

Reimagining Academic Mentoring in Precarious Times: Insights from a Collaborative Collaging Inquiry

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Figure 1

Bailey. (2025). *Pow-Her*. [collage]



A graduate student tells me they have lost their job. Then, within a week, another one. Both skilled professionals, both with years of experience. None of that matters in These Times. The economy for some professionals is dismal. I watch as another struggles to get any kind of information from the university—10 days before the term starts—about whether they will have a graduate assistantship, tuition waiver, and stipend to help support their family and continue their doctorate. My advocacy emails to get answers land in vain. I try to process these silences and uncertainties and embodied precarities swirling around me as the hungry academic institution I work for continues noisily churning out rules, deadlines, norms, forms, emails, and schedules to which I must respond—and always quickly. University discourse says we are “a family.” Incoming athletes sign million-

dollar contracts. Emails advertise a seminar about the great ways to use AI. The push for student enrollment persists while major grants and faculty hires are cut. What does “good” mentoring look like in these circumstances? How should I advise graduate students who are uncertain about post-graduation opportunities? To get certificates? Attend academic conferences? I wonder which mentoring guidebooks might aid me amid the gritty uncertainties of social and economic precarity in these times (Bailey, reflection).

Introduction

We position this paper about collaborative collaging alongside other scholarship that is reimagining graduate academic mentoring in higher education (e.g. Abernathy, et al, 2026; Fox, 2020; Pauly, et al., 2023). Over the last two years, we have sought to join this conversation with other scholars in analyzing—and reimagining—common academic mentoring practices for graduate students in higher education that scholarship and faculty alike have long conceptualized as inherently valuable endeavors. We have done so through collaborative collaging sessions that we refer to as “co-mentoring” where we discuss graduate student/faculty needs, pressures, and hopes. The purpose of this conceptual article is to describe how collaging has aided us in conceptualizing and enacting co-mentoring in precarious times. Collaging is particularly generative in conditions of precarity because the practice is built on uncertainty, repurposing, and continuous reconfiguration. As our epigraph underscores, academia today is rife with tensions among its idealized educational mission, its daily demands, and its limits in meeting the conflicting and pressing needs of its diverse stakeholders. Even as educational institutions importantly tout their contemporary value and salience, leaders are fundamentally grappling with how to respond to changing economic and social needs and competing demands in the wake of severe funding cuts, grant reductions, pervasive mental health and learning challenges among students, AI proliferation, and threats to institutional autonomy, governance, and academic freedom that characterize this historical moment.

Such tensions and fragmentations abound in these constitutive bureaucratic engines, and graduate mentorship is no different, reflecting often decontextualized recommendations about “how to be successful in graduate school” or “mentoring for faculty jobs” that seem at times utterly detached from the erosion of institutional and social certainties. Precarity refers to social and lived circumstances in which people endure social unpredictability, lack job and material security, and navigate the psychological costs of such uncertainties. How does one, for example, mentor graduate students *for* faculty jobs when institutions are hemorrhaging faculty positions by the day? On December 12, 2025, for instance, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that New York’s famed New School for Social Research offered 40% of its full-time faculty opportunities to retire early or to separate from the institution (Gardner, 2025). In June, 2026, the school laid off nineteen faculty and over 60 staff members (Farfan, 2026). Similarly, in 2025, the *Chronicle* reported that budget cuts and championing of majors that smoothly translate directly to “employable” skills have led to massive restructuring and program closures nationwide

(Gretzinger et al., 2025). In 2026, eight small colleges shuttered their doors (Farrington, 2026). These are just a few of the recent and still unfolding changes that necessitate reconceptualizing what exactly good academic graduate mentoring might look like in amplified conditions of change and uncertainty. In these situations, decontextualized mentoring rules and recommendations for graduate students simply no longer apply.

Certainly, useful resources on academic mentoring have increased across the last decade to reflect a hearty number of guidebooks, student testimonials and lamentations, and field-specific materials to support formal and informal graduate mentoring (Bettencourt et al, 2021; Johnson & Griffin, 2025). This growth has occurred in response to important recognition in the field that mentoring is a craft, that everyone benefits from tailored support, and that graduate school is too complex and demanding to leave students to figure it all out for themselves. Indeed, in the first sentence of their mentoring guidebook, Johnson and Griffin (2025) emphasize that “[d]eliberate and thoughtful mentoring is one of the *most* important and enduring roles for the higher education faculty members” (p. 3, emphasis in original). In its most successful forms, the endeavor is relational, productive, and mutually-rewarding. Despite the richness of existing resources, we argue that advice and practices in the field are too often homogenous despite diverse student positionalities (Abernathy et al., 2026), problematically limited to socialization into deeply entrenched institutional grooves—how to perform in particular ways to “do” higher education well, or how to learn how to become future faculty members even as the contours of higher education fundamentally shift beneath us.

