CHAPTER 14

Conclusion: Imagining Responsive, Equitable, and Humane Academic Cultures

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Abstract This concluding chapter reflects on the narratives presented throughout the volume, examining what doctoral students have shared about caregiving, migration, inclusion, and academic kinship. The chapter addresses five implications for doctoral education: recognizing doctoral study as structural, understanding support as foundational, redefining inclusion as relational accountability, treating form as ethical practice, and approaching change as collective action. The chapter extends invitations to institutions, faculty, and students, outlining what more humane doctoral education might require. The volume is positioned as an open archive documenting the pandemic years, the erosion of diversity and equity initiatives, and the political climate of 2025. The chapter invites readers to witness, remember, and act, recognizing that meaningful change develops through sustained attention and collective accountability.

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This book started by asking doctoral students to share their experiences in their own words. These narrative inquiries reveal something relational: Each student holds their own truth. These stories remain partial and situated in time. They show doctoral study as it really is: messy, contradictory, often exhausting, but still with moments of joy. The students are thinking through their experiences in real time. This book leaves these accounts intact instead of organizing them into themes or extracting patterns. The rawness of their stories becomes a record of lived experience, preserving what institutional memory also includes.

The book follows narrative inquiry as Clandinin and Connelly describe it: experience understood through time, sociality, and place. I keep each story whole, pay attention to relationships, and treat voice as knowledge itself. I call this editorial practice *curatorial gestures.* Through these gestures, I have organized the narratives around four areas: caregiving, migration and identity, inclusion and equity, and academic kinship. These groupings draw out connections while each account keeps its own character. Organizing the narratives required more than thematic arrangement. There was hesitation in deciding how to place the stories. Each choice carried questions of fairness and responsibility, and whether such framing might distort what the authors meant to share. Many narratives intersect across themes and resist clear boundaries. For example, Xiaoxiao Bao and Lingran Zhang write about both migration and academic kinship, while Syed Faizaan Ahab's story moves through crossings of identity, language, and belonging. The groupings serve as points of entry, tracing how experiences meet and extend into one another.

The narratives in this anthology address how doctoral experience takes place within larger forces. Each account tells how students navigate political, economic, and social circumstances. The writings render these realities visible, linking individual experiences to their institutional settings and the broader conditions around them.

Caregiving as Invisible Labor

Kaleb and Alexis Ostraff write about the daily work of being doctoral students and parents. Their account documents the logistics of managing coursework, teaching, and dissertation writing alongside caring for young children during a pandemic that closed schools and deepened isolation. What carried them through was relational support from an advisor who told Kaleb directly, "Never put your family second to the program, your art, or career." This statement marks an empathetic form of academic mentorship, one that acknowledges how personal and professional commitments exist together.

Hsin Fang, Jung Shan Sung, and Shatha Alrashdan extend this conversation by centering Asian international student mothers. Their narrative involves caregiving within migration, language negotiation, and cultural adaptation. They describe mothering while learning US academic culture, separated from extended family, and managing the emotional labor of maintaining cultural traditions for their children. Their metaphor of *stirring the pot* conveys both pressure and creative agency in this ongoing process. They live between cultures and build ways of being that merge inherited traditions with present demands. Through this work, they form hybrid identities for themselves and their children under conditions of profound inequality.

These chapters make clear that caregiving is central to doctoral education. It remains a structural condition that institutions largely ignore. Students who are parents carry disproportionate burdens. They work late after their children sleep. They request extensions with apprehension. They conceal their family lives to avoid judgment. They navigate a system that rewards those who can perform total immersion, as if doctoral students existed outside kinship and daily responsibilities.

Migration, Language, and the Politics of Belonging

The narratives by Rachel Yan Gu, Xiaoxiao Bao and Lingran Zhang, and Niousha Mousavi examine the cultural and linguistic labor of international students in US doctoral programs. Their stories focus on the emotional weight of being treated as outsiders. Exclusion appears in moments such as eating lunch alone, citing Western theorists over scholars from their own regions, or feeling anxious about using an ordinary word in an unfamiliar context where language carries power.

Rachel's narrative follows her path from art education in China, where training centered on technical mastery, to graduate study in the United States, where personal expression and conceptual framing took priority. The transition meant learning new artistic methods and new ways of talking about ideas. As a neurodivergent student, she also described how sensory perception and cognitive difference informed her approach to learning and making. Her story documents the ongoing effort to translate words, expectations, and ways of thinking. This labor often goes unseen by faculty and peers who move within familiar cultural systems.

