from this, I'm going to use it to do good. And so trying to focus more on the lessons learned from it, then on who to throw under the bus for it is something that I found for me has been helpful in my healing and how I've connected with other people, and is how I've been able to create some change in the system at some level. So not a lot, it hasn't been, you know, huge, but I've pecked away at it a little bit with the help of, you know, the huge network of others that are also fighting this fight.

Dani :

I think it's a very, it's a really great way of looking at it and a way to help it not like bring you down. All of us on the call today have unfortunately had some negative experiences too. And we're also really worried to talk about it any more specifically than just that. Because there were warnings of "Oh, you might defame this person. And then they can sue you".

All 20:41

Sounds of frustration.

Brooke 20:42

Right, right. I think we've all received specific warnings about how we should proceed about the experiences that we've had. And that can be pretty intimidating as well. And I feel like you explained very well, you know, if you want to make change down the road, you can't start off your path with, you know, throwing stones at specific people. It will make your path very difficult, and then you won't be able to create change down the road the way you want to.

KWS 21:21

Yeah, exactly. You know, I think important to realize that, yes, well, there are a few people who it for me personally have really impacted me in that way. It's, they're not acting in it alone. They're supported by a system that for a long time has encouraged and not treated graduate students very well. So....

Dani 22:40

Right.

Will 22:41

Yeah, I think that, I mean, you hinted at a lot of things that are unique to academia, that people outside of academia might not really understand, like, the treatment of intellectual property of graduate

students, for example. And there are a lot of things like that, that probably somebody interested in graduate student advocacy could talk about at length. But I think this leads us nicely into our next question. In your opinion, what is the culture of graduate school like now? What would you like to see change in graduate student culture, specifically? And in STEMculture in general?

KWS :

That's a really good question. So the culture of graduate school now to me? Really, to me, it's still on that, you know, well I had to suffer through it. So you have to suffer through it, that that seems to be kind of the the majority of the stories that I hear and what I've seen, what I experienced is this all well, you know, I suffered through it. So you have to suffer through it too, which I find so interesting. Because, especially, right, so as scientists, we do work to improve our methodology, we do it to learn new things, to change how we used to do things, so we can do them better. So like we learn how to, you know, analyze things in a new way, we develop new methods, new protocols, we invent new tools, so that we can improve and increase our productivity on what we're doing. And yet so many folks that have, usually it's folks that have been in it for awhile, are like, well, this is how it's always been. So we can't change. And so it's so interesting. There's a disconnect with our research, that's, we want to innovate, we want to do better, we want to learn from what we've done wrong and make things better and more productive. And yet, people are still really big on "Oh, well, that's just, you know, part of the process is feeling miserable". "And part of the process is being really unhappy". And, and so I think, to me, that's still the majority of the culture, in it from, you know, from what I experienced, what I've seen. And, and so that's kind of how I see it still, I think it's improving, I think, depending on where you're at, like, in the department, I ended up in, UTEP, with my advisor, and my, my department chair, who I worked really closely with, that was a super collaborative, super encouraging, super intellectually challenging, wonderful experience for me. I really enjoyed who I got to work with, and the culture of it there. But I was also in my last few years when I got there. So you know, I kind of learned the ropes a little bit. And I think that helps too. I mean, the biggest thing for me of what I'd like to see change, well, there's a few things. I think we need to stop emphasizing that graduate school is who you are, and that's it. For the longest time, I was like, "Hi, I'm Katie, I'm a PhD student period", I had nothing else. I couldn't talk about anything else. I didn't know how to talk about anything else. I lost all my hobbies, all my interests, I lost my multidimensionality as a person. I became a graduate student, I became entrenched in the literature and my field. Sure I did great in qualifying exams, I got grants, I was doing my fieldwork. But I didn't talk about anything but my research, I didn't think about anything but my research, I never could turn my brain off, it totally consumed who I was. Now, I have a personality that is easily susceptible to that kind of an environment where I can fall into that really easily because I really like external praise, it's something that has often fueled me. But I realized that it was these other people's goals and their pressure that was fueling me. And it really fueled me until it didn't and I totally burned out. And so, you know, for me, the biggest thing is, I think, for the culture, it's departmental from cohort mates, from collaborators, really deemphasizing that it's everything that you are. So I say, graduate school, it's something that we do, it's not who we are, and to really try to emphasize that we are unique individuals, and we have such cool, you know, like, we have so many different things that we can offer so many things about us, connect us to other people, whether those are academics or non-academics. And when we lose that, not only are we losing a part of ourselves, we're losing opportunities to connect with people and to even, we're losing opportunities for a broader impact of our research because we no longer know how to interact with others.