Too often, we believe, mentoring practices are problematically decontextualized from the complex tensions of precarity we note in the epigraph above and the dynamic social, political, and economic contexts in which academic institutions are situated. They perform a kind of stable set of steps mentees should follow regardless of context. In fact, in reviewing varied useful practical and scholarly resources, discussions of mentoring often emerge as a set of “best practices” deployed by a “mentor” who emerges as a noun, an identity that one person holds to guide others, mentees, from a stable position of authority and wisdom that can anticipate the “right steps” to be successful in some discernible futures. Although utterly well-meaning, and likely incredibly helpful in many instances, mentoring often appears in such discourse as a homogenous, even sunny term, accepted unquestioningly as a resource mentors are well-equipped to provide in the forms that students need it. Collectively, the message is that such mentoring can help ensure student success in graduate programs and future careers. Yet there are no such certainties in our current times. Scripting stability feels performative and out of touch. Mentors face unstable conditions in their institutional contexts just as mentees face in graduate school and in post-graduation career opportunities. Mentoring must trouble historic assurances of stability or student adherence to static norms that may have historically paved pathways to success. As we discuss in this article, the very instability of collaging as an inquiry practice has helped bring these realizations to the fore.

Critical scholars have long questioned practices in higher education that reproduce its norms and dictates despite rhetoric of change (e.g. Wisniewski, 2000). Some have argued the idealized pace and rhythms of higher education are fundamentally ableist and antithetical to well-being and embodied diversity (e.g. Dolmage, 2017; Mountz, et al., 2015; Price, 2024). Recent scholarship, to which our work has contributed, has argued for the importance of abolitionist feminist mentoring given the racialized, gendered, and class norms of higher education riddled with power dynamics (e.g. Abernathy, et al, 2026; Martin & Brooks, 2026;

Pauly et al., 2023). In this sense, abolitionism embraces the radical politics of working to dismantle oppressive systems and build new sites of communal flourishing. While such arguments about contemporary universities are by no means new (e.g. Readings, 1996; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000), the work of mentoring as a particular expression of reproduction in such systems remains undertheorized. In contrast, we recognize a need for academic mentoring processes more aligned with new visions of worlding and the realities of contemporary precarity to support faculty and students alike.

Our purpose in this essay is to describe how our ongoing collaborative collaging inquiry work has helped us imagine and begin to foster co-mentoring practices that offer promising strategies amid the demands of the ever-changing social and political landscape. This is part of a multi-step mentoring inquiry aiming, in time, to enact praxis. As we have reflected on our work, we recognize that it is the creative, uncertain, and fragmented nature of collaborative collaging, specifically, that has amplified our efforts to consider what co-mentoring *in precarity* might feel and look like. The three authors, all women, occupy various positionalities (first-generation, Black, white, caregivers, dis/abled) and academic roles (all academic workers, two of whom are faculty and one of whom is a doctoral candidate). We draw from our engagement with arts-based collaging for the last two years to imagine, create, and reconfigure livable mentoring practices in and beyond higher education. In the pages that follow, we introduce our collaborative mission, outline our layered inquiry, and detail three themes that currently dominate our thinking about the productivity of collage for our worlding in precarity. Our co-mentoring reflects an ongoing creative, relational, and communal practice—a verb rather than a noun—formed in dialogue and oriented to imagining and flourishing (Kimmerer, 2015). Like collaging, co-mentoring is neither top-down, nor binary, nor prescriptive, nor static, and resists closure through ongoing questioning, shared interactions, and creative practices.

Inquiry Approach

To enact the co-mentoring work, foster our imaginaries, and nourish spaces of refuge and possibility in the current context, the three of us began meeting to collage and dialogue together about graduate and post-graduate school life. Our inquiry emerged through these meetings, and continues to unfold as we continue to dialogue, ask questions, and raise new issues. In the wake of this inductive processing, we found ourselves pulled from conventional scholarship and research methodologies in which researchers generally design, chart out, and follow codified and scripted methodological pathways, step by step, to conduct research to contribute to “gaps” in social science literature. Instead, we followed our energy to embrace collaging processes as entirely (il)legitimate and generative scholarly practices for fostering new ways of knowing, being, and thriving. This is what methodologists might call a type of inquiry “without methodology.” As Mirka Koro-Ljungberg (2016) argued,

The notion of non-methodologies...represents methodologies without strict boundaries or normative structures—....that may begin anywhere, anytime, but by doing so can create a sense of uncertainty and loss (or mourning of stable, fixed, preconceptualized, or historical knowledge)...They [can] bring about methodological challenges and examples that may push current research practices and question rigid methodological traditions.