Xiaoxiao and Lingran write together, treating friendship as both a method of learning and a means of mutual encouragement. Their dialogue describes facing cultural confusion, from early experiences of eating alone to claiming space in classrooms where their voices were minimized. They write about moments when Western art history was presented as the norm while Asian art appeared as supplementary. They describe how their identities were flattened into broad labels such as "Asian" or "international." They also document how they built strength through conversation, mutual recognition, and shared inquiry.

Niousha's narrative adds another layer. She writes about finding balance in a system that measures people by their productivity. Her story moves from perfectionism toward a more integrated way of living that holds both precision and curiosity. She questions narrow ideas of success and seeks a sense of completeness that includes structure and openness, logic and care. Her narrative suggests that migration involves more than geography. It requires living across boundaries, accepting contradictions, and staying open to multiple ways of being.

These narratives by Rachel, Xiaoxiao, Lingran, and Niousha portray the intellectual and emotional work involved in international doctoral study. Each chapter illustrates how students navigate differences in language, culture, and expectation while constructing meaning within new academic contexts. Their accounts call attention to the ongoing negotiation, persistence, and creativity that sustain scholarly life across borders.

Performativity and Institutional Betrayal

Syed Faizaan Ahab's narrative examines the violence embedded in performative inclusion. His chapter describes how spaces labeled as "safe" operate through correction and surveillance. In one class, he used the word *discover* to describe a movement exercise and was told to replace it with

uncover. In another, a playful reference to penguins as "spirit animals" prompted an accusation of appropriation. When he later spoke about fear of protest in Pakistan, a peer read it as "internalized oppression." Through humor and restraint, Faizaan writes about how repeated correction replaces understanding with moral performance.

Ava Maken Ali's story turns to fractured trust among peers. Through the image of a cow stealing a flower, she reflects on how competition for recognition distorts relationships. Her story records moments of appropriation, betrayal, and silence within networks presumed to be collegial. The narrative examines the lateral tensions that circulate in academic life, where shared marginalization seldom leads to reciprocity.

These two narratives demonstrate how institutions celebrate diversity while exhausting those they claim to support. Language intended to affirm becomes a means of regulation. Inclusion becomes shallow when reduced to correct phrasing or symbolic presence. Equity requires structural change, mutual responsibility, and a redistribution of authority.

Kinship and Collective Survival

Azlan Guttenberg Smith, Marina Tinone, Hannah Heath, Emily Luming, Finola McMahon, Dani Nutting, and María José Palacios Figueroa describe the Critical Disciplinarity Scholars collective as a gathering built on conversation and shared meals. The group meets to discuss exhaustion, supervision, teaching, and the unease of navigating academic structures. They offer each other material support: rides, housing help, time to rest. Their writing recalls sessions where students questioned why research often serves institutional prestige instead of human connection. They reimagine study as a communal act grounded in hospitality, mutual accountability, and attention to place.

Somi Lee and Nupur Sachdeva write within the tightening political climate of 2025, marked by visa restrictions under Project 2025 and increased surveillance of international scholars. Their dialogue records the difficulty of sustaining academic work while repeatedly proving legitimacy through paperwork and shifting regulations. Lee writes that "many have carried different forms of fatigue from trying to be seen," while Sachdeva describes how ""the paradox is cruel: the institution demands productivity as proof of belonging." Through this exchange, they present writing itself as a form of resistance against erasure. Their chapter keeps them intellectually and emotionally present when institutional systems demand silence.

Qingquan Tony Zhang reads across several doctoral narratives to understand how students negotiate vulnerability and resistance within uneven systems of support. He refers to Syed Faizaan Ahab's account of linguistic correction and to the Ostraffs' description of compassionate advising to ask what safety in education actually requires. Zhang writes that "trust demands time, consistency, and a willingness to confront the limits of our own understanding," urging faculty to recognize that presence and reliability form the basis of ethical mentorship. His commentary turns reflection into a pedagogical stance that replaces performative concern with sustained listening.

Lindsey Stirek writes from the position of a faculty member who remembers the instability of graduate life. She links her own experience of late-night exhaustion and masking neurodivergence to broader structures of overwork and contingent employment. She recalls the pressures of teaching, research, and financial insecurity, noting that "graduate students are situated in a strange liminal space between worker and student." From this recognition, she calls on faculty to use their limited authority to improve conditions by joining unions, serving in shared governance, and mentoring through small but consistent actions. Stirek redefines faculty responsibility as collective advocacy built through daily gestures of support.

These four chapters compose a collective meditation on how people sustain one another within institutional strain. Meals, conversations, field notes, and reflections function as quiet interventions that make community visible. Each author works through a distinct mode of relation: organizing, correspondence, reflection, and action. The voices in this section deepen the meaning of scholarship beyond production. Knowledge lives in small acts of steadiness and attention, in the effort to remain connected within structures that often divide.