Brooke :
Right.

KWS :

And, and so I think that's a big thing for me as really promoting, promoting and demonstrating more of having a life and being allowed to have a life and being encouraged to take time off and to turn your brain off. And, you know, being encouraged to do that without binge drinking, which was a big thing in

my first department. It was like, you work ridiculous hours for six days a week, five, six days a week, and then you binge drink, and then you're hung over a little bit, and then you work six days of ridiculous hours, and then you all binge drink. And it was that was we did it was exhausting and really unhealthy. And led to some pretty negative ramifications for many folks that I know wasn't great for me. And so I think really just promoting that it's, it's a job that we're doing. It's not everything, and the only thing that you are.

Dani :
Yeah.

KWS :
And to me, that's really, I think the biggest part of the culture that I would like to see changed is, is just recognizing that we're humans, and that giving each other my advisor always says, are always my advisor said to me once that I think we're all health, I think we're we're all better off when we give ourselves permission to know one another as whole beings. I just think I love that. And I kind of decided to start living by that. For me that I'd like to see changed.

Will :
Yeah, I think we all strongly agree with you, I think, you know, you could go, I mean, in the same direction, another step and even say that, you're going to do better science, if you treat yourself like a whole person. And I mean, I hadn't considered before what you said about if you lose touch with everything outside of academic science, lose the ability to communicate with people who aren't in that world, you're actually losing a skill, probably, and probably plays into the broader problem that we have with communicating science to the lay public, which actually is a term that I really dislike. Because what are we like, a religion? Is this the Catholic Church and everybody else is outside of this dogmatic structure that is self-supporting for its own reasons? I don't like any of that. I think we should even come up with a different term.

KWS :
Yeah, I mean, you know, there are scientists grad students, and you know, professors, ECR is all docs, but do a great job with science communication, as well, because they've dedicated their time to it. But I think just even, you know, and I'm not saying that every, every scientist doesn't have to want to talk to the general public. But I think just having science in itself as a creative endeavor.

Dani :
Yeah!

KWS :
We use creativity to solve problems to figure out where we can fill in gaps and knowledge. And in order to be creative, you have to have the space to be inspired to be creative. And if you're so bogged down in the methodology, and the literature, and if you don't give your brain the time and the space to be inspired, it becomes really hard to do your work. I know for me, I really burnt out, I ended up taking like a whole year off of my dissertation, because I just was so resentful and angry and uninspired by it. I just couldn't look at it, I couldn't deal with it. And it really took time for me to take time away from it, to allow myself the room and the space to focus on me and my own health, which I had been neglecting. Because I was going all in like I was told I had to, you know, taking that time away, made all of my publications, which are a year delayed than they should be, but they are so much stronger, so much more inspired and will be so much more impactful with how I've written them now that I feel inspired and excited to share them rather than feeling like I'm forced just to do it because I have to do it.

Brooke :
Yeah...

Dani :

Absolutely. Yeah, I think rest is super important. I ended up burning myself out last semester pretty bad. And now I'm just taking, taking it real slow. I'll show up for like half a day and my advisor's on board, which is nice. So I can really take some time and and just feel excited again. And also take control. I told him nope, no more of that. [laughter] No more six months of work in two months.

