



Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-being

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE GRADUATE COMMUNITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Jed Foundation

Executive Summary

The past ten years have seen mounting evidence that graduate students are facing increasing levels of stress and anxiety. In spite of this trend, little is known about the distribution of stress and stressors across diverse subgroups of master's and doctoral students. Even less is known about student pathways to care, or about the effectiveness of resources, policies, and practices designed to create healthier departmental and campus cultures.

With support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and The Jed Foundation (JED) embarked on a project designed to address this gap across all broad fields of graduate study. Our primary objective was to create an evidence base that could meaningfully guide future research and action. More specifically, we sought to survey the current landscape of resources, policies and processes that graduate institutions currently use to promote graduate student well-being; to understand the extent to which resources and practices are tailored to the needs of specific communities, in particular, students of color; to examine barriers that exist for implementing accessible policies and programs; and to learn whether interventions are being assessed for their effectiveness.

As we undertook this work, we engaged the voices and perspectives of groups with strong investments in the success of master's and doctoral students. Over 22 months, a series of research activities gathered information and perspectives from graduate deans, graduate students, student affairs professionals, disciplinary society representatives, and researchers. Through surveys and analysis of qualitative data derived from campus listening sessions and a stakeholder convening, we developed a Statement of Principles and Commitments of Graduate Deans, an evidence-based framework to guide the development of campus-wide, systemic approaches to graduate student mental health and well-being. This framework serves as a blueprint for action that graduate deans can use to engage a broad group of partners in supporting their students. To date, the framework, along with its 2021 accountability goals, has been endorsed by over 150 institutions in the U.S. and Canada.

In addition to this framework, the project resulted in specific recommendations to key groups: senior university leaders, graduate programs directors and department chairs, graduate students, and funders. Like the Statement of Principles and Commitments, this broader set of recommendations recognizes that a wide range of individuals will play a role in creating healthy environments where all graduate students have the potential to thrive.

Regardless of your role in graduate education—graduate student, student affairs professional, faculty, dean, provost, president, or scholar of graduate education—it is our hope that you will find guidance and resources in this report that will help you make a positive and lasting impact on the well-being of graduate students and on the health and inclusiveness of program environments.

Recommendations

FOR UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS AND PROVOSTS AND OTHER SENIOR LEADERS

The senior leadership team of a university plays a critically important role in defining institutional values and ensuring that resources align with those values. University presidents, provosts, and other senior leaders are in a strong position to:

- Ensure that campus strategic plans regarding mental health and well-being address the unique needs of graduate students.
- Examine ways to mitigate the impact of hyper-competitive campus cultures, recognizing the toll this may take on graduate faculty, staff, and students.
- Create a taskforce or process to investigate how tenure, promotion and other faculty reward systems might be modified to encourage academic excellence and work/life balance.
- Prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion, creating campus spaces to acknowledge and discuss challenges and crises experienced directly by minoritized graduate students.
- Consider creating a series of university-wide campus wellness days, campaigns or events.

FOR GRADUATE DEANS

Graduate deans are typically the individuals on campus with the broadest and most central responsibility for graduate education. They are also in a position to facilitate collaborations across different units. We encourage graduate deans to:

- Include training on graduate student mental health and well-being in orientations held for new graduate faculty and directors of graduate programs.
- In conjunction with the graduate faculty senate or other shared governance body, begin the review, and as appropriate, revision of graduate student leave policies that may negatively impact students. In particular, explore flexible leave policy options that allow students to remain partially engaged with their programs if they choose to do so.
- Investigate how time-to-degree or funding limits might be changed to promote both work/life balance and the highest levels of academic performance.
- Create a source of funding to support graduate student organizations planning wellness days, mental health campaigns or events.

FOR GRADUATE PROGRAM DIRECTORS AND DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

Graduate Program Directors and Department Chairs have an important role to play in influencing the cultures of their departments and in setting policy. We encourage these leaders to:

- Begin a conversation about ways to recognize the quality of graduate student mentoring in annual performance reviews. Work to establish a shared expectation that faculty will consider the whole student—not just their academic performance—in their mentoring.

- Create spaces and mechanisms for students to exercise agency around career planning and decision-making, such as Individual Development Plans (IDPs).
- Include information in orientation for incoming graduate students on resources available to support graduate student mental health and well-being.
- Ensure that all policies, resources, and processes for resolving conflicts and making satisfactory progress are transparent and available in easily accessible formats.
- Identify points of stress around major program milestones, (e.g. comprehensive exams or execution of thesis /dissertation requirements) and develop mechanisms for supporting students through those transitions.