They can begin anywhere, stay (at least temporarily) lost and uncertain, and still promote change in onto-episte-methodological practices (p.1).

As part of this creative pathway of beginning anywhere, anytime, and any way, we were particularly drawn to the *uncertainties* of such creative practices as collaborative collaging (e.g. Bailey & Woodall-Greene, 2022; Knelman, 2021), which invite practitioners to embrace non-prescriptive, inductive, emergent forms of inquiry oriented to process and data-*creation* (e.g. Ellingson & Sotirin, 2023) rather than data *collection*. In embracing a non-methodology of collaging, what surfaces is endlessly emergent and uncertain—failures, fragmentations, questioning, lines of flight, color, insights, repurposed bits of yarn, shared and revived materials—and is counter to almost universal research prescriptions in raising more questions than it answers. Such inherently unstable collaging configurations are conceptually aligned with the precarities of the present. Further, in embracing such uncertainties, like Koro-Ljungberg (2016) and others, we recognize these endeavors can “promote change in onto-episte-methodological practices” (p.1) that, in our case, also surface insights about doing mentoring differently.

We have interacted consistently for several years, meeting regularly for 2-hour sessions, to collage together over Zoom, dialogue about various issues that arise regarding higher education, social change, and becoming, and to theorize and question anew. We document our conversations, share readings and collages, and follow our work where it leads us. After our initial work (e.g. Abernathy et al, 2026), our attention shifted to precarity based on social and economic changes we are witnessing institutionally, nationally, and globally. Taking stock of our insights at this moment, we share three themes that we have created from our collaborative processing. We focus on collaging as a particularly generative practice of making and imagining aligned with the precarity of higher education and social life. We use the following themes to capture these ideas: (1) Shifting Terrain: Collaging Failures *toward* Co-Mentoring in Precarity; (2) Embodied Fragmentation and Reassembly in Precarity; (3) Continual Reconfiguration as Praxis. Collectively, they speak to our shared engagement in creative methodologies to rethink-reimagine conventional mentoring practices for these times.

Figure 2

Bailey. (2025). *Within and Against*. [collage]



Shifting Terrain: Collaging Failures *Toward* Co-Mentoring in Precarity

This multidimensional theme captures our realization over time to render visible and articulate how collaging practices enact a series of necessary failures that mimic the ways we believe we must “fail” prescribed research practices and decontextualized mentoring recipes for success in social and institutional conditions of precarity. Among the most powerful realizations that have emerged from our dialogues, bit by bit and scrap by scrap, is our amplified awareness of the varied embodied effects of the profound discourse of failure and norms of success that shape higher education and our experiences within it. Educators are quite familiar with the language and norms of educational success and failure (e.g. Carr & Micciche, 2020). Its normative-if-supple force thoroughly guides covert and overt educational structures, grading scales, student advancement, and affective experiences. We sift students into different tracks. We grade and rank papers, faculty, and even schools through criteria of “success” and “failure,” as evident in the grading systems some lawmakers use to rate schools’ productivity (e.g. *Oklahoma’s A to F school grading system under scrutiny*). Through years of schooling, students learn which practices and behaviors help them achieve “good” student status—to become proper educational subjects—so that they can strive to do their work well in the frames available: writing in particular formats, meeting deadlines, completing requirements (Levinson, et al., 1996).

Discourses of failure, success, and excellence (e.g. Readings, 1996) are also endlessly malleable based on the culture and norms operating at a given historical moment. In the current context, opportunities to “fail” are all around us. As Troiani and Dutson (2021) argue, the new “imperative of the neoliberal university is to continuously increase performance –measurable in ultimately economic terms, imposing a new auditable disciplining, and quickening pace, of learning, thinking and working” (p.5). This furious institutional pace, fueled by corporate and neoliberal regimes, has ushered a relentless focus on productivity and accountability with an ever-moving target of success. As feminist scholars have noted, rising to the demands of these imperatives disciplines us to a culture of speed and performance expectations that are impossible to meet (see Mountz et al., 2015) and at odds with the diverse bodies that make up educational

spaces (see Price, 2024). We all inevitably face daily opportunities to fail. One of us noted this salient embodied experience:

In a doc program (and from what I've noted of faculty jobs), there is never a moment to feel good when you've accomplished something. It's always – what's the next thing? How soon can I do the next thing? I gotta get on to the next thing! (Author 3).

