

Grad Schools Try to Ease ‘Culture Problem’ of Anxiety and Isolation

By Vimal Patel | AUGUST 31, 2015

These days, Arran Phipps often feels depressed and stressed. The worrying has led to migraines, he says, and he has visited the student health clinic at the University of California at Berkeley, where he is a doctoral student in physics. But seeking professional help feels inadequate, a Band-Aid, he says. "My reactions to what's happening around me are totally valid and normal. It's not like there's a problem with the way I'm looking at things. That tells me there's a culture problem in graduate school."

Earning a doctorate, of course, is tough. It usually means at least five years of intense study, teaching, and research — all with the knowledge that secure academic jobs are becoming scarcer. Toss in the isolating nature of doctoral education in some disciplines, and stipends that often fall below a living wage, and it's easy to see why graduate school can take a toll on mental health.

A recent survey of graduate students at Berkeley provides a snapshot of just how heavy that toll can be. Student leaders created the survey to help fill a void of data about graduate students' mental health, which they say isn't discussed enough on campuses. It gauged students' well-being by asking them to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as "I've been concerned about money lately," "I'm upbeat about my postgraduation career prospects," and "I'm satisfied with life."

The findings surprised even administrators who suspected that the climate was unhealthy. About 37 percent of master's students and 47 percent of Ph.D. students scored as depressed. Graduate students in the arts and humanities fared the worst, at 64 percent.



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Graduate students at Berkeley and elsewhere want their institutions to address their emotional well-being head on. Although counseling centers are important and can play a role in helping students, especially during personal crises, these students say that to make a significant difference, colleges must change the culture of doctoral education.

"Graduate student well-being is baked into the whole system," says Galen Panger, a fifth-year Ph.D. student in Berkeley's School of Information and lead author of the report.

Psychiatrists, after all, can't do much about poor adviser relationships, social isolation, precarious finances — or career prospects, which the report found was the top predictor of graduate students' levels of both life satisfaction and depression.

Like many graduate students, Mr. Phipps worries about his career prospects as doctoral production continues to outpace the share of new tenure-track positions. He works far more than the standard 20 hours per week that a Ph.D. student is officially supposed to work for a stipend, but he feels that he must, in order to complete his doctorate in a reasonable time.

Meanwhile, making do on his stipend in the San Francisco Bay Area is a constant challenge. He and his wife, a physics Ph.D. student at Berkeley, carry six-figure student-loan debt. And finances will soon get tougher: Berkeley's decision to stop covering health insurance for the dependents of graduate students could cost Mr. Phipps, who has a diabetic stepson, \$3,000 or more a year.

"I mentor undergraduates, and it's hard to recommend grad school to anyone now," he says. "You're going to suffer a lot through grad school, and your quality of life will be poor for six or seven years."

To some, that is how it should be. Graduate school, the thinking goes, is supposed to be rough, a painful but necessary marathon on the way to an academic job. If a student can't navigate the challenges of a doctorate — both the rigors of the program and the life challenges along the way — he or she probably won't fare well as an assistant professor, better paid but under similar stress.

Sheryl Tucker, dean of Oklahoma State University's graduate school, says academe should no longer tolerate that view. One way universities can help change their graduate-school culture, she says, is by preventing students from being overworked.

When Ms. Tucker started her job, in 2011, she often heard of doctoral students whose assistantships demanded too much of their time. It's one of the most common complaints of graduate students everywhere: The 20 hours on paper is more like 30 or 40 hours in reality. It's particularly a problem when the teaching or research is not related to the student's dissertation.

Ms. Tucker decided that administrators had to sharpen their message: Students and faculty members needed to know that any work beyond 20 hours should be the student's choice, and students needed to know they had recourse when they felt overworked.

Oklahoma State officials, including Ms. Tucker, had to speak individually with many faculty members or department heads who resisted the change.

"When push came to shove, if someone really was not getting it, we did have to say, 'This is how OSU defines our workweek with the federal government. There are federal regulations about how employment works,' " Ms. Tucker says. "You have to have difficult conversations. It's not fun."

She reports rarely hearing students complain of overwork anymore. Where it continues, it tends to be greatest in the sciences, Ms. Tucker says.

Humanities and arts disciplines, however, present their own challenge to students' well-being: isolation. When coursework and exams are complete, often all that's left between a student and his or her Ph.D. is two or more years of dissertation writing, which can be a lonely endeavor.

Some colleges are responding by creating more-structured programs or dissertation workshops in which students bounce ideas off colleagues. Others are aiming to create a sense of community among graduate students, who are typically not as connected to their institutions as undergraduates are.

One such effort is at Virginia Tech. A decade ago, the university turned an old hotel and conference center into the Graduate Life Center, a sort of one-stop shop for graduate-student services. The building offers housing for graduate students and areas to meet, including a coffee shop. It's also used to provide career advice, financial-aid workshops, and counseling services, in a place where graduate students can go without the prospect of being seen in a waiting room by the undergraduates they teach.

Berkeley, too, has addressed that common graduate-assistant fear. In recent years, it has created several "satellite" sites across the campus where graduate students can discreetly seek mental-health counseling.

Mr. Panger, the Ph.D. candidate, says Berkeley administrators have been receptive to his well-being survey. He and other students have briefed many campus leaders on the report, including the University of California's president, Janet Napolitano, who oversees a system that produces 7 percent of the nation's doctorates. Berkeley's graduate dean, Fiona Doyle, wants to institutionalize the survey and conduct it every two years, as the report recommends.

After the report's release, the graduate school announced that it would hire a "graduate community coordinator" to create and oversee social programs for graduate students, and would make them aware of activities and services available.

Karen DePauw, dean of the Virginia Tech graduate school, says she is hearing interest from many fellow graduate deans who want to try something like the Graduate Life Center on their campuses. She agrees with Ms. Tucker, of Oklahoma State, that academe must change its attitude that doctoral education needs to be a time of anxiety and low morale.

"Yes, graduate school is stressful, and a lot of time and energy must be devoted to it, but we don't need to demoralize folks," she says. "This isn't the 19th century."

As for the poor job prospects, Mr. Panger says Berkeley and other universities should try to change the culture around what counts as career success. Graduate students often worry that their advisers will be disappointed in them if they don't seek academic jobs. To deal with that and other issues, Berkeley plans to create a center and devote a full-time staff member this fall to work on graduate students' professional development.

Progress at Berkeley and elsewhere has been slow, but there's a "coming awareness" about just how important well-being is to performance and productivity, Mr. Panger says. He sees efforts like Berkeley's catching on. "Change doesn't happen overnight," he says.

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