FOR GRADUATE FACULTY

Graduate faculty and supervisors are positioned to closely observe, and influence, the development of their students. We encourage graduate faculty to:

- Be transparent and clear about expectations, including expectations that students will take the time needed to rest and care of their health and well-being.
- Model the importance of work/life balance and self-care.
- Recognize and support student agency in making decisions about careers, including careers outside of the academy.
- Express concern and care for students who appear to be struggling, and be prepared to connect them to appropriate campus resources.

FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Graduate students have a critical role to play in helping faculty and administrators understand the challenges they face and the resources they need. In addition, graduate students are often the first to notice that their peers need help. We support the efforts of graduate students, some of whom will become the next generation of faculty, to:

- Reach out to student affairs professionals, faculty, and counseling services when they observe students in distress.
- Play a role in peer mentoring and other initiatives designed to support student well-being in their departments or on campus.
- Embody principles of self-care and compassionate mentoring as teaching assistants of undergraduates.

FOR FUNDING AGENCIES

Funding agencies provide important incentives for change. We encourage funding agencies to:

- Review how current practices for evaluating the impact of research funding may exacerbate hyper-competitiveness and graduate faculty, postdoc, and student stress.
- Provide support for research to better understand graduate student mental health and well-being, especially challenges and barriers experienced by underrepresented and underserved groups of graduate students.

A Call to Action for Graduate Deans

Supporting Mental Health and Well-being for Graduate Students: A Statement of Principles and Commitments of Graduate Deans, results from an iterative process drawing from the perspectives of a broad range of groups and experts. The vision, values and principles outlined below describe the foundational aspirations and beliefs that our commitments are designed to support.

Supporting Mental Health and Well-being for Graduate Students

A Statement of Principles and Commitments of Graduate Deans

Vision: As graduate deans, we are committed to building a graduate education system that supports the academic success and well-being of all students.

Values: We believe in . . .

- 1. Student-centered education.** Graduate programs succeed when they provide opportunities for students to explore pathways and learning experiences that align with their interests and goals.
- 2. Educational environments that support the whole student.** Students are most likely to succeed when graduate programs recognize that physical, social, and emotional experiences—in addition to academics—are important aspects of any student's life.
- 3. Diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Diversity, equity and inclusiveness are at the core of graduate schools and programs where students from all backgrounds flourish.
- 4. Transparency.** Graduate programs best support students when they offer clear program guidelines, policies and expectations that help students understand what is required for success.

Principles: We also believe that we, as graduate deans, play a key role in supporting graduate student mental health and well-being by leading graduate education at our respective institutions with the following principles:

- 1. Well-being is a foundation of student success.** Graduate schools and programs that nurture a positive and inclusive learning environment allow graduate students to optimize personal, academic and professional growth.
- 2. Thriving, not surviving, is the goal.** Some stresses and challenges are part of the learning process. Graduate schools and programs that balance these inherent stress points with safety, respect, and effective mentoring increase the likelihood that students will thrive.

3. The challenges experienced by graduate students vary widely and differ in important ways from the experiences of undergraduates. Universities must understand and act on the specific nature of the challenges graduate students face.

4. Faculty, staff, and administrators who work with graduate students may also themselves experience significant stress. The ability of graduate schools and programs to serve their students effectively also depends on the mental health and well-being of all of their community members.

Commitments: As graduate deans, we are committed to exercising our leadership in . . .

1. Involving students in the development and revision of programming to support mental health and well-being on our campuses. We recognize that graduate students have an important role to play in maintaining their own mental health, and their experiences and challenges in doing so should be well understood.

2. Recognizing and amplifying the roles of different groups in supporting graduate student mental health. We recognize that it “takes a village” to create the conditions of thriving for graduate students, and the village includes, but is not limited to: student support services, faculty, directors of graduate study, the graduate school, and graduate students themselves. We also recognize that the village extends beyond the campus boundary and includes friends and family of students, as well as community spaces and resources.

3. Working across campus offices to develop a comprehensive approach to mental health and well-being. Graduate deans have a key role to play in bringing relevant campus offices together to formulate these approaches that support graduate students.

4. Ensuring that mental health and well-being programs on our campuses are tailored to the needs of different groups of graduate students. We must recognize commonalities and differences among and between students from different backgrounds, for example students of color, LBGTQ+ students, international students, first-generation college and graduate students, and student parents. Programming and resources should also reflect the fact that sources of stress may vary across the graduate student life cycle.

5. Developing and using evidence-based strategies that are designed to improve graduate student mental health and well-being. Collecting baseline information and assessing outcomes of campus interventions is a key part of this work. In addition, we must engage and rely on subject matter experts in counseling psychology, student development, and other areas to inform the design of campus efforts.

6. Investing in strong mentor and supervisor training on our campuses