In this sense, we see such demands as intrinsically fueling the looming and constant potential for failure. We fail to meet the deadline. We fail to respond to the email quickly enough. We fail to publish in the best journal. We fail to get the funding or the job or the assistantship. We fail to write the paper exactly as the instructor (or journal, or committee, and so on) wants. We fail to get the reading done. As Author 2 reflected on one experience,

I had to read like 13 books for [my theory] class, and it was clear that one of two things was going to happen: one, sacrifice reading for depth and I was up late a lot of nights reading, and two—compromising a lot of time to do all the other things that I needed to do, right? (Author 2, reflection)

With these expectations, however meaningful the topic, this high-achieving full-time student, mother, and worker simply could not “succeed” in conventional ways—to do all the reading well—in that time and in that moment. Through such varied school-work-life micro-expectations—what Tricia Hersey (2022) refers to as “grind culture”—such expectations for performance and our inevitable failures to meet them are thoroughly affective, deeply absorbed, and lived in the bodies of educators, staff, and students who occupy academic spaces.

The embodied weight of this pervasive discourse of failure for our jobs and academic milestones became particularly clear through our collaborative collaging. We regularly collaged about juggling, joys, and pressures. Yet academic expectations also manifested in *how* we experienced our inquiry. For example, Bailey (Author 1) began to intensely dislike (and eventually abandoned) a collage riddled with bold phrases and colors that she was creating from a glossy university marketing brochure. The title, *Working Within and Against* (see Figure 2), is a favorite phrase that, in this case, was intended to capture the need to resist stable constructions of “successful” mentoring, research, and behavior as we grapple with social changes and needs. Yet the colors and jarring organization failed to capture the budding idea. In this sense, it became a “failed” collage, an inadequate effort to represent resistance from within, a project for the shredder rather than public display. In the collager’s dismissal of this collage, the ever-present nature of academic discourses of failure and success became abundantly clear. A failed collage, a bunch of words on a page, endlessly open to reconfiguration, symbolizes the exact processes we need to embrace in theorizing and living out the fragmentations and failures of our current time.

All around us we see the need to “fail” conventional norms of success. Collaging has been a generative practice for doing so. Prescriptions for success in hungry institutions are often at odds with diverse embodied needs (e.g. Price, 2024). Learning the new trends in AI pedagogy,

for example, while students need letters of recommendations for jobs and scholarships are simply not aligned. Neither is “needing” to make progress on a dissertation when your workplace closes. These gritty encounters underscore the tensions of navigating changing institutional contexts haunted by static notions of “success” and “failure.” Collaging, in fact, represents an enormous failure within academic norms that privilege sophisticated narrative discourse in research. Pausing to consider, through the lens of failed collages, what constitutes arbitrary constructions of success and failure in our embodied lives and needs of this social moment is a useful initial intervention in our layered inquiry. One of us described this kind of intervention as “hard and ongoing labor,” because normative notions of “success” are so entrenched and monitored in academia (see Figure 3). In fact, doing well affirms we belong.

Figure 3

Abernathy. (2024). *Outside the Lines*. [collage]



Several theoretical companions that accompanied us in our collaging helped us muscle our way through this predicament of wanting to perform as “good mentees,” “good students,” and “good academic workers” and the necessity of “failing” these very norms in conditions of precarity. Retheorizing what success and mentoring can look and feel like has been important reorienting work (Ahmed, 2017). Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, via Carr and Micciche in *Failure Pedagogies* (2020), helps to reframe failure as a “sweaty concept” that demands labor and time to unpack its diverse functions. In Ahmed’s vision, failure, like any sweaty concept, is supple, alive, and suffused with powerful and nuanced meanings that can function in a variety of ways. The meanings of sweaty concepts demand embodied labor to consider and unpack in varied settings. Similarly, Halberstam’s (2011) *Queer Art of Failure* embraces failure as an art form that marginalized groups must enact for their own well-being. Halberstam clarifies that

conventional norms of success represent ideals and forms of capital only available to some. In this sense, destabilizing failure's connotations of deficiency can reframe failed collages, and failing institutional prescriptions of success, as potentially liberatory.

Collaging as and for co-mentoring—cutting, pasting, and assembling material images and scraps—can generatively invite and render visible possibilities beyond the pages we create; they can represent and produce new relationships among pressing material needs, discourses of success and failure, and institutional demands and norms. Such imaginaries can reframe the failure of the professional who cannot read every page of her 13 academic books because she must sleep and tend to her children as successfully crafting a schedule aligned with her holistic bodily needs; it can reframe the teacher choosing to support a student trying to find a job rather than meeting a paper deadline as successfully aligned with pressing material needs.

Many years ago, a student told me after finishing her degree that she stopped responding to her instructor's paper revision requests after numerous attempts across the course to meet their expectations—each submission coming back to her, choking with comments and revisions, burying her original words, a blur of exacting red markings that said to her— 'everything you are doing is wrong. It must be done: Just. Like. This.' By the final draft, she recognized the message there was only one 'right' way to do this work—down to the exact best terms, the exact best transitions, the exact best structure—and the writing she was supposed to be doing was not about cultivating her own voice and her own scholarship in her own way at all. To 'succeed' in these conditions, she realized she had to simply accept the revisions and track changes in an unfamiliar voice and resubmit the instructor's own revisions back to them. She did well in the course. (Author 1, reflection).