KWS :

Yeah, it's really it's such an important thing to not only, you know, talk about that balance, but also for, for folks that are higher up to demonstrate the balance and taking time and resting. Like my advisor, she, she does a great like most summers, she's with her grandkids and with her family, and she's there for her students when we need her. But she, you know, that's her priority. And she, over like winter break and Thanksgiving break: same thing, she's with her family, and she tells us that we need to do the same and to take time and, you know, go on vacation, and don't take your laptop, put up an email, you know, an email away message. And she's, you know, really straightforward with, I might email you at five in the morning, because I wake up early, I don't expect you to respond at five in the morning, don't be freaked out, if you don't get it till 10 or noon. You know, where I've worked with other folks that were like, if I email you at 3am, you better respond to me by 4am, you need to be on call time. And so I think just leading by example, from those who are more established is going to be huge for grad students to learn, hey, you can do this. And you can do this successfully working fewer hours. I'm not saying don't, you know, work like five hours a week, but you don't have to work 70 hours a week to be successful. I know a lot of grad students who, you know, have had really positive advisors. And that's how I did it at the end of mine was I worked, you know, up to 40 hours a week, my work was so much higher quality when I kept with how much I worked. And when I preserved my personal time, my work was way more efficient and way higher quality than it ever was when I was working way more hours than that. So it can be done. And you know, I say that and a lot of times grad students will laugh at me, or I'll say, you know, try to go 24 hours without checking your email or waiting 24 hours to respond to an email and I get gasps from people. And like it's not we're not asking for anything extreme, we're asking for 24 hours to respond to things - a business day.

Dani :

Yeah...

KWS :

Being aware that if the culture promotes kind of that burnout mindset, but really, we need that space, we need that rest, we need that self care, so that we can be more productive. So we can be more efficient. And what we do, we can be more passionate, we can be more excited about it, we can be we can want to share it with more people, we can have the energy to go talk to other people and share it. And so I think, yeah, sorry, I talked about that already.

Dani :

No, no, that's quite all right.

Dani :

That's really important. That's why in our first season of STEMculture, we have a three series or a three episode series on work-life balance. And it's, you know, Episode Five: Work, Episode Six: Life, Episode Seven: Balance. [laughter]

KWS :

Yeah, that's awesome.

Dani :
Yeah!

Will :

You mentioned that, and I think I got this right, that, that the people who are established in the field are the people that we really need to get on board with this idea. But if they came up in the culture that we're talking about, you know, they made it through and now they're successful, how do we motivate them to accept this improvement?

KWS :

Yeah, that's a really good question. And you know, there are some really great established academics, folk that are advocating for these kinds of changes. There's a ton in the science Twitter community, which is wonderful. I think those that are already doing it, helping to amplify student voices that are talking about it, and also talking about it themselves with colleagues, is how we're going to, is what we really need, you know, eventually, I think we're going to just need critical mass where enough people are talking about it, and established folks are not necessarily calling out but are, you know, making it known that they know what's going on places and actually trying to take action. So that bad situations don't continue to happen with students over and over again. It's going to need to be that like applications go down to institutions that have bad reputations, or PIs that have bad reputations, no longer get TA funding from the institution or something that needs to be convinced those that are really ingrained in their ways. I'm not sure how we do that. But I think it has to come from their equal level or higher. So it's got to come from, you know, colleagues that are already helping us out and advocating for us. I mean, I had a lot of professors that were really awesome and advocated for me when I was changing labs and universities, who really helped me navigate a tough situation, once I sought them out and asked them for it. And so, you know, that I think is, is how we're going to have the most change, to get the ones that are really set in their ways and that are kind of the perpetrators of this. I'm not sure. I'm not sure how we reach them. I don't know.

Will

I was going to say an obvious question that people like that might ask is, is there research that supports the claim that supporting the whole person and all of its different manifestations actually improves work quality? And I think there probably is, I think we discussed some of it that deals with more specific realms. But there, I mean, if we're talking about STEM and the people who are ensconced in the positions of power there, they're probably going to ask for citations.

KWS 39:37

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, I don't, um, it's something that I've wanted to look into. But I haven't had time to look into yet, but I, I'm not sure. I mean, you know, there's, although there's a bunch of articles coming out, and that have come out recently about, like the mental health crisis and graduate school. And, you know, you would hope that that would maybe help that people aren't super happy that they're contributing to mental health crises in their students, but I don't know if there's research on that. I, I hope that there is.

