

BEYOND THE CURVE

Press Kit

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LOGLINE — College students, Mara and Brooke, struggle to achieve their dreams of majoring in STEM while confronting their own collapsing mental health in an environment designed to weed them out.

SYNOPSIS —

Mara and Brooke are UC Berkeley college students with ambitions of majoring in the STEM field (science, technology, engineering and math). Mara is a transfer student who grew up in Mexico and strives to find solutions to climate change while Brooke is a first year hoping to major in cognitive science. For both of these young women, coming to UC Berkeley is a dream. But through their experiences at this prestigious institution and a charismatic biology professor, the campus slowly takes a darker turn.

We start to unravel the highly competitive and harmful nature of the STEM environment built to weed people out. Especially students like Mara and Brooke who are more likely to experience test anxiety and feel like they don't belong.

But Mara and Brooke's dreams aren't the only thing at stake. So is their mental health. Mara recounts how her difficulties with her major led her to having suicidal thoughts while Brooke struggles with bipolar disorder which affects her ability to succeed in college.

Despite the toxic STEM culture, Mara and Brooke persevere although their experience is bittersweet. While Brooke finds support with her parents, she often feels like she's just getting by. And Mara is so close to becoming a real engineer but she questions whether she'll be able to continue on to more advanced degrees.

Although Mara and Brooke are making it through the college STEM environment, who else will be left behind? And at what cost?

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT —

In college, I was drowning — lost in a sea of engineering problem sets and test anxiety I didn't even know I had. My head bobbed barely above the water as I moved robotically from assignment to assignment, not able to think past the nearest deadline. I juggled engineering courses, culture shock from growing up in a different country, extracurriculars, a job and difficult personal experiences. A numbness grew inside me until I couldn't even remember how to cry.

But I wasn't alone. More than half of college students are experiencing anxiety, depression or both. And although college mental health issues peaked during the pandemic, it's been getting worse for the past two decades. In response, many schools have invested in counseling centers and suicide prevention methods. But they haven't been addressing the role that universities themselves play in contributing to these issues — and that's through academic stress. Professors are for the most part chosen because of their research, not because of their teaching skills.

The more I dug into the research, I realized that these problems were more acutely present in the STEM fields. For college students one of the highest predictors of depression, stress and burnout is feeling like they don't belong. And women and students of color are less likely to experience a sense of belonging in STEM.

I also realized that I was lucky to have made it through and gotten my engineering degree. Many students like Mara and Brooke get weeded out which prevents the STEM field from becoming more diverse and for people to give back to their own communities. It prevents bright students from achieving their dreams and contributing to the field just because they don't fit within the exclusionary conventions of the STEM culture. But it's also a question of life or death. Of whether people are able to thrive or not. Even if they manage to stay like I did, the struggle, the depression, the anxiety, they don't just disappear.

They affect your ability to think, to advocate for yourself, to take advantage of the opportunities that you came to college for. They affect your future wellbeing and whether you even graduate or not. And while I did graduate, I had no mentors, no idea about my future, no brain space to think about what I actually wanted to do. During graduation, I sat there dumbfounded at what our student speakers had

accomplished while I had merely survived. So it's not just about the injustice of women and students of color being pushed out of STEM, it's also about the quality of our lives.

This film is a wakeup call for professors and universities who are concerned about students' mental health but are not addressing how they themselves are contributing to the issue. It's also a call to the thousands of college students who are struggling and who like me, thought they were alone.

CREDITS —

Featuring

Mara Alonso
Brooke Covington
John Matsui

Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Editor

Grace Galletti

Additional Sound

Jennifer Wiley

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Tanay Gokhale
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Rick Johnson
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Music from

APM Music

Original Music

Daniel Li

Special Thanks

Mara Alonso
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Drew Koch, Ph.D.
Sarah Miles, Ph.D.
Denise Pope, Ph.D.
Angie Wallace
Jules Winter, Ph.D.
Christine Zhou, Ph.D.
Shortform Class of 2023
The Biology Scholars Program
All the students who shared their stories

DIRECTOR'S BIO—

Grace Galletti is a documentary filmmaker and journalist with a passion for mental health because of her own struggles with depression and anxiety. She has focused her work extensively on the subject to raise awareness and overcome the stigma that has kept many, including herself, in silence.

Some of her published work explores the barriers that different communities face with accessing mental health services, the aftermath of child sexual abuse by the Catholic Church and university tracking of student suicides. She uses her trauma informed lens and experience as a domestic violence support line counselor to tell these underrepresented stories with empathy and compassion.

Galletti was born and raised in France and graduated in 2023 from UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism in the shortform video track. She also has a degree in environmental engineering from Brown University.