In this example, a student is actively collaging her life, reconfiguring her priorities among discourses of success, institutional requirements, and material needs to advance in her program.

She strategically “fails” to write in her own voice to simply “succeed” within course parameters, which is necessary to continue with her life, education, and career goals. Carr and Micchie's (2020) analysis speak to the potential generativity of sweaty concepts like failure, constantly in motion in collaging and in social uncertainty. Our collaging toward failure as art, question, and dynamic contextual strategy (see Figure 3), have been central to our co-mentoring dialogues in envisioning what failing toward flourishing might look like.

Figure 4

Warner. (2026). *Hanging on by a thread!* [collage].



Most importantly, in collage’s productivity for embracing the art of failure as a creative practice, we landed on the conviction that co-mentoring in these times must involve transparent conversations about contemporary precarity (see Figure 4). It is all around us. As uncertainties proliferate, we cannot give static mentoring advice about how to prepare for an academic job, proceed through a graduate program, or perform confidence in “next steps” when we cannot know what the future holds. It is important to interrupt static notions of “good academic worker,” and “success,” as the world changes around us, so we can recognize such dictates as sweaty concepts at work in the institutional air we breathe. We should, in fact, call out decontextualized and entrenched institutional prescriptions to help faculty and students alike hear, speak, and co-mentor in *multiple* institutional languages. As one faculty member expressed recently, with the ethical weight of dissolving faculty positions hanging in the air, “*I’ve been wondering should I even be helping students seek academic jobs right now??*” Openly discussing these points are important forms of relational and context-sensitive praxis.

Figure 5

Bailey. (2026). *Endless Fragmentation and Reassembling* [Collage]



Embodied Fragmentation and Reassembling in Precarity

Higher education as a patriarchal, neoliberal institution has taken a lot from me, particularly during my time as a staff member. In this role, I experienced years of relentless gendered violence and harm. This was enacted on me, and I also witnessed it enacted on others in horrifying ways. These are experiences I carry with me that inform how I experience and show up in academic spaces. In this way, higher education has taken things from me that I cannot get back.... At the same time, it is a place of profound growth. (Author 3, reflection).

Collaborative collaging helped produce another insight salient to our collective work in cultivating co-mentoring: enacting the *embodied* fragmentation and reassembling necessary in precarity. Collaging time and again in varied spaces (a closet, offices, couches, while balancing a computer, often dragging boxes of supplies around to establish new locales of possibility) constitutively heightens awareness of embodied precarity as academic workers. As many have theorized (e.g. Ellingson, 2017), too often academic processes, research, teaching (and, we would add, mentoring advice) foreground the intellectual aspects of the academy. These norms ask us to rely on our scholarly traditions, our theoretical knowledge, our rationality, and our logic to produce important academic work. This is all serious business that we recognize and embrace. We thoroughly believe in the power of education and knowledge as potentially emancipatory in our lives and our globe; whatever our critiques of institutional practices, they come from within the institution, and against it, as loving ones (hooks, 2021), welcoming and fiercely charging all of us to work together to confront the demands of the moment. And yet the stubborn notion of the Cartesian mind/body split suffusing higher education, in which the mind and body are

somehow separate and hierarchical entities (mind over body; thinking rather than thinking-feeling-becoming), does a profound disservice to imagining co-mentoring practices that honor the fully embodied ways we show up in academic spaces and the embodied consequences of precarity. As Figure 5 represents, collaging demands us to engage with shredded paper drafts, shredded ideas, shredded certainties, to form tactile relationships with yarn, ideas, and job ads in new ways, and to feel-see-craft our ways in endless configurations that can help us imagine how to respond to the constant social, institutional, and embodied changes in our material worlds.

Phenomenologically, the collaborative collaging process foregrounds that we are fully sensory beings, always engaging in a swirl of thinking-breathing-affective-aural- oral- olfactory-proprioceptive interactions as we move with materialities in diverse environments. Collaging together can stir up communal life energy that constantly flows around us and entangles us with varied materials and other life forms. Collaging produces embodied interactions that, like higher education practices must be in these times, are fundamentally relational. And such spaces and experiences are also suffused with the possibilities and precarities that have long haunted higher education — body politics of size, age, race, class, voice and language, bodily adornment, abilities, movement, pain, objectification, and belonging that demand ongoing interrogation of homogenous conceptions of “graduate students” (e.g. Ahmed, 2006; Bailey & Hinton, 2026).

