

MEETING NOTES

Let's Talk Research: Advancing Research for Mental Health & Well-Being

Host:	Bob Henson, Associate Dean, School of Education, UNC Greensboro
Format:	Lightning talks (5–6 min each), followed by table-based networking and collaboration
Focus:	Building interdisciplinary partnerships to advance mental health research
Recap By:	OSIRD

Executive Summary

This research exchange session brought together faculty from across disciplines at UNC Greensboro to explore opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration around mental health and well-being. Associate Dean Bob Henson framed the session around a central goal: building partnerships that connect mental health expertise with other disciplines, education, community resilience, workforce development, technology, and more, to address complex challenges that no single field can tackle alone. Six researchers delivered lightning talks highlighting their work, populations of interest, methods, and collaboration needs. Following the presentations, attendees moved to themed tables to discuss potential partnerships and review relevant funding opportunities.

Session Framing

Bob Henson opened the session by noting that mental health intersects with a wide range of disciplines across campus, including education, community resilience, workforce development, and technology. The challenges within each of these areas are complex and may be better addressed through intentional cross-disciplinary partnerships that incorporate mental health expertise. He outlined three goals for the session: to highlight ongoing research and spark ideas about alignments, to surface opportunities that may not have been previously considered, and to facilitate networking around specific funding announcements and collaborative possibilities. Following the lightning talks, attendees were invited to join themed discussion tables aligned with their interests or relevant RFAs.

Lightning Talk Summaries

Speaker 1: Dr. Sucaldito — Mental Health Equity in Refugee and Immigrant Communities

Research Focus

Dr. Sucaldito work centers on mental health inequities within refugee and immigrant communities, using community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods. The research addresses community-identified priorities including depression, anxiety, and emotional well-being, with growing attention to individuals with higher support needs as trust deepens with partner communities.

Populations of Interest

- The Karen refugee community in the Triad region (partnership with the Montagnard Association of North Carolina)
- Asian American immigrant communities (partnership with Traum, a mental health-focused organization)
- Filipino American communities of the Carolinas (more immigrant-oriented than refugee)

Methods and Tools

Primarily qualitative to mixed methods: photovoice, interviews, and other participatory approaches. Current quantitative work includes a randomized control-style study (VA MEH).

Key Projects

Bamboo Roots is a current initiative that incorporates mental health promotion into soccer-based settings. This approach bypasses common barriers to healthcare access including fear, stigma, and language limitations. Ninety-one percent of the community participants are limited English proficient, and the program is run by native speakers. The initiative has also enabled community members to become medically qualified interpreters.

A newer line of research focuses on community readiness for mental health research. Working with community partners, Dr. Sucaldito discovered that participants in underrepresented communities often do not fully understand what research is or what their rights as participants are. Common concerns include whether participation could affect employment or legal status, whether the research constitutes a clinical service, and whether information would be shared with healthcare providers. The team has created short (under five minute) videos featuring community members that walk through informed consent, explain differences between experiments, qualitative interviews, and needs assessments, model what it looks like to say yes or no to a study, and address mental health-specific questions about rights and service boundaries.

Collaboration Needs

- Quantitative methods expertise to complement existing qualitative and mixed methods work

- Partners interested in building community readiness tools for mental health research participation
- Collaborators for the Bamboo Roots soccer-based mental health promotion project

Speaker 2: Dr. Michelle Martin Romero — Racialized Stressors, Coping, and Health Equity Among Black and Brown Youth

Research Focus

Dr. Martin Romero is an assistant professor in public health education whose work centers on achieving health equity, with a particular focus on racialized stressors experienced by Black and Brown youth and their families, including youth of Latin origin and those from immigrant backgrounds. Racialized stressors include direct and indirect (vicarious) forms of interpersonal discrimination, xenophobia, and legal status-based stress—all of which are racialized in the U.S. context. The research examines how youth and families experience these stressors, how they cope and respond, and what those coping processes mean for health outcomes including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and trauma.