Dani :
Yeah.

KWS :

I bet it may be like in the HR world, there's some kind of studies or something, you know, that's going on, but I'm not sure. But I think, you know, that could be potentially really valuable.

Dani :

Yeah, yeah, we'll see what we can find because definitely, when we were doing the work life balance series, we definitely came up across some articles that were talking about, like increased happiness, and, and all that. So if we could find something, especially in the business world, you know, there's actually a lot of research with that kind of stuff in those spaces.

KWS :

Yeah, I bet the business world is going to be, probably like HR, where that stuff will be found. I mean, I know that there are even majors or master's degrees, probably PhDs too that are all about, like, psychology for business. And so it's how you help managers, I think, manage the, but I don't remember what it's called. But there are distinct programs that are actually targeted for business. But it's a psychology perspective. On like organizing, I think it's called organizational psychology, actually. So anyway.

Brooke :

That might be a great place for us to start digging.

Dani :

And at our university, one of the things we've been kind of discussing amongst ourselves is, you know, it'd be really great if, because when you become a PI, no one teaches you how to manage people, right? You go from your PhD to probably your postdoc, and you're researching, and maybe in your postdoc, maybe you manage some people, but maybe not. And then all of a sudden, if you get a tenure track position, and you have to manage people, then you don't know how, then it's very easy to mismanage that situation. And we've been trying to have this conversation for a little while now. And we've gotten some positive feedback now, but having like, a management, like class, not class, like management workshop requirement for, like, incoming tenure track professors, and then any, anybody that's already there, like maybe they need to take it too. And I think that could help a lot. Because I think, you know, a fair amount of, of pain could be reduced if people just knew how to manage properly and communicate expectations properly, etc, etc. So...

Brooke :

And I think it could really boost productivity, you know, if they had these management skills, and you had happier grad students, you're going to have a more productive lab.

Dani :

Yeah.

KWS :

Yeah, I mean, I think of all the time I lost having to, you know, having to navigate a bad situation, having to figure out who to talk to, having to report it without actually reporting it, because it couldn't be anonymous, because obviously, they would know who I was. And, you know, like, all that navigation of a, of a bad situation, you know, took away from grant writing, or fieldwork or research. And then, even still, once I left, like, I, I had a lot of lasting impact, that I'm even still now that I've, you know, defended recently, I still am working through some things, I tried to unlearn some things. And, you know, all that time, that could be better dedicated to being productive in any aspect of my life, not even just academically, but just in general, that's wasted on having to deal with these unnecessary extra hurdles. And again, I'm a middle class white woman, my hurdles are, you know, pretty low compared to a lot of others. And, and, you know, and even still, I really struggle with it. So for others, you know, for underrepresented minorities, it's, you know, a whole different set of challenges that they have to navigate before they can even get to their science or get to what they want to be doing. And I think, yeah, you know, it, it definitely takes away from productivity and it takes your energy away, and not just so it doesn't just take away your productivity for the time that you're losing having to deal with that

stuff. But it sucks the energy out of you. And you have to be really careful and focus on, prioritize self care to really balance that out. Which is really hard to do, especially with deadlines and everything.

Dani :

So yeah, absolutely.

Brooke :

Yeah, I, I, you know, just speaking for myself, I know that, you know, the three of us here all have experienced exactly what you have said, but, you know, I look back on my first year of graduate school. And that was my entire year was taken up by the situation that I was in, so I wasn't able to put everything into my graduate program. It was just how do I fight this? And who do I talk to? And how do I navigate? And how do you sleep? And so, you know, I'm sitting here thinking, okay, out of the four of us sitting here having this conversation, four of us have experienced this, four of us have had our time and energy sucked by an experience that was essentially out of our control. And so that's one hundred percent of us, you know? How does that represent graduate students as a whole in this country? That's pretty terrifying.