Indeed, as the opening epigraph for this section conveys, bodies enter higher education spaces in a range of ways, erratically hyper visible and invisible, objectified and celebrated, and affected and shaped, in turn, shaping the experiences with education and precarity we have as embodied beings (e.g. Bailey & Hinton, 2026; Bobel & Kwan, 2019; Clare, 2017; Pillow, 2003). Cartesian subjectivities and institutional markers of success can be at odds with the holistic experiences of mind-body-selves that collaging helps us order, disentangle, and entangle in new configurations. Scholars have long called out the limits of championing the “rapid production of quantifiable things over what is best for people and environment” (Museus & Wang, 2023, p. 16). It is hard to imagine whose bodies, spirits, and social interests are served by prioritizing the rapid academic production of quantifiable things. Indigenous botanist Kimmerer (2015) invites us to consider our ecosystems as entanglements among our embodied human, non-human, and material worlds. Collaging demanded this of us. It demands embodied interaction with material acts of shredding, cutting, and assembling. It demands attention to existing and imagined ecosystems. It invites conversations about our illnesses/vulnerabilities in meeting academic demands and imagining new academic strategies. It beckons new ways of being, imagining, relating, and becoming.

Feminist scholars have written at length about collaging’s power to enact critical and emancipatory work through subverting and interrupting (e.g. Atkinson, 2025). In this sense, we wondered how collective collaging can evoke new possibilities in precarity: in channeling fear and rage through snipping, gluing, and slashing, we can feel threats to academic freedom, institutional autonomy, bodily safety, and job security in the gut; as we process concerns about the future and organizational change from our diverse vantage points, we can channel emotional responses of grief, loss, and possibility (see Figure 6); and as we collectively engage with questions about how graduate degrees and post-academic jobs are changing we can honor the embodied urgencies of how faculty/students use their time. In such co-mentoring, we recognize the collective responsibilities to fragment old norms and reassemble them in new configurations. In community, pace slows, urgencies become collaborative responsibilities, questions become

loving opportunities to critique and to act (hooks, 2021). As one of us reflected, “*I always feel better when we have the chance to connect, process, and work together.*”

The processes of producing messy collages and experimenting with mixed media in our co-mentoring are fully embodied and relational experiences. As we move magical purple-then-white glue to paper, scissors to scraps, scraps to textured construction, and then return again, we are engaging in reassembling and assembling anew. In the collage of failure (see Figure 2) as part of the failed academic non-methodology of collaging inquiry, the collager extracted unsettling institutional commands from a marketing magazine to form in a jagged row visible in one direction. Then, after this cutting and deconstructing, she looked for words of resistance in the pages to move against the grain of the magazine’s cheerful purpose to champion university business. In this act, she repurposed and assembled anew. In its disruptive intent, this was bad art and a failed collage, ending because the page was not expansive enough to address the resistance and precarity driving the need for expression in the first place.

The practice of collaging is a fully embodied scholarly practice of becoming that both invites—and cultivates—a sense of vulnerability, openness, and community. We share initial fragmented thoughts and ideas; we produce temporary arrangements of materials and images; and we come together in our uncertainty to process and rearrange. Collaging allows us to bring our full embodied selves into the interactions—cutting and gluing bits and pieces together amid interruptions from family or the string of email dings, worries about the latest news from a medical appointment, and awareness of the inviting but steady to-do list. *How did email come to symbolize productivity, we wonder?* An engine that whirrs endlessly, catching our sensory attention, each response signaling responsiveness, and each then beckoning yet another response. One of us decides to print out and pulverize an email, adding it to a shredding collage (Figure 5). In such collaboration, all ideas are welcome, from honoring successful markers in a graduate program, to discussing how to productively fail email, to strategizing how to seek jobs in all kinds of spaces. Collaging surfaces new possibilities for communal work.

Continual Reconfiguration as Praxis

Figure 6

Bailey. (2024). *Embodied Precarity*.



Collaging toward co-mentoring can invite, we think, interconnections in which we see, feel, recognize, and foster our relations to enable new questions and relationships to arise. It is a generative practice that enables equity and collaboration as co-mentoring should. Its incomplete nature orients us to continual deconstruction and reassembly--toward both theory and practice.

