



GRADUATE STUDENT COUNCIL

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Mental Health Initiative

Problem

As with the general population, there is a rise in reported graduate and professional students exhibiting mental health disorders (1). Mental health disorders can disrupt relationships and ability of students to perform. According to multiple studies performed in different universities around the country, graduate, professional, and medical students experience high levels of stress (2, 3). Graduate school includes prolonged periods of stress as well as episodic stress relating to major life events including the candidacy exam, thesis writing, and dissertation defense (4). These stress levels are reported higher in graduate students than their medical student peers (3). This elevated stress can manifest in both physical, as well as mental health issues including burnout, depression, and anxiety. Other issues reported include stress due to financial status, relationship to one's advisor, personal relationships, thoughts of quitting, conflict between child-bearing and career development, academic discipline, program competitiveness with women having increased anxiety revolving around family and career planning, while trying to balance and succeed in both (3). Graduate students have different needs, problems, and stresses than undergraduates; currently, there is no place, away from undergraduates, for graduate students to receive care or consultation. This lack of separation is perceived to be detrimental for students who teach and are teaching assistants for the undergraduates and do not want to undermine their implicit power dynamic. Currently, graduate students at Vanderbilt report that stigma, inability to conveniently schedule appointments, discrimination and fear of social isolation prevent them from seeking guidance (GSC survey). Similar concerns have been expressed in Peabody College graduate and professional programs. A separate survey conducted within the Peabody campus also describes similar concerns (please contact Shea Davis, shea.m.davis@vanderbilt.edu, for the details of this survey) with stigma, location of services, and lack of services targeted toward the Peabody population.

While there are reactionary programs in place for advisors, scientists especially, that aim to manage some of the interpersonal issues that arise from poor mental health and lack of mental health training in graduate school, there are no preventive care programs that incorporate positive mental health, stress and interpersonal difficulties management, and mental wellbeing into graduate training.

Solution

Major causes of graduate level stress are the relationship with one's advisor, physical isolation, and growing changes in graduate student demographics, including increase in familiar and financial responsibilities and job insecurity (3). In order to address the stress induced by relationship with the advisor, the current incentives for mentors to take on students need to be reexamined. Mentors should be rewarded for positive mentorship in addition to publication quantity. Unfortunately, this may not be a reality. However, by providing students with easily accessible counseling/care, access to group therapy (prevents social isolation or departmental isolation), and training to incorporate mental well-being must be in place. Access to group sessions will provide a platform to allow students to process and manage academic anxieties in a shared environment with access to professional help while decreasing the feeling of isolation. This can come in the form of counselor or life coach. The overall hope is to provide students with beneficial coping strategies to alleviate situational stress while reducing ineffectual coping mechanisms that students use including: expressive (complaining, crying), cognitive (not thinking or overthinking), escaping style (yoga, TV, altering habits), social support (talking with family and friends, exercising), and hedonistic coping (sex, alcohol, drugs, sports) (5). Providing a Mental Health and Well-Being Education/Counseling Module for graduate students will help students mentally and physically adapt to the demands and stressors of graduate school in a supervised setting and will increase student productivity, retention, and success beyond the program.

IMPACT

- Will put Vanderbilt above other universities in terms of all around well-being and mental health training.
- Decrease the instances of emotional or stress-related problems that affect well-being, personal and academic performance.
- De-stigmatize asking for help, approaching someone with concern.
- Will help recruit and retain students.
- Will promote productivity and future success.
- Potentially reduce substance abuse.

GOALS

1. The first goal is to de-stigmatize and bring awareness to mental health disorders
2. Make help easily accessible and available to students
3. Encourage students to seek professional help or get involved in educational courses that teach stress and anxiety management along with positive health practices.
4. Address many common and unique stressors for graduate students between gender, race, age, marital status, and academic discipline.

IMPLEMENTATION

The United States Military Academy at West Point has a Center for Enhanced Performance that focuses on improving mental health skills through the Performance Psychology Program that integrates positive mental health with leadership training. The attached appendix is a presentation outlining how the Center for Enhanced Performance integrates mental training into standard practice. While not on a battlefield, graduate students still have to navigate politically and emotionally charged environments. I believe a similar training program should be implemented to strengthen the leadership potential and current mental health of graduate and professional students that would give them an edge both during their training and in subsequent positions. The simplest way to implement this proposal is to start with short modular courses available to graduate and professional students. These courses will utilize professionals that can oversee and teach on topics such as stress relief, relaxation, biofeedback, stress management, motivation, psychiatry, imposter syndrome, coping with and understanding failure and incorporate these topics into management and leadership training. Additional resources are listed in the appendix that can be used to develop a course based on preexisting literature.

ESTIMATED COST

After speaking with Dr. Kim Petrie from the office of Biomedical Research Education and Training (BRET), we estimated that that an Augmenting Scholar Preparation and Integration with Research-Related Endeavors (ASPIRE) module costs anywhere from \$10,000-\$35,000 and can go up from there depending on the cost of the professional being brought in, if there are additional supplies required for class, and if adjunct faculty costs are being paid. For this proposal I would recommend at least \$50,000-\$100,000 a year to support a mental health and well-being module that could accommodate at least 25-30 students per session. This amount would cover the cost of current staff preparing and organizing the module, the cost of bringing in professionals to teach stress relief, relaxation, stress management, motivation, psychiatry, imposter syndrome coping with and understanding failure and incorporate these topics into management and leadership training. This estimated cost does not include hiring new staff and faculty, which will ultimately need to be done to service the entire graduate school successfully.

References

1. Storrie K, Ahern K, Tuckett A. A systematic review: Students with mental health problems--a growing problem. *Int J Nurs Pract.* 2010;16:1-6.
2. Garcia-Williams AG, Moffitt L, Kaslow NJ. Mental health and suicidal behavior among graduate students. *Acad Psychiatry.* 2014;38:554-560.
3. Hyun JKQ, Brian C. Madon, Temina Lustig, Steve. Graduate Student Mental Health: Needs Assessment and Utilization of Counseling Services. *Journal of College Student Development.* 2006;47:247-266.
4. Izawa S, Sugaya N, Ogawa N, Nagano Y, Nakano M, Nakase E, Shirotaki K, Yamada KC, Machida K, Kodama M, Nomura S. Episodic stress associated with writing a graduation thesis and free cortisol secretion after awakening. *Int J Psychophysiol.* 2007;64:141-145.

5. Stecker T. Well-being in an academic environment. *Med Educ.* 2004;38:465-478.

Appendix:

There are additional resources in place that we could use to model this initiative. The ASPIRE program out of the BRET Office currently has modules in place that allow students access to cross-disciplinary topics at no cost to the student. One of the more popular sections of a business management class revolved around human resources and interpersonal interactions. The National Institutes of Health's Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) serves to enhance the training experience of students and fellows on all NIH campuses to develop scientific and professional skills to enable leadership within the scientific community. The OITE provides workshops and seminars as well as online materials. The Divinity School has held seminars on nonviolent communication based on the book by the same name by Rosenberg, as well as other seminars on using Meyers Brigg personalities to foster collaborations. Dr. Carl Cohen president of Science Management Associate (SMA) has published *Lab Dynamics*, which includes topics like management, leadership, and negotiation skills for scientists. SMA also provides workshops, coaching, and individual assessment and training.

Attached is information on why the Army Center for Enhanced Performance is a part of the curriculum and how it is integrated with standard military training.