Graduate Student Mental Health, Wellness & Support

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When we asked App State Graduate Students

What is causing you to feel stressed or anxious? (and how to WE respond?)

- School is already stressful and I have been used to that but now it is as if there is no escape. Am I doing all that I can to stay safe? I have no ability to have time away from it without taking risks.
- Activities have become somewhat mundane.
- No distinction between Covid-19 stress and school stress. It's all just stress.
- Stressed about the future and applying to graduate schools and what I'll do if I don't get in.
- I am so financially stressed. Work on campus has decreased for me.
- I am more aware of people's personal lives and needs than ever before.
- I have noticed that I have a harder time turning off school, decompressing. Not finding it easy to find pleasure in the usual things.
- I can't focus on school. I am putting things off more and more.
- I feel guilty for not being sick and guilty if I test positive and have given it to anyone else.
- I have Covid-19 now. I feel terrible and school work is just impossible to focus on.
- I tested positive for Covid-19 but have no symptoms. Who was around me before I knew?
- I'm worried about the winter months. I come from a hot climate and have no idea how to deal with black ice or snow.
- I am worried about being so far from home. There is a wildfire in my state and I am worried even more about my family.
- I am doing self-compassion exercises now to try and reduce my stress and anxiety.
- I am anxious about the election and how people are going to respond. I have a diagnosed mental health condition and all the additional stressors have made it much worse. I try to practice self-care but now I get sick when I eat and cannot be active without losing all energy. It's a nasty cycle. I know I'm not the only one experiencing this right now.

Supporting Mental Health and Wellness of Graduate Students

The Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies received a grant from the Council of Graduate Studies and the JED Foundation to help identify different graduate student mental health needs, challenges, and opportunities across various graduate fields, student demographics, and campus stakeholder groups.

To this end, we organized a listening session for the Program Director meeting on Monday, September 28, 2020. We sought insights into the challenges of supporting graduate student mental health and wellbeing, identifying strategies for enhancing current mental health resources for all enrolled graduate students and to identify gaps in services and support that need further attention, particularly those resources that faculty need available to them.

*Throughout the project, CGS sought guidance from an advisory committee of experts and graduate education leaders, who provided input on the research and action plan. In addition, CGS surveyed its member institutions to better understand existing policies and practices for supporting graduate student mental health and factors that may impact the design and delivery of services. In 2020, graduate deans, graduate students, mental health researchers, and other experts convened virtually in October for a one-and-half-day workshop. **The final project outcomes will include a report and a statement of common principles for supporting graduate student mental health.**

30 Program Directors attended and responded to the following questions

What mental health challenges/needs do you see in your graduate students?

What resources currently assist you with those challenges?

Where have you identified gaps in support services for graduate students?

What strategies can we implement to enrich our mental health resources?

Question 1: What mental health challenges/needs do you see in your graduate students?

Summary of responses

- We are seeing students with anxiety and depression related to Covid-19 concerns
- Students are facing transition issues; students of color and trans students (in particular) deal with issues around safety, microaggressions, racism, sexism, etc.
- Students are not communicating much with me; they are showing a 'stiff upper lip' and are not expressing issues they are having – they seem more likely to express this during one-on-one interactions.
- Graduate students who are classroom teachers are more stressed than ever, dealing with things like having to teach online.
- Coping with family members who were hospitalized with Covid (some who died or nearly died)
- Our adult students—like us—are often responsible for their own programs, their children, their parents etc.; the burden can be huge
- There's a feeling of a lack of community, and also increased financial worries; mentions of stress/anxiety/family issues but also trying to keep a stiff upper lip and get through the work
- Major Zoom fatigue and overall fatigue is noticeable
- Financial concerns because the jobs that they had been able to work in the past are no longer available or the hours have been cut back dramatically
- Increased anxiety caused by uncertainty for international students

Question 2: What resources currently assist you with those challenges?