I came across yet another mentoring description that sounded too much like a training manual that rendered the entire process lifeless and objectifying and foregrounding the Mind as separate from Body ...all the fancy scholarly language that folds in psychosocial and development theory and skill mastery... With words such as “informal transmission of knowledge... and capitalrelevant to career or professional advancement... one person with greater experience and one with less” All of this is a form of truth. All of this can happen in and through mentoring. Yet how can this transactional language help with the real interconnections needed to find jobs in these times? To work toward a meaningful degree AND save money? To connect and transform in relation across roles to imagine new ways to address social needs in these times...as the world shifts around us and under us? (Author 1, reflection)

There is nothing transactional about collaging. It is no magical elixir for the ills of the world, to be sure. Yet it has invited us to engage seriously in reflection and reassembly toward praxis. We have talked about available jobs. We have discussed strategies to navigate wellness. We began talking to other academics about their hopes, worries, and actions. It has thus supported possibilities for praxis in facing new demands from a changing social and economic landscape that each of us can carry forward. Such co-mentorship works against the artificial fragmenting of home/school, worker/person, personal/professional, to honor us all as holistic beings in different positions working in coalition. We embrace the spirit of Manathunga et al.'s (2022) reflections in their arts-based inquiry into academics' experiences, who write,

we take hold of the...idea that a valuable academic life is balanced, embodied and contemplative; that thinking is a biological, not a digital process, and that we are organic, psycho/spiritual/social not mechanistic beings who, without the wind, water, sun, land, air, rocks and breeze, and without movement through liminal spaces, would cease to exist (p. 247).

This vision continually orients us toward collaborative praxis. Within a culture hyper-focused on narrow constructions of expertise, our co-mentoring collaging practice opens equitable space for all of us — art degrees or not — to think outside and beyond conventional research, mentoring, and hierarchies, to remain connected to our embodied lives as we navigate our work, our relationships, and our own sense-making without demanding clarity or completion (see Figure 7 for a bit of collage salvaged from a larger, uncompleted piece). Collaging, within this relational ecology, is an accessible form of embodied inquiry. As a feminist practice, it can emerge out of the domestic and material landscape around us, with the materials that call to us, and with no institutional governance over its form or possibilities. It is productively illegible in such academic conventions.

When Author 3 noted that after a tough academic interaction, she “*did a collage about that*,” the gesture was not incidental nor performative; it signals how collage offers ways of thinking and acting that do not rely on academic discourse or visual training. For those with or without formal art backgrounds, collaging does not require mastering “academic language,” claiming artistic identity, or mapping on to norms. The praxis-oriented work makes room for more than one feeling, truth, or position at once - allowing “parts” to co-exist - and gives fleeting form to experience that otherwise might be challenging to narrate or explain coherently within institutional frames. In this sense, it functions as a relational site of meaning making where we can invite, make, hold, revisit, and negotiate possibilities of praxis. As Manathunga et al. (2022) noted of walking, it supports a way of thinking and producing that is embodied and reflective, inviting us to collectively imagine and continually reconfigure possibilities.

Figure 7

Abernathy. (2025). *Revolution*.



Collaging also resists closure; like co-mentoring toward praxis, it is always in motion. As Ahmed (2017) reminds us, any dinner table (and any hallway interaction, and any collaging encounter) can become a space for praxis. Rooted in reciprocity, this work fosters learning and guidance that move in multiple directions. Looking forward, we want to contribute to shaping the futures we want to inhabit, even as we navigate chaotic times in which former assurances simply don't apply. For those who entered graduate schools with the vision of becoming future faculty, co-mentoring must transparently lay out the statistics and realities of these declining opportunities while reimagining other fields of application. While there have always been ebbs and flows in faculty hiring, field stability, and tenure-track positions, higher education today is facing stark economic vulnerability, mass cuts of programs and faculty, and reinvention of its mission. As we noted earlier, a glance at the *Chronicle* or the Facebook community, The Professor is Out, lays bare the serious threats to higher education as we have known it and the desperate ways academics are reinventing their work lives and identities. One *Chronicle* article from December 2025 framed contemporary teaching conditions in this way: "The ubiquity of artificial intelligence, the enormity of political pressure, and the severity of financial constraints on many college campuses have conspired to create learning environments of profound unease and uncertainty" (Stripling, 2025, np). It is imperative to communicate openly about these uncertainties, identify actionable steps, and nourish relations that help us navigate.

In recent conversations with students, I urged them to consider alternatives to their planned dissertations and their thoughts about faculty roles. Consider which piece of your planned project might be an important area for future jobs, and what parts can go. Save money. Collaborate with others on your writing plan and your accountability goals. Redo your resumes. Look for side hustles you can do right now if you need to. Tell people to keep a look out for you. Share jobs ads. (Author 1, reflection).

Collaging Toward What We Need in this Moment

Between the precarity of academic and social life - where timelines compress, expectations mount and expand, and institutions navigate new conditions - collaging helped us repeatedly return to the same need: the freedom and grace to focus on being and becoming in community. Institutional pressures can sneakily orient us to convert our embodied and holistic lives into a problem to manage-our bodies, our care obligations, our unique ways of being and knowing, and our voices. To write in particular ways. To succumb to manufactured urgencies. And yet, what we need right now is not more entrenched conventions or rules. We need ethical and collaborative orientations that help us connect and strategize while we navigate structures and conditions that do not reliably keep us safe. In that orientation, the question is not, “How do we perform ‘successfully?’” but instead, “How do we perform, with integrity intact, collaboratively, to support our futures and becoming?”