KWS :

That's something that that really kind of has blown me away with the, you know, with the response of, of the things that I've said on Twitter, you know, I, I started out with like, like, 50 followers, people in my cohort, and people I had met at conferences, and I, I never really anticipated to, like, be a voice for this, because that was not something that I like, planned or set out to do. It just kind of happened. Because when I first went through everything, I felt like such a failure, I felt really alone. I was terrified. I didn't know if I was making the right choice. I didn't know. You know, where they right? Should I leave? Should I stay? Did I belong? What? What was wrong with me that this happened to me. And then the more I talked about it, you know, I could kind of like dip my toe in the water, depending on who I was talking to. They'd be like, Oh, I know, like five people who have changed labs. Why is no one talking about this? Oh, I know, like five people that, you know, had really bad experiences, but found great ones where I know people you know, and so I started getting angry that no one was talking about this, you know, or when my, my marriage struggled because of graduate school, because I did fall into that give graduate school your all and kind of shut out the rest of your life. I didn't even realize I was doing it. Because I was getting such positive feedback from everyone in that academic world. And I didn't even think to, you know, part of it was my fault. I wasn't prepared for it. But no one talks about about how prevalent divorces for graduate students, how prevalent just relationship struggles in general are, from my friends who, you know, were on the dating market and graduate school, how tough that is on its own. And, you know, nobody was talking about those things. And so I kind of just started talking about things that I was angry about, like when I would hear so many stories of it. And then I was always blown away by how many people it resonated with, like when all of a sudden there'd be like thousands of people responding like "Oh, shit, this is not just me". And there was such comfort in that solidarity, even though it was concerning that there were so many people that related to such negative experiences. And I, I've said this a few times and on different outlets, but like, truly, because of just talking about it more, right, or like the four of us all being able to relate to some of these things. In the things that made me feel like a failure, like I didn't belong in academia, like I could never graduate, like I couldn't, I wasn't enough. In all of those things that I've struggled with, I have found the most compassion, the most support and the most belonging with other graduate students in those areas. When we all just put down our you know, our strong faces and are vulnerable together we are, it's so powerful to have that camaraderie. Like, we're not all perfect, we all have struggles, and that's okay. And we're way better off if we just acknowledge that within one another. And we work through them together, rather than feeling so isolated and scared that like, if I tell people I'm struggling with this, they're gonna kick me out. And so, you know, I think it's, and it's been really, there's been a huge response from professors from other established alt-ac, folks, you know, people from all different levels, and all different walks of life who have talked about these, these shared struggling experiences in grad school. And there's something

really, you know, really alarming about the amount of people that are, that can relate, but also something comforting, knowing that it's not just us, it's not just me, I'm doing something wrong. It's this is a systemic issue that needs to be addressed. But it's something that, you know, we're not, we're definitely not alone in our struggles.

Dani :

Yeah, and I wanted to address you, you said earlier that it was your fault, you weren't prepared, I strongly believe it's not your fault, there's literally no way to be prepared for what you went through, Will has said something similar before. And I also yell at him. So... [laughter]

Will :

I was actually just thinking also, this needs a little preface. So my father is also a scientist. And he also went through some really awful things during his career as a graduate student, including a professor in one of his courses, failing him in a class, even though he made a B or something like that. Because that professor's opinion was that he would be better suited as an automechanic or a construction worker. So I, this is a story that I heard growing up. So I should have been prepared, because I knew that there were professors on some level, who had very little grasp of the potential negative effects of what they say to graduate students, and the impact of their imbalanced power dynamic in that situation. But I still wasn't prepared. Because I was so invested. And so personally, you know, I identified my self worth with my success. So much that it, I don't think that, I think it would be very difficult to be prepared for, running into a situation where as a grad student, you have a professor deride you. And, and, yeah, I just don't think I don't think that there is really any good preparation for that. And, and even from from where I stand, I don't think that even if I had been more, you know, emotionally mature, in a more general sense, when I got to grad school, I don't think I would have dealt with it well, and so some of these things are not going to be I think that, that raising awareness and hearing student voices, is going to make things better for people. But a secondary effect of that is that it's gonna it's going to change the culture and hopefully change the way the professors see themselves.

