

NJPA article

I live by the mantra, “Can’t is a conscious effort not to, of which I will never do.” Despite the clear grammatical error, to me this mantra means to never say that you “can’t” do something, saying can’t means to accept defeat and not progress. I apply this mindset to my personal life, my school work, my clinical work, and my research efforts. My name is DeVanté J. Cunningham and I am currently a third-year doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program with an emphasis in Clinical Child Psychology at Montclair State University (MSU) in Montclair, NJ. Prior to entering the program at MSU, I attended the University of Virginia where I completed my B.A. in Psychology and Sociology and a Master’s in Public Health with a concentration in Health Policy, Law, and Ethics. My master’s thesis was entitled, *“I’m in the dope Black people group”: The educated and stressed minority*, in which I conducted a qualitative research study on the stressors and coping strategies of Black graduate and professional students at a predominantly white institution.

Currently, my research interests have been largely focused on online racial discrimination, mentoring relationships, and internalizing disorders. My clinical interests are primarily focused on minority populations and trauma and anxiety related disorders. On a personal level, I am an active youth mentor and have spent years mentoring minority and under-resourced youth. Most recently, I have been an active youth mentor in my fraternity’s (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.) Auxiliary Program (Sigma Beta Club) where we seek to empower young Black and brown boys in the Northern New Jersey area. Eventually, I aspire to bridge all of my interests through clinical work focused on trauma and as professor who researches mentoring relationship in children with a special interest in those that have been physically and sexually abused.

At MSU, I am very active and currently serve as the president of the Graduate School’s Honor Society (Alpha Epsilon Lambda) and the vice-president of a doctoral organization started with my colleagues (Psychological Organization of Doctoral Students). Additionally, I am a member of the Dean’s Advisory Board, where I am afforded an opportunity to advocate for other graduate and professional students directly to the dean of the graduate school. I also serve as an adjunct professor at MSU, where I teach Psychological Aspects of Human Sexuality.

Last year, while completing my first doctoral externship at the Youth Development Clinic in Newark, NJ. I was able to be trained in and utilize trauma-informed therapies (e.g., TF-CBT and PCIT) with my clients that ranged in age from four to 19. This initial exposure to utilizing trauma-informed therapies created an interest in becoming more competent in using these modalities and others like it and drove me to search for future externships that were entirely or largely focused on child abuse and neglect. Therefore, for my 2019-2020 externship experience, I was very fortunate to be accepted to the Game-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (GB-CBT) track at the Newark Beth Israel Metropolitan Regional Diagnostic and Treatment Center (Metro RDTC). In these first few months, I have gained a wealth of knowledge on how to effectively work with children that have been physically and/or sexually abused. In particular, I have been afforded the opportunity to serve alongside the lead social worker as the RDTC liaison for the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT)

meetings. I have seen so much growth in how to properly discuss sexual and physical abuse with youth and in my forensic writing abilities. My experiences in the GB-CBT externship, have also made me a better professor through keeping me up-to-date on relevant literature and topics that heavily relate to the topics I cover in my class.

As an out-of-state doctoral student that is very active in multiple communities and is completely financially independent, it is virtually impossible to have any additional streams of income. While creating my budget, I found myself initially saying that I “can’t” afford to travel to Newark multiple times a week on a doctoral student’s budget or “can’t” afford to travel home for break. However, just when I thought that I would have to sacrifice seeing my family for the holiday’s I was informed that we were awarded the NJPA grant. It is for that reason and many others that I am extremely fortunate for the NJPA grant and the strain it has lifted. I am excited for the opportunity to continue to grow professionally and personally in the GB-CBT externship program at the Newark Beth Israel Metro RDTC.

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