Summary of responses

- I often recommend that students utilize campus counseling options - both the student counseling center and the employee assistance program through HR
- I also suggest connecting with others with similar identities through professional associations to build community outside the campus and in the broader field
- Counseling Center and counselors in the community—although many are full and not accepting new clients
- We do "check ins" at the beginning of every class, encourage students to attend virtual office hours, discuss "students of concern" at monthly program faculty meetings
- We did zoom check-ins with our students in the spring (to make sure our students are doing okay in all facets of their lives).
- I'm preparing to meet with each student individually for a mid-semester check-in regarding professional development, program goals, etc. I do typically include a personal check-in at this time
- This is "way more complex than just Covid and racial injustice." An increasing number of students are coming into the program with chronic mental health issues that need regular care and medication. Mood disorders, anxiety, etc., added to current world events makes for a bigger problem – bigger than the Counseling Center can address. Statistics across the past two decades suggest that mental health issues have become both more prevalent and more severe. Partly this is because there is less stigma today in seeking out mental health services even before coming to campus. Students may or may not continue to seek these services when they come to school. We need more psychiatric care on campus. Sending a student to the Counseling Center is "the right move" but one thing that was happening even pre-Covid is that there is insufficient access to psychiatric care (specifically, physicians or physician assistants who can help monitor psychiatric medications).

Question 3: Where have you identified gaps in support services for graduate students?

Summary of responses

- *Psychiatric care* – we need more psychiatric hours available for medication management
- *Reliable internet access*
- *Student health center hours* [need to be expanded]
- *More information targeted to students* or at least something that can be sent out to students
- *Supports and community specific to Black and Brown* grad students
- Information is sent out from the Graduate School about the many resources available, but I'm not sure enough of our students take advantage of those. I guess that means the gap is in *encouraging students to utilize what is available*
- Students have mentioned receiving a lot of emails especially due to most classes being online. So any pertinent *info along these lines should probably be disseminated in a different way*
- *Diversifying the staff* available to assist them
- *Hiring more counselors* at the Counseling Center
- Making sure *advisors and faculty are aware of the resources*
- Utilizing the *Early Intervention Program*
- Grad students who identify as *transgender or non-binary need gender identity related services in Student Health.*

Question 4: What strategies can we implement to enrich our mental health resources?

Summary of responses

- ❏ Tele-mental health
- ❏ Create a peer support program by providing assistantships for the helping professions to listen to the concerns of graduate students
- ❏ Hire Black and Brown counselors/therapists
- ❏ Holding bi-weekly zoom meetings with all grad students in program
- ❏ Training for faculty on how to identify and refer students to services
- ❏ Connect them with services offered by advanced students in the mental health-related programs: clinical mental health, marriage and family, clinical social work, music therapy -- students whose focus is mental health
- ❏ Using AsULearn pages (Virtual Graduate Student Life Center)
- ❏ Our students started a Slack space to be able to keep in touch and communicate with one another more easily
- ❏ Over the years our students have formed tight cohorts, but this year it's been really hard to do. What advice do people have for social experiences for grad students to get to know each other
- ❏ Work with graduate student government associations to create connections across programs of study
- ❏ Zoom with frequent breakout room sessions and now Zoom has made it such that students can create their own breakout rooms
- ❏ We've been trying Zoom coffee hours and alumni/student event panels; also planning a trivia game with four other NC universities

How are NC universities addressing mental health concerns?

Campbell: https://cphs.campbell.edu/student-resources/graduate-student-services/

Duke: https://gradschool.duke.edu/student-life/student-health-and-wellness

Wake Forest: https://counselingcenter.wfu.edu/

UNC Chapel Hill: https://caps.unc.edu/

NC state: https://counseling.dasa.ncsu.edu/services/

UNCW: https://uncw.edu/counseling/

Elon: https://www.elon.edu/u/health-wellness/counseling-services/

UNCC: https://caps.uncc.edu/mental-health-resources

ECU: https://rede.ecu.edu/covidcounseling/

Appalachian State:https://today.appstate.edu/2020/05/15/mental-health

Queens University: https://www.queens.edu/life-at-queens/student-support/health-wellness.html

High Point University: http://www.highpoint.edu/counseling/

How are universities outside of NC addressing mental health concerns?

