

Stress and Relief for American Graduate Students: Results from a Nationwide Survey

Grad Resources

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INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence suggesting that graduate school is a stressful time of life. Ask any graduate student—or former graduate student—about his or her life and you are sure to hear stories of nightmarish academic advisors, absurdly lengthy reading assignments, horrifying TA experiences, do-or-die qualifying exams, failed lab experiments, and dissertations that seemingly have no end. And all this for a stipend that, depending on one's family size, may or may not exceed the federal government's poverty threshold. Despite this anecdotal evidence, there is little systematic evidence about the life experiences of graduate students. What are they stressed about? Just how stressed are they? What would improve their lives? Which types of students are more stressed than others? And how might family support, faculty support or religion alleviate or exacerbate stress for graduate students? These are the types of questions motivating Grad Resources' landmark nationwide survey of graduate student life in the United States. With the help of Barna Research Group, GradResources surveyed 578 graduate students at 26 major universities across America. The results provide a window onto graduate student life and the resources that are or could be mobilized to help graduate students navigate this stage of their life.

THE CONCERNS AND STRESS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

What Graduate Students Are Concerned About

There are any number of concerns graduate students—like any American adults—may have, but we asked specifically about a number of concerns related to their career, their health, and their relationships. Table 1 reports the percentage of graduate students reporting that each of these issues is a major concern to them. The most pressing concern for graduate students is striking an appropriate school-life balance. The overwhelming academic pressures tend to push out time for social interaction, exercise and entertainment that could be a source of refreshment in the midst of the degree pursuit.

Career concerns are also quite salient: more than half of graduate students are worried about their career success, and a majority are also worried about their finances.

Stress and health are also on the minds of a large number of graduate students.

The least frequently cited concerns for graduate students are relational, even relationships with professors. Among the options provided, graduate students were least likely to indicate that their relationship with God or a higher power was a major concern (along with feeling like an outsider). Fewer than one in four (24%) feel this way.

Table 2 looks a little more closely at the most pressing concerns to graduate students—school-life balance, not being successful, financial pressures, and stress—by the type of program in which they are enrolled. Somewhat surprisingly, there is very little difference between those who are enrolled in a masters-only program and those in a Ph.D. program. There are, however, some rather substantial variations in these concerns among students in different fields.

Those pursuing a degree in education are the most likely to cite school-life balance as a major concern, perhaps because these students are often employed fulltime at a school while pursuing their degree, or perhaps because they are also more likely to be women (who are more likely to be concerned about this issue).

Arts and humanities students are the least likely to be concerned about this balance. However, along with engineers and computer scientists, they are the most likely to be worried about not being successful in their careers. Engineering and computer science students are also the most likely to feel financial pressure, and arts and humanities students are the most likely to report stress or burnout is a major concern for them.

Improving the Lives of Graduate Students

We also asked graduate students how a variety of different factors might help improve their lives. These factors are listed in Table 3, along with the percent of students who reported that each one would improve their lives “a lot.” Not surprisingly, given the concerns voiced in Table 1, the thing graduate students are most likely to agree would significantly improve their lives is reduced financial pressure. Six in 10 graduate students feel this way.

More than half of graduate students also feel that having a stable relationship with a significant other would make their lives a lot better. Graduate students are less likely to perceive religious concerns as fruitful means for improving their lives, such as being a part of a community of faith and having a deeper relationship with God. They are also less likely to perceive regularly serving others as helpful to themselves.

Graduate Student Stress Levels

We wanted to know how much stress graduate students are experiencing, so we asked them, “Overall, how much stress do you normally feel you have in your life?” They could tell us they had a lot more stress than they could handle, a bit more stress than they could handle, about as much stress as they could handle, a bit less stress than they could handle, or a lot less stress than they could handle. Table 4 reports the percentage of graduate students who reported experiencing either a bit more or a lot more stress than they could handle. These are the students experiencing significant amounts of stress.

A substantial minority of graduate students—43%—claim to be experiencing more stress than they can handle. These stress levels are slightly elevated among those in a Ph.D. program, but even 41% of masters-only students report being overstressed. A slim majority of arts and humanities students report more stress they can handle, as do 49% of social science students. Natural science students and education students are the least likely to report having more stress than they can handle.

How Graduate Students Deal with Stress and Other Problems

Many graduate students have major concerns and high levels of stress, as we have learned from Tables 1, 2, and 4. But how do they address these concerns and deal with this stress? Table 5 displays the percentage of graduate students who make use of various resources frequently when they are in need of support or insight for issues of personal development or crisis resolution.

More than two thirds of graduate students frequently turn inward when in need of insight or support. Graduate students are also likely to turn to their close friends or their family. About a third turns to God or a higher power, and just 14% turn to the Bible. Even fewer turn to co-workers, professors, or professional counselors.

We also wanted to know just how helpful different resources are for dealing with stress. According to our survey, the resource most widely perceived as helpful for dealing with stress is a spouse, with 90% of *relevant respondents* saying their spouse was somewhat or very helpful in dealing with stress. Peers and other family members are also widely perceived as helpful for graduate students. The resource least widely perceived as helpful was recreational

drugs. Drugs were the only resource perceived as helpful by fewer people than chaplains or ministers (among those who reported these resources were applicable). However, more report that holy or sacred literature is helpful in dealing with stress.