KWS :

Yeah, no, absolutely. And, yeah, and I appreciate your reminder to be kinder to myself, I always tell others to do that. Still working through it myself, too, but it's just yeah, you know, it's, it's so important that we talk about these things. You know, hopefully it does create change down the line. But the biggest thing is to just let people people know, they're not alone in these struggles, and that this is really common. And I've drawn this analogy before, but my husband used to be a professional chef. And he really, we both looked at what is the work, what is the life like for folks that are really high up in those jobs in that profession. And you know, a lot of them work, all nights, all weekends, all holidays, they have, they work ridiculous hours, they have very little work life balance. In that field, it was pretty well known and well talked about, But, you know, I it's just something that I didn't think very many people or, you know, or I didn't feel enough people were talking about those similar struggles that we have in academia, because, you know, had I known what this was going to cost me like mental health wise, physical health wise, just in general, maybe I would have made a different choice if I would have known when I was getting into up front. And you know, I worked for three years out of undergrad before I came to graduate school. I interned with a federal research lab, I worked with graduate students and people who had PhDs, and I still had no idea what I was getting into when I got there. And, you know, had I known, you know, I never want to like scare everyone away from grad school. But I think it's important that they know the pros and the cons of it, and like how to look out for red flags, and that there are options that you can navigate away from those red flags. And that if you leave graduate school at any point, you are not a failure, you are doing what's best for you. And that is wonderful. And you know, it's, yeah, it's talking about more what it all means. Be more open and transparent about it like we are in our methods sections, we need to be [laughter]

Dani :

Really honest. So this is just part one of our conversation with Katie, we literally could not stop talking to her. This episode, she discussed some of her story of switching out of a toxic lab and how the NSF GRFP helped her leave this lab, why she doesn't name names, grad school culture now and what she'd like to see changed and how academia is similar to the life of a chef.

Will :

What a great conversation this was. The second half is just as good. But before we move on, I wanted to clarify one point retrospectively. When I relayed the story about my dad and his bad experience in grad school, it may have sounded like I was implying that being a scientist is somehow better than being a mechanic or a construction worker. That was not my intention at all. In fact, growing up my dad instilled in me a great deal of respect for anyone who earnestly pursues any profession, especially those for which society has need, like automechanics and construction workers. The key problem with that professor's suggestion was that my dad had invested years of effort into becoming a scientist, had found success, but was being sabotaged by a professor because of their bias regarding what kinds of people should be scientists.

Brooke :

This is just part one of two. So keep out for the part two coming soon. September 2, is when we will be launching our new series of Season Two: Back to School. Episodes will be tips on how to get from high school to grad school, then graduate school applications. And finally, first year of graduate school success. We really look forward to bringing you these episodes.

Dani :

We are on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook at STEMculture (one word) podcast and when in doubt, visit our website at STEMculturePodcast.com for show notes, references, transcripts and information about our guests and contributors.

Moncie :

If you like what we're doing, please support us on Patreon. We have two tiers right meow: \$1 and \$5. At \$1 you get warm fuzzy feelings and a thank you on our show notes. And at \$5 you get access to extra Patreon content and our undying love. Everything we get from Patreon goes back into the show - not into our pockets. Katie can be found on LinkedIn and on Twitter at [krwedemeyer](https://twitter.com/krwedemeyer), that's KRWEDEMEYER (spelled out).

Will :

We also have an amazing new logo for both the series episodes and our inSTEM episodes designed by Hector Dominguez. Check out his website at cargocollective.com/HectorDominguez. And we have an intro and outro music that's remixed by Godfather666 - you can hear his music on SoundCloud. Until next time, don't forget about consensually hugging a grad student or at least buying them a coffee or avocado toast sprinkled with salt and pepper, sliced tomatoes, and a sprinkling of feta cheese. [meowing and purring from Dani and Will]

BLOOPERS:

Dani :

Put that shit on silent bruh.

Zach :

[Zach dancing around the kitchen] Why are you glaring at me?

Dani :

I can hear your flapping tentacles! [laughter]

Transcribed by Moncie & <https://otter.ai>