https://www.etsu.edu/gradschool/successservice.php

https://grad.berkeley.edu/news/announcements/mental-health-resources/

https://grad.uconn.edu/graduate-students/health-and-wellness/

https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/resources/wellness/

https://graduate.ucsf.edu/wellness

https://gradschool.princeton.edu/life-princeton/support-resources/health-and-wellness

https://www.gradstudents.pitt.edu/healthwellness

https://uhs.berkeley.edu/health-topics/mental-health

https://www1.villanova.edu/university/student-life/health-services/counseling-center.html

https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/about/graduate-student-resources

Resources for further questioning and planning

https://www.gograd.org/resources/grad-student-mental-health/

Writers, Staff. "Mental Health in Grad School: Master's & PhD Student Resources." *GoGrad.org*, GoGrad.org, 28 Nov. 2018, www.gograd.org/resources/grad-student-mental-health/.

Graduate school is tough. Not only is the curriculum challenging, but grad students often have other obligations, such as full- or part-time work or a family to raise. Add in a few other worries, like paying off those student loans, and it's no surprise that tensions run high. Reports of mental illness among grad school students are rising, and quickly. This guide will cover common mental health concerns for grad students, expert advice on where to find help, and more. It will give exercises on how to manage your mental health.

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/06/new-study-says-graduate-students-mental-health-crisis

Flaherty, Colleen. *New Study Says Graduate Students' Mental Health Is a "Crisis"*, 2018, www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/06/new-study-says-graduate-students-mental-health-crisis.

Mental Health has been a crisis for graduate students even before this pandemic. In 2018 a study found "strikingly high" rates of depression and anxiety with reports of little help from supervisors. Graduate students are six times more likely to get depression than the general population largely due to social isolation. Woman and transgender students are also more likely to experience these feelings compaired to their male cisgender counterparts. It is also shown that good work life balance is highly correlated with good mental health.

Resources for further questioning and planning

https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2020/09/pandemic-erodes-grad-student-mental-health-academics-sound-alarm

Katie LanginSep. 4, 2020, et al. "As the Pandemic Erodes Grad Student Mental Health, Academics Sound the Alarm." *Science*, 4 Sept. 2020, www.sciencemag.org/careers/2020/09/pandemic-erodes-grad-student-mental-health-academics-sound-alarm.

In a survey of about 4000 STEM grad students, there was a 13% jump in anxiety symptoms and 19% jump in depression symptoms from the rates in 2019. This is largely due to the isolation and unknowns of the pandemic. Many students now have blurred visions of what their future holds and when that graduation finish line really is. There is also a large struggle with productivity. It is important to let these students know it is okay to get help and to offer virtual resources.

https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2020/05/professors-must-support-mental-health-trainees-during-covid-19-crisis

June GruberMay. 20, 2020, et al. "Professors Must Support the Mental Health of Trainees during the COVID-19 Crisis." *Science*, 20 May 2020, www.sciencemag.org/careers/2020/05/professors-must-support-mental-health-trainees-during-covid-19-crisis.

With COVID the pressures that may lead to mental health challenges in academia are even more extreme. Everyone must adjust to digital contact instead of face-to-face which is having some negative results. With student well being at an all time low it is important for professors to help be there for support. Research shows that supportive mentorship leads to increased student well being and academic success. How? Here are tips: Advocate for mental wellness, don't be shy about discussing it with your group. Check in regularly and stay connected. Loneliness and isolation put people at an elevated risk for anxiety and depression. Be flexible with work routines, deadlines and schedules. Not everyone will be able to always be in sync. Lastly find meaning.

Resources for further questioning and planning

https://asm.org/Articles/2020/June/Coping-with-Stress-in-the-Time-of-COVID-19-Strateg

ASM Careers. "Coping with Stress in the Time of COVID-19: Strategies to Enhance Resilience in Biomedical Graduate Students." ASM.*org*, 2020, asm.org/Articles/2020/June/Coping-with-Stress-in-the-Time-of-COVID-19-Strateg.