We also wondered how the different resources graduate students used to deal with stress might affect their levels of stress. Table 7 reports the percentage of graduate students who are overstressed among those who frequently use a variety of resources for dealing with stress.

To be sure, the causal direction is likely going both ways here (e.g., those who are overstressed turn frequently to counselors), but nevertheless Table 7 reveals some interesting patterns. In particular, those who do turn to religion—recall that Table 5 showed only 34% turn frequently to God or a higher power and only 14% turn frequently to the Bible—are the least likely to report experiencing more stress than they can handle.

Those who turn to friends, family, and themselves frequently are somewhat more likely to report excessive stress levels, and those who turn to those outside their friends and family—like co-workers, professors, and counselors—are the most likely to report feeling overstressed. Given the finding that most graduate students do not turn to religious resources to deal with stress, and that those who do are the least likely to feel overstressed, religion may be something of an untapped resource for helping graduate students navigate this stressful time of life. Religion only makes sense as a resource, however, for those who are religious (or are interested in becoming so). Graduate students who are active in a Christian church—that is, those who attend church in a typical week—are less likely than their counterparts to report experiencing more stress than they can handle (37% vs. 45%).

CONCLUSION

Our nationwide survey of graduate students has yielded a number of important findings. Most graduate students have major concerns about their school-life balance, their career success, their financial pressures, and their stress levels. Indeed, more than 40% of graduate students report experiencing more stress than they can handle. Most turn inward or to their friends and family when in need of support or insight, and they report that their spouse, peers, and family are the most helpful resources for dealing with stress. Even so, those who do turn to God or the Bible for support or insight have the lowest levels of stress.

Grad Resources has initiated Christian Graduate Student Communities on campuses across the country as a source of support for students interested in discussing the intersection of faith and academics. These communities provide a point of relational connection, diversion from academic discussions and may represent a relatively untapped resource for combating stress among graduate students.

For additional resources of support see: www.GradResources.org, www.NAGPS.org, www.HopeLine.com, and the National Grad Student Crisis-Line 800-GRAD-HLP

Table 1

Percent of Graduate Students Reporting Issue as a “Major Concern”

Issue

Reaching an acceptable balance between school and life outside of school	59
Not being successful in your career	56

The financial pressures of being in graduate school	54
Stress or burnout	53
Your health	47
Failing to meet the expectations others have of you	43
Choosing the wrong career path	38
Not completing your degree	37
Your relationships with your professors	32
Your relationship with your peers	27
Feeling like an outsider, or that you do not belong	24
Growing your relationship with God or a higher power	24

Table 2

Percent of Graduate Students Reporting Most Common Major Concerns,
by Educational Characteristics

	School-life balance	Not being successful in career	Financial pressures	Stress or burnout
Overall	59	56	54	53
Masters only program	58	58	55	55
Ph.D. program	60	54	54	51
Arts / Humanities	50	64	51	62
Education	69	53	56	47
Engineering / Computer science	61	64	62	49
Natural sciences	61	49	49	49
Social sciences	61	47	54	53
Other	57	59	57	57

Table 3

Percent of Graduate Students Agreeing Items Would Improve Their Lives “A Lot”

Reduced financial pressure	60
Stable relationship with a significant other	53
Having better self-esteem	40
Better physical conditioning	39
Having an academic mentor	37
A better relationship with your family	33
A hobby	28
A deeper relationship with God or a higher power	27
Having a reliable counselor	19
Being part of a community of faith	17
A way to regularly serve people	16

Table 4

Percent of Graduate Students Reporting
“A Bit More” or “A Lot More” Stress Than They Can Handle

Overall	43
Masters only program	41
Ph.D. program	45
Arts / Humanities	51
Education	38
Engineering / Computer science	41

Natural sciences	37
Social sciences	49
Other	40

Table 5

Percent of Graduate Students Reporting Using an Approach or Resource “Frequently” When in Need of Support or Insight

Approach or Resource

Your inner-self	68
Close friends	56
Your family	52
God or a higher power	34
The Bible	14
Co-workers	10
Your professors	8
Counselors	3

Table 6

Percent of Graduate Students Reporting Resources for Dealing with Stress “Somewhat Helpful” or “Very Helpful”

Resource

Your spouse	90
Your peers	78
Your parents or other family members	78
Listening to or playing music	78
Entertainment media like TV or movies	73
Visiting a special place that renews you	69

Social events	68
Participating in sports	61
Praying	57
Eating	50
Your professors	43
Reading holy or sacred literature	40
Counselors	33
Drinking alcohol	33
Chaplains or ministers	28
Recreational drugs	14

Note: Respondents indicating a resource was not applicable were not included in the analysis.

Table 7

Percent of Graduate Students Reporting
 “A Bit More” or “A Lot More” Stress Than They Can Handle,
 by Frequently-Used Resources for Dealing With Stress

Turns to counselors frequently	63
Turns to professors frequently	58
Turns to co-workers frequently	47
Turns to close friends frequently	45
Turns to inner-self frequently	43
Turns to family frequently	43
Turns to God or a higher power frequently	36
Turns to the Bible frequently	26