Methods and Tools

Dr. Martin Romero identifies as a critical qualitative methodologist with advanced training in biobehavioral health and developmental science. She utilizes interviews, focus groups, open-ended surveys, photo elicitation, and other participatory tools, and also has expertise in mixed methods integration and intervention work.

Current Project

She serves as the qualitative methodologist for the One Pocket at a Time intervention, led by former UCG psychology professor Dr. Livas (now at UT Austin), Dr. Coard (HDFS), and Dr. King (Wake Forest). The project uses longitudinal in-depth interviews to understand how a video-based intervention works in families' daily lives, how and where racialized stressors arise, and how families make sense of those experiences.

Future Direction and Collaboration Needs

Dr. Martin Romero is seeking to shift the research lens from individual coping to structural change. Rather than asking youth and families to continually demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, she wants to collaborate with researchers interested in examining how systems themselves can be changed to be less adverse. She is looking for partners ready to explore how to reduce the burden on youth and families by addressing root causes at the structural level.

Speaker 3: Dr. Carrie Morris — School Counselors as an Untapped Resource for Mental Health and Youth Development

Research Focus

Dr. Morris, from the Department of Counseling and Educational Development, focuses on school counseling as a profession and its critical role in youth mental health, academic achievement, career development, and social-emotional development. She highlighted that between 92 and 96

percent of U.S. students are enrolled in a school at any given time, and most schools have someone serving as a school counselor tasked with academic, career, and personal-social development. However, awareness of what school counselors actually do remains extremely low, only about five audience members raised their hands when asked.

Key Challenges

School counselors face high turnover, a declining pipeline of new professionals entering the field, and enormous breadth of responsibilities. On any given day, a school counselor might work with a student who is about to run away, then meet with a student failing multiple classes, then attend a parent meeting, then organize a FAFSA night for college-bound students, then make numerous unrelated phone calls. Dr. Morris described the profession as “functioning on fumes.”

She also shared that federal funding that had supported her work, providing school counseling students to two rural school districts, was recently discontinued. The immediate impact is the loss of six FTE school counselors per year in those districts, affecting both the schools and the students her program was training.

Collaboration Needs

Dr. Morris urged attendees to consider schools as a central hub for research partnerships, particularly in rural and urban communities. School counselors can support workforce development, mental health, academic achievement, career development, and normative social-emotional needs. She emphasized that schools touch almost every family in the country and should not be overlooked as partners for community-based research.

Speaker 4: Dr. Christian Chan — Intersectionality, Career Development, and Mental Health Access for LGBTQ Communities of Color

Research Focus

Dr. Chan’s work centers on intersectionality, specifically the structural intersection between racism and heterosexism and how these intersecting forces of oppression affect Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ communities, particularly queer and trans people of color. His research moves in two focused directions: career development and vocational health (examining how people thrive across their lives), and access to mental health supports and counseling (examining how structural, cultural, and stigma-related barriers inhibit access for these communities).

Emerging Direction

As Dr. Chan prepares for the transition to associate professor, he is developing a third research direction at the intersection of his existing work: the role of family relationships in mental health for LGBTQ communities and BIPOC populations. He noted that for queer and trans people of color, mental health engagement is rarely a purely individual effort—it relies on communal relationships, family dynamics, culturally inherited attitudes toward stigma, and forms of resilience and resistance passed across generations. This direction was the subject of a recent NIH R01 proposal developed with mentorship from Drs. Leerkes and Coard.

Methods and Tools

While Dr. Chan's published work skews toward qualitative research rooted in critical paradigms, he emphasized that he uses whichever methodology best addresses the questions most relevant to his communities, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. Current projects include photovoice research on colonial mentality (a form of internalized racism) among Filipino communities (in collaboration with Dr. Sucaldito), and a study using MAIHDA (Multilevel Analysis of Individual Heterogeneity and Discriminatory Accuracy), a sophisticated quantitative technique examining structural drivers of health inequities.

