

About a week before Covid struck the nation, a separate tragedy struck my family. My father passed away after a long struggle with pancreatic cancer. It seemed like everyone was just as sad and worried as we were. Though quarantined, I felt more connected than ever to the rest of the world. To my students at Lehman College, I wrote: “We’re all going to make it through this.”

Mourning drew me to take care of others, especially my graduate student community. The history department at CUNY Graduate Center supports an unusual organization. The [Peer Mentor Program](#) typically runs workshops, circulates example syllabi and applications, organizes town halls, welcomes new students, brings concerns to departmental administration and generally forms the supportive nucleus of the community. I ran for co-coordinator of the Peer Mentor Program on the promise that I would expand this network in response to the challenges of the pandemic.

Over the 2020 fall semester, my fellow co-coordinator Carli Snyder and I doubled the mentors’ typical programming. We launched a Discord server to keep communications between students open, paired up incoming students with more advanced mentors with similar interests, and responded to suggestions for online teaching preparation. I also started an initiative to procure workspaces, since we could no longer access the student lounge, library or public coffeeshops to study as we were accustomed.

The problem of study spaces is dire in the pandemic. Sheltering at home with family, children or roommates tests many graduate students’ ability to find time and space to work effectively, threatening their progress towards their degrees. I attempted to alleviate this difficulty by locating LGBTQ-friendly houses of worship around NYC with preexisting coworking spaces for rent. Though they were few in number and inconvenient in location, they were far cheaper than options like WeWork. I established relationships with a synagogue in

Flatbush and a church in Washington Heights. I wrote up contracts specifying safety measures and payment, which was generously provided by the history department. Students then used a calendar on the Mentor website to pick available time slots. They reserved the space by emailing the signed Covid safety forms. Five students used them regularly. This number seems small, but given the restrictions of social distancing and limited room, it was close to the maximum possible.

The workspace initiative quickly exposed the gendered inequities of unpaid and underpaid labor. Liaising between the workspaces, students and the department—just one of my responsibilities as Co-coordinator—consumed as much time as my teaching did. While trying to keep my fellow students moving forward, I found myself falling behind. I moved the date for my second exam from September to February. Meanwhile, it became harder to find mentors with the time and energy to run workshops. The Peer Mentor Program relies on twenty-three student volunteers, while the history department pays co-coordinators a small stipend. It is no coincidence that three quarters of the peer mentors are women. As has been amply documented in this pandemic, women are putting aside their paid labor for unpaid or underpaid work that is nevertheless essential. For me, a day spent trading emails about how to invoice the workspaces was one day less spent on progressing towards my dissertation. For the volunteer mentors, it was simply not possible to follow through on a request for a workshop on sixth year funding opportunities in December. Our personal and professional lives had drained us.

Ultimately, it was CUNY bureaucracy that put a stop to the workspace initiative, though it left the crisis unsolved. In early November, I received an email from my department's Executive Officer with a heart-stopping subject line: "CEASE AND DESIST the workspaces". The Graduate Center lawyer had determined we were liable. There was no recourse to appeal the

decision. I proposed workarounds, like changing the language of the rental agreement according to the lawyer's directions, only to be rebuffed. With chagrin, I apologized to our partners and made a hasty and ignominious retreat. Restaurants across New York were open but studying alone in a room with the window open and a mask on was out of the question.

My father was a practical person, and were he still on this earth, he would no doubt have advised me to avoid quixotic campaigns like the workspace initiative. But it is not easy to tell what will work out and what will fail while standing at the center of this crisis. When my department's Doctoral and Graduate Students' Council representatives came to me in January for ideas on how to use our student funds, I felt we could realize the longtime goal of refurbishing our lounge. With no money going towards conference refreshments, our coffers could support an Ikea trip. Yet bureaucracy stymied us again. Furniture must be acquired through a specific channel at the Graduate Center, which is not taking requests in the pandemic. Those who have been around the department for a while rolled their eyes at this news. Apparently, we are still waiting on a podium said to have been "coming soon" in 2014. I am left inventing new ways to spend the cash to the benefit of my community. It is unclear if or when the funds will expire. How can I tell what is a rare opportunity and what is a waste of time when the decision-making process is this murky?

What is clear is that the Peer Mentor Program and student organizations like it have the organizational capacity, expertise, and flexibility to support their communities in Covid-19. Many of our initiatives have flourished, such as our recent and very popular caretakers' workshop. When we do this labor of sharing childcare resources or providing workspaces, we are filling in for institutional failures, and this makes the Peer Mentors much more than a lemonade-pouring, cookie-baking woman's auxiliary. But we will need more support from within the

Graduate Center if we are going to reach our full potential. When we sign up to perform these essential services, we need to know that we are not also signing up to sacrifice ourselves. I cannot run for Co-coordinator again without risking burning out in fifth year and finding myself without a dissertation and without insurance in a pandemic. I urge all members of the Graduate Center to recognize that the work of student organizations is more valuable than ever before and to provide the necessary support.

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