Implications for Doctoral Education

What can be learned from the stories in this book? What do they ask of those who teach, govern, and study within doctoral systems? The following reflections are offered as possibilities for continued thinking and collective response.

1. **Doctoral Education Is Structural**

The stories in this collection show that difficulty in doctoral life does not come from personal weakness or lack of commitment. It grows from structures that create exhaustion: limited funding, unstable visa policies, lack of childcare, and advising that functions without accountability. When students reach a breaking point, the issue is not their motivation. It is the system that demands constant work while giving little in return. Addressing attrition, inequity, or burnout requires structural change. Institutions must provide fair stipends, accessible healthcare, reliable childcare, and transparent advising. They must also stop promoting diversity while maintaining practices that exclude those they claim to support.

2. **Support Is Foundational**

Stories by Kaleb and Alexis, Hsin Fang and her collaborators, and the Critical Disciplinarity Scholars collective show that support and scholarship are inseparable. Support forms the ground on which research and learning can exist. Students who raise children, care for family members, or live with illness should not be asked to separate their personal lives from their academic work. They need structures that allow both to coexist with dignity. Flexible timelines, leave policies without penalty, and an understanding of circumstances beyond the university are essential. Peer communities and student collectives also sustain academic life. Institutions should fund and recognize these spaces as integral parts of educational practice.

3. **Inclusion Is Relational Accountability**

Syed Faizaan Ahab's narrative exposes how correction without context can harm. Changing a student's wording does not equal equity. When faculty correct without listening, they reproduce the same hierarchies they claim to challenge. Inclusion demands attentiveness, patience, and humility. It means listening before speaking and allowing discomfort to become a site of learning. The decline of equity initiatives across US higher education calls for renewed responsibility. Inclusion must take form in hiring, mentoring, decision-making, and access to resources.

4. **Form Is Ethical Practice**

Storytelling functions as an ethical way of knowing in this book. Narrative inquiry values presence and listening over interpretation from a distance. The contributors' diverse forms (autoethnography, duoethnography, visual work, dialogue, and fiction) express how meaning develops through experience. Keeping each voice intact is a political and ethical act that rejects the extraction of stories as data. Honoring narrative integrity asks scholars to reconsider how doctoral research is taught and evaluated. Creative inquiry holds the same weight as conventional scholarship. Learning grows through close attention to everyday life and to the moments that give knowledge meaning.

5. **Change Is Collective Action**

Faculty commentaries by Tony Zhang and Lindsey Stirek make clear that goodwill addresses only part of systemic inequity. Enduring change grows from sustained work among students, faculty, and institutions. Zhang examines who experiences safety in academic spaces and who remains outside it. His reflection encourages faculty to stay attentive when student experiences challenge their expectations. Stirek recalls her own graduate years to show how faculty also navigate unequal structures. She points to unions, faculty senates, and governance as ways to strengthen collective influence. Her commentary presents specific actions—joining committees, forming networks, and maintaining clear boundaries—as steps toward fair practice. Both authors describe mentorship as an ethical commitment grounded in accountability. Transformation depends on a shared capacity to act together and to build a university where human life and intellectual pursuit hold equal importance.

Toward More Humane Possibilities

The stories and commentaries in this book invite imagination toward more livable forms of doctoral education. Change begins in policy, but it also grows through relation, in how institutions, faculty, and students respond to one another with steadiness and integrity. I offer the following reflections knowing that many wish to make change yet face systems that restrict what can be done. What follows offers openings for reflection and action. The reflections presented here arise from hope and conviction,

grounded in the belief that imagination itself is a courageous act. I write with sincerity and commitment, refusing the cynicism that treats hope as naïve. The aim is to envision what should be considered the norm, rather than focusing on what remains impossible under structural barriers or accepting those limits as natural. Let us imagine a truer norm and recognize that such imagining can move us toward a more humane academic life.

For Institutions

Doctoral study depends on the most basic conditions of living. Many students pursue research while teaching, grading, and taking additional jobs to afford rent or groceries. The promise of scholarship cannot stand apart from the reality of labor. Universities must ensure that doctoral work is not sustained through exhaustion or debt. Stipends should meet the real cost of survival—housing, food, transportation, and health. Assistantships must provide stable hours and fair compensation so that study and life can coexist. Institutions must recognize that intellectual work cannot grow where basic needs remain unmet.

