Graduate & Professional Student Mental Health & Wellbeing

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Mental health: A top concern

- Open ended survey, administered to graduate student attendees (n=36) at the 9/26/2011 GPSA meeting asked:
  - What are the main issues facing the graduate school community?
  - 76% of respondents reported mental health to be of central concern
GPSA Student Advocacy Committee

• University data on Graduate and Professional Student mental health and wellbeing is sparse
• The need to better understand issues pertaining to mental health and wellbeing of graduate and professional students was clear
• To address this issue, the GPSA Student Advocacy Committee engaged in 2 data collection activities:
  1) Survey research
  2) Qualitative focus groups
1) Survey research: Methods

- **Method**: The pen and pencil survey was administered to attendees at the 10/21/2011 meeting of the GPSA

- **Survey instrument**:
  - What are the obstacles to mental health?
  - How many times per week do you exercise?
  - Do you own a membership to the Cornell Fitness Centers?
  - If not, what are obstacles to a gym membership?
  - Do you have any additional comments?
1) Survey research: Results

- Respondents exercise 2.5 times/wk on average
- About half own a CFC membership (57%)
- Of those without a gym membership (n=16), almost one third (63%) report cost of memberships to be a significant obstacle
- 13% of respondents voiced concern over inadequacy of fitness facilities
2) Qualitative focus groups: Method

- **Recruitment**: An event titled “Graduate & Professional Student Mental Health: Dine & Discuss” at the Big Red Barn on 12/9/11 was publicized as an opportunity to discuss issues pertaining to mental health and wellness.

- **Participants**: Students (n=60) attended from diverse disciplines.
A diverse sample of Graduate & Professional Students (n=60)
Vice President Murphy delivered keynote
Food provided through funding from the Graduate School
Breakout discussion

- **Focus group format:** Participants broke out into small groups (6–10 people)
  - Discussion guided by a trained facilitator
  - Discussions transcribed by a note taker

- **Discussion prompts:**
  1. What do you do to unwind?
  2. What is the current state of Graduate & Professional Student Wellness?
  3. What are areas the University can improve on?

- **Analysis:** Transcripts collected were thematically analyzed by the Student Advocacy Committee
“What do you do to unwind?”

- **Socialize**
  - “TGIF at the big red barn”
  - “Call friends”

- **Physical activity**
  - “Moving my body, walking”

- **Involvement**
  - “Being involved in a student organization”

- **Relax sleep**
  - “Meditation is really helpful for me”
“Current state of mental health?”

- **Lack of publicity**
  - “People need to sometimes see the value of an event in order to attend”

- **Stigma around socializing**
  - “There needs to be a message: we’re all in this together”
  - “Mental health is such a stigmatized term; people are reluctant to ask for help”

- **Resources underutilized**
  - “Graduate students sometimes know about resources, but can’t take advantage, due to poor appointment management software, reduced availability of counselors, etc”

- **Lack of knowledge**
  - How to help others “I don’t know what a ‘warning’ sign would look like”
  - How to help oneself “No instruction on how to live your life”

- **Workload**
  - “I don’t have time for counseling here... Thank goodness I don’t need it”

- **Graduate housing does not serve the community**
“Barriers to mental health?”

• **Individual differences; preferences**
  – “The notion about unwinding varies widely from one department to the next; one individual to the next”

• **Cultural barriers**
  – “Many people who are most isolated are international students who are less familiar with the American culture of involvement, may not want to make connections”

• **Dispersion of individuals**
  – “It’s hard to reach out to all graduate students with advertising about an event, etc”

• **Overcoming stigma**
  – “It’s hard to get people who do not normally ‘go out’”
“What are improvements?”

• **Centralized Resource for graduate students**
  – “Online calendars, dashboards with events, and resources specifically for graduate students would be helpful”

• **Need for more, better physical graduate space**
  – “Big Red Barn, it’s always over run with undergrads”

• **Access to health and wellness**
  – “Gym memberships costly”
  – “Exercise classes not conducive to graduate student schedules”

• **Events & programming**
  – Simple, off campus events for graduate students
  – Better events in the graduate student living centers
  – Food is a great attractor; “Find ways to ‘kill two birds with one stone’ like socialize and eat; graduate students are always so busy”

• **Training**
  – Orientation – how to be a graduate student
  – Ongoing–
  • How to identify warning signs of mental health problems
  • Built in systems of mentoring, attrition
  • University-wide education on work-life balance
“Improvements,” cont’d

• **Build a sense of community**
  – “A sense of community in, and outside, the department”
  – “Colloquiums are a great place to build community”

• **Strong, supportive learning environment**
  – Advisor accountability
  – Workshops on conflict resolution

• **Need for a joint effort**
  – “Such a tricky issue, so cultural”
  – Administration, Deans, Graduate field representatives
  – Collaboration across colleges
Programming at Columbia

• International
Online resources

• Harvard Newsletter
• MIT Website
  – RSS feed
• ISSO international student newsletter
• Cornell Graduate School Newsletter
• Centralized
Insert the Wheel
Gym Information in the Ivies

• Columbia: free
• Cornell $150/year
• Dartmouth/brown/Princeton
• Harvard: Free
• MIT: Free/subsidized by student fee
• Penn: $360/year
• Free
Thank you!

Questions?

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