Graduate school can be stressful overall and studies show that stress levels in the sciences field are even higher. It is extremely important students have access to the right resources during this global pandemic.Possible sources of stress are difficulties with advisors, gaps in institutional support, fear of no career advancement or opportunities, and extreme competition for positions. As these stressors are heightened during covid there are some pooled suggestions to assist with coping. Foster community, don't allow relationships to flounder due to social distancing. Avoid avoiding, stop procrastinating. By this we mean take big things and make them into smaller tasks, set yourself up for success, take one step in the right direction every day, and lastly have someone hold you accountable. Build a rewarding life, treat yourself for your successes. Lastly cultivate acceptance. Everyone is going through a hard time right now, take things with grace and be sure to give grace as well.

Resources for further questioning and planning

https://www.naspa.org/blog/promoting-graduate-student-mental-health-the-role-of-student-affairs-professionals-and-faculty

Kaler, Michael J. StebletonLisa, et al. "Promoting Graduate Student Mental Health: The Role of Student Affairs Professionals and Faculty." *Home*, www.naspa.org/blog/promoting-graduate-student-mental-health-the-role-of-student-affairs-professionals-and-faculty.

Student affairs professionals and faculty members need to take an active role in focusing of graduate students mental health. In a recent global study of graduate students published by Nature, more than a third of Ph.D. students reported seeking help for anxiety or depression.Students reported a range of defeating behaviors and interactions that contribute to poor mental health. For example, 21% of respondents said they had personally experienced harassment or discrimination, and the same number reported experiencing bullying. Faculty members, advisers, and/or supervisors engaged in many of these harmful behaviors.While some faculty and higher education professionals may question their role in supporting graduate student mental health, we argue that faculty members, staff, and administrators have a moral and ethical responsibility to support graduate and professional students at all levels. Mental health should not remain siloed in campus counseling centers or even in student affairs divisions.

Resources for further questioning and planning

https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/09/advice-helping-grad-students-through-summer-covid-19

"Inside Higher Ed." *Advice for Helping Grad Students through a Summer of COVID-19,* www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/09/advice-helping-grad-students-through-summer-covid-19.

Students have desperately needed structure and scheduling support during this time. Working from home is hard for everyone, but graduate students can easily fall through the cracks if we do not provide community, contact, a growth mind-set and accountability. You can build community by having zoom call activities such as happy hours and virtual graduations. Make contact, do quick check in calls. It is important to have more interaction with the students now that we are not face to face. Make sure you keep a growth mindset. Administrators and faculty members are quickly learning new technologies, creating new policies and finding ways to adapt our "rules" to allow for more flexibility to ensure student success. To be a successful educator, you have to be willing to relearn and unlearn on a regular basis. Now is the time to implement all of the ideals we never thought would see the light of day. Continue to encourage accountability. Share a group calendar with deadlines, goals and events that everyone can see and foster group communication and accountability.

Resources for further questioning and planning

https://cen.acs.org/education/graduate-education/Grad-students-tell-coronaviruss-impact/98/i13

    Wang, Linda. "Grad Students Tell of the Coronavirus's Impact." *Chemical & Engineering News*, American Chemical Society, 23 June 2020, cen.acs.org/education/graduate-education/Grad-students-tell-coronaviruss-impact/98/i13.

Delayed opportunities, canceled commencements. Students describe how COVID has affected their working lives. Many are struggling with mental illness and uncertainty. Even more have unclear futures ahead as their post grad studies have been postponed or canceled. Most are worried about just making it through each day and trying not to be in social isolation.

https://gradresources.org/crisis/

    Grad Resources, gradresources.org/crisis/.

The National Grad Crisis Line helps graduate students reach free, confidential telephone counseling, crisis intervention, suicide prevention, and information and referral services provided by specially-trained call-takers. Caring, professional staff and well-trained volunteers answer around the clock. All counselors have completed training to understand the unique issues faced by graduate students. In addition to listening to and empathizing with a caller's concerns, counselors assess the caller's lethality risk, counsel, and offer various local support services and mental health resources for follow-up.