Freedom to Choose and Refuse

A prevalent practice we identified is the freedom to decide what deserves our attention — and the right to refuse what drains and distorts it. This represents our reconceptualizing of success and failure. Author 1 named this directly: “*The things that keep coming up for us (health, seeking jobs, family time) are important...And we get to decide what’s important for us.*” Such insistence matters because precarity and competition train us to doubt our own significance and react through fear rather than creativity. Throughout our dialogue sessions, we often returned to certain essential points: moments signaling a boundary, a grief, a harm, a value, or a truth. Over our years collaging together, we have all created embodied collages, and Author 3 has created numerous collages exploring silencing mechanisms she has experienced within different institutions. She has represented the lingering affective and embodied repercussions of such silences with flames, cut or crafted from magazines and a course textbook containing only hegemonic leadership theories. She has filled collages with the words she would have said, had she felt safe enough to speak, and with representations of emotions she was not allowed to express in institutional settings. Naming what “keeps coming up” in this way has become a form of refusal for us: a refusal to outsource our ways of knowing/being/becoming, a refusal to treat institutional and societal ills as noise, and a refusal to *only* let institutional timelines and structures determine what merits our attention and how we process. The collaging process of breaking down and reassembling has helped open these pathways.

At the same time, we recognize that attention and refusal must be paired with *power-aware* decision-making. During one session, we highlighted the risk that lives inside scholarly storytelling: “*Who will read [my work]... and have some sort of ... power over it?*” From that thought, a strategy for relational care emerged: “*I’ll probably save some of my ... most personal stories for a different space.*” Author 1 affirmed this kind of decision-making: “*It’s important that we have some agency in what and where we share.*” Making such decisions in institutional spaces requires care. Protecting parts of our work can help keep what is sacred from being handled carelessly. Sometimes “praxis” looks like moving the story to a safer container, choosing the audience and timing, and refusing the demand that everything must fit neatly into “institutional expectations” to count as scholarship.

Space to Bear Witness

Indeed, indigenous scholars using decolonizing and indigenous methodologies (see Wilson, 2008) have underscored this expanded understanding of research. Their work is not, primarily, *for* institutions or to *fill* scholarly gaps or to contribute *only* to a scholarly community

of professionals who read, think, and conduct research. Such work is created primarily by—and *for*—their communities. Essential to that work is carrying it out through a relational ethics of care that honors the relationship between those sharing their knowledge and those bearing witness to it, and the new understandings that emerge from those interactions for others to learn. In that sense, our collaging and dialogue cannot enact care that solves financial crises or intervenes in attacks on higher education; instead, we see the relational ethics of care in co-mentoring as an ongoing process of bearing witness, expanding understanding, asking questions, and always having a voice in forging actionable steps for livable futures.

Re-making and Crafting Time

We also identified a shared need to *re-make* and craft time in ways that intervene in neoliberal temporal pressures. The clock can be one of the sharpest instruments of precarity - it is a constant reminder of what we still need to do, what we failed to do, and who we have failed to be. One of us discussed the turning point where wellness and survival become intentional practices. “*I’m not going to kill myself to do it because then time won’t be a factor... if I’m not here.*” That statement holds the truth many scholars carry quietly: we can meet deadlines and still lose ourselves, damage our health, not find a job. We can be “productive” and yet still be disappearing. So, we are practicing different measures of productive failure. As our opening epigraph conveyed, in precarious times, building a linear career path through prescribed steps or a series of promotions may not be an option. Collaging provides a literal representation of how we are working (messily) to craft the kind of lives we want to live that may diverge from what institutions might deem “successful.” Through collaging, we can blend varied resources – pieces of a flowery wreath; programs from a feminist conference; magazines from medical waiting rooms – to assemble and create entirely new relationships, pathways, and imaginaries. We can try out different combinations of materials, repositioning bits over and over or throwing them out altogether, and arrange such thoughts in any shape we want, rejecting linearity all together.

We count and celebrate what we can - small blocks of work, partial wins, an afternoon reclaimed, or a weekend that stays “unproductive” on purpose. We are learning that rest is not a reward for finishing; it is a condition for continuing (Hersey, 2022). Most importantly, we are learning to treat our relationships - especially co-mentoring and shared witnessing - as a method for fostering holism and action while doing academic work in precarity. We do not need quick or certain answers in These Times. But we continue to ask questions with and alongside others toward imagining more liberatory co-mentoring practices within—and beyond—educational spaces to expand counterspaces and strategies of flourishing.

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