Collaboration Needs

Dr. Chan emphasized the importance of genuine community-engaged research that goes beyond obtaining community endorsement of pre-designed projects. He is seeking partners who are committed to showing up consistently in communities, listening to the needs that emerge from group meetings, town halls, listening sessions, and programs, and co-developing research that reflects those needs.

Speaker 5: Dr. L. DiAnne Borders — Proactive Coping Strategies for Novice Mental Health Counselors

Research Focus

With over thirty years of research in clinical supervision, Dr. Borders focuses on preparing and supporting the mental health workforce itself. She works with master's students in the Counseling and Educational Development program during their first experience seeing real clients (practicum). Research consistently shows that novice counselors experience high anxiety, low self-efficacy, significant self-doubt, and cognitive overload that prevents them from fully seeing and hearing their clients. These issues become exacerbated when students encounter clients with trauma histories or suicidal ideation.

Approach

Drawing on literature across stress and coping, emotion regulation, emotion expression flexibility, and clinical supervision, Dr. Borders developed a proactive approach that helps students build personalized coping plans at the outset of practicum. She emphasized that no single approach (such as mindfulness) works for all people or all situations; the plan must be tailored to the individual and their specific clinical context. The personalized plans identify strategies students can use before, during, and after counseling sessions, with particular emphasis on the "during" phase, which is not addressed by conventional self-care approaches. She noted that she deliberately avoids the term "self-care" in her research because it is poorly defined, not well operationalized, highly commercialized, and insufficient for the in-session challenges students face.

Results

Over a two-year mixed-methods study, Dr. Borders provided training and personalized plan development to UNCG master's students while collecting pre-post data and comparison data from three other counseling programs (control groups). Students who received the training showed

significantly greater gains in counseling self-efficacy, better emotion regulation ability, and fewer concerns about working with minoritized clients compared to the control group.

Collaboration Needs

- Researchers working with other high-stress professions where the work itself impacts mental health: nursing, allied health, K–12 teachers, professors, first responders
- Scholars in applied sports psychology and the study of flow in athletes, which Dr. Borders sees as a potentially transferable literature
- Cross-professional partnerships to test the applicability of personalized coping plans in other training contexts

Speaker 6: Dr. Jennifer Toller Erausquin — Mental Health Among Migrants in Transit Through the Darién Gap

Research Focus

Dr. Erausquin presented research on the mental health of migrants in transit through the Darién Gap, a 66-mile stretch of dense jungle along the Colombia-Panama border that represents the only break in the road system connecting Alaska to the southern tip of South America. Traversing this gap requires a combination of motorboats, canoes, and walking over three to fourteen days, with no bathrooms, healthcare, food, or infrastructure. Prior to 2025, it was a major northbound migration route used by people from South America, Africa, and Asia heading toward the U.S. and Canada. In the year before the route was effectively shut down, over 500,000 people made the journey, including more than 100,000 minors.

Study Design

In 2022, Dr. Erausquin participated in a study organized by Instituto Gorgas (Panama's equivalent of the CDC) that conducted the first systematic study of migrants in transit through the Darién Gap. The multinational, multilingual research team assessed general and tropical medicine, sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, and conducted field laboratory blood tests for HIV, syphilis, malaria, and other conditions. The mental health component screened 137 participants at a migrant reception station where people exiting the jungle are processed by Panamanian authorities.

Mental Health Findings

Participants ages 12 and older were screened using the Refugee Health Screener, the European Quality of Life Assessment, and a distress thermometer. Those who scored high were offered a clinical assessment session with a mental health provider. Key findings include:

- 17% met criteria for at least one depressive disorder
- 10% met criteria for an anxiety disorder
- 24% met criteria for trauma and stressor-related disorders
- More than one-third screened positive for at least one psychiatric disorder

- More than one-third experienced a traumatic event during transit (e.g., encountering dead bodies, experiencing rape or assault)

Despite these experiences, northbound migrants still showed surprisingly high quality-of-life scores, reflecting hope about their destination.

Current Developments

With the northern route effectively shut down since early 2025, the research team (based primarily in Panama, Spain, and Florida State University) is now studying two emerging phenomena. First, return migration southward is now occurring, and the mental health conditions observed are significantly more severe; the hope that characterized northbound migrants has been replaced by a sense of hopelessness. Second, there is interest in continued collaboration among Central American countries to design creative service delivery approaches, potentially leveraging nonprofit and non-governmental organizations.

Collaboration Needs

- Partners interested in global migration and mental health, particularly service design for displaced populations
- Researchers working on trauma, refugee mental health, or culturally responsive interventions across borders

Cross-Cutting Themes

Community-Engaged and Participatory Methods

Multiple speakers emphasized the importance of genuine community engagement, not just consulting communities for endorsement, but co-developing research questions, building trust over time, and ensuring that research processes empower participants. Drs. Sucaldito, Chan, and Martin Romero all highlighted participatory methods (photovoice, community advisory structures, longitudinal community presence) as central to their work.

Structural vs. Individual Approaches

A recurring theme was the tension between studying individual coping and resilience versus advocating for structural and systemic change. Dr. Martin Romero explicitly called for a shift from asking youth to be resilient toward changing the systems that produce adversity. Dr. Morris highlighted the systemic underfunding and undervaluing of school counselors. Dr. Borders noted that the mental health workforce crisis is partly structural, not just individual.

Trust, Stigma, and Access Barriers

Across populations, refugees, immigrants, LGBTQ communities of color, migrants in transit, school-age youth, speakers consistently identified trust, stigma, and structural barriers as obstacles to mental health access. Several noted that culturally responsive approaches, community-run programs, and meeting people where they are (literally and figuratively) are essential strategies.

Workforce Development and Retention

Both Dr. Morris and Dr. Borders addressed the mental health workforce pipeline. School counselors face high turnover and declining interest in the profession. Novice counselors enter the field under-prepared for the emotional demands of clinical work. Both argued that proactive support and systemic investment are needed to retain professionals in these high-stress roles.

Methodological Complementarity

Several speakers explicitly sought cross-methodological collaborations. Dr. Sucaldito seeks quantitative partners for her primarily qualitative work. Dr. Chan uses whichever methodology fits the research question. Dr. Borders used a mixed-methods design with comparison groups. This suggests strong potential for interdisciplinary teams that span methodological expertise.

Networking and Collaboration Activity

Following the lightning talks, attendees transitioned to themed discussion tables organized around specific topics and RFAs. Each table was designed to facilitate conversation around a particular area of mental health research, with the goal of forming potential research teams and identifying shared interests. A miscellaneous table was also available for attendees whose interests did not align neatly with the pre-defined topics. Participants were encouraged to exchange contact information and discuss possible team formations for future interdisciplinary proposals.

Key Takeaways

1. Interdisciplinary collaboration is the session's central message. Mental health research at UNCG spans refugee communities, youth of color, school systems, LGBTQ populations, the clinical workforce, and global migration, and there are clear opportunities for cross-pollination.
2. Multiple researchers are actively seeking collaborators, particularly in quantitative methods, structural/systems-level analysis, community-engaged research, and applied intervention design.
3. School systems, community sports programs, and migrant reception stations were all identified as non-traditional but effective sites for mental health research and intervention.
4. The emphasis on structural change, rather than placing the burden of resilience on affected populations, was a strong and recurring theme across presentations.
5. Funding opportunities and RFAs were shared at the session; colleagues interested in pursuing any of these should reach out to the presenters or to Associate Dean Bob Henson for more information.

Note: Attendees were encouraged to follow up directly with presenters to explore collaboration opportunities. Contact information can be obtained through the UNC Greensboro School of Education.