Scholarship also depends on time. Doctoral students need quiet hours to think, read, and create without administrative demands consuming their energy. Much of doctoral life is spent navigating endless forms, visa paperwork, registration systems, and approval processes that often take days and weeks to complete. These procedures, while necessary, should not become barriers to study. Universities must streamline administrative work in ways that respect doctoral students' time and mental energy. Simpler systems, clearer communication, and responsive support can restore time to its proper place: as the condition for thought itself.

Beyond financial and administrative stability, universities say they support community and mentoring through programs. These efforts remain insufficient without structural support to make them meaningful. Real connection grows through time and sincerity, not through policy or training alone. Institutions can protect this by limiting faculty advising loads, counting mentoring hours in workload calculations, and creating spaces where students and advisors can meet regularly without competing demands. They can fund peer mentoring programs with stable budgets and recognize student collectives as legitimate sites of learning. They can build accountability by asking students directly about their advising experiences and responding to what they say. Doctoral study flourishes when students are recognized as partners in scholarship and as people whose

presence matters. *Why does this matter beyond doctoral students themselves?* Improving doctoral education is not separate from addressing the crisis in higher education—it is central to it. Doctoral students teach undergraduates, conduct research, and sustain institutional knowledge production. When they are exhausted and unsupported, the entire system suffers. Better conditions for doctoral students mean better education for undergraduates, more sustainable faculty workloads, and stronger institutions. Moreover, whether graduates remain in academia or pursue other paths, the practices they learn through ethical mentoring and supportive structures shape how they work and lead elsewhere.

For Faculty

Faculty understand the paths students walk because we have been there. We know the weight of uncertainty, the long silence before recognition, and the effort that learning demands. Many of us remember the mentors who listened, and the absence of those who did not. Memory can hold strength. From that place of knowing, faculty can speak when others remain silent, question systems that ignore, and use the language of the institution to make students' realities heard. Change begins in small acts that allow others to keep moving forward. We act because remembering those years keeps teaching humane. Many faculty wish to make change but live with limited influence. Within large systems, voices can fade like a flickering light in the wind. Even so, transformation starts there. We teach, we write, we publish, we present, and sometimes people listen. We know the spaces where our words can reach. Influence is more than position or title; it grows through steady action and genuine regard for others. We act within reach, and each effort becomes part of a larger movement.

For Students

You have heard many things before about how to find community, how to make time, how to speak, and how to rest. I will not repeat them here. I am still learning the same things. Some days I forget what matters. Some days I remember. We move through places with little room to breathe, yet we keep learning how to stay whole. Keep close those who see you as you are. Write, talk, or stay quiet when you need to. Keep small traces of what helps you continue. Rest when you can. These are not tasks but ways of being. I speak them aloud so I can hear them too.

You have come a long way through your education, and that path has never been easy. You have achieved, you have stumbled, and you are still here. Being here already tells a story of strength.

Looking Back: What This Book Offers

This book places doctoral students' experiences at the center. Through narrative inquiry, it connects individual stories to broader institutional and social conditions. Each account shows the complexity of graduate education shaped by expectations, relationships, and structural pressures. The stories ask readers to sit with these experiences—to recognize what feels familiar and to consider what challenges their assumptions. Both responses matter. Narrative inquiry guides this work. It emphasizes relationship, attentiveness, and ethical engagement. The method clarifies how students navigate their programs and how meaning develops through dialogue and shared experience. The book asks scholars, educators, and administrators to reconsider how academic environments can support students as full participants in intellectual communities. It works toward scholarship grounded in connection, responsiveness, and mutual respect.

Looking Forward: An Archive That Remains Open

Throughout this book, I have described these narratives as an archive of lived time rather than institutional memory. Archives breathe and shift through interpretation, conversation, and engagement. What students share here lives in the present and reaches toward futures still forming. This collection reflects a specific historical moment: the pandemic years, the dismantling of DEI, and the political tension of 2025. Yet the realities within doctoral education continue to surface in new ways, making this work relevant beyond its historical context. What evolves is how clearly those realities appear, how bravely students name them, and how communities respond together.

This book joins that act of naming. Doctoral difficulty grows from political, economic, and social conditions. Transformation requires steady attention to relationships, daily practices, and collective care that make learning and growth possible. These narratives open space for more voices and forms. Readers might sit with complexity and reflect before seeking

resolution. Universities must confront harm. Students can speak with confidence. Doctoral education can become a place where inquiry, compassion, and human growth thrive together.

I invite readers to witness, to remember, and to act. Speaking takes courage, especially when silence feels safer. Meaningful change grows through steady effort and sustained connection. As this book comes to a close, the archive remains alive. New stories will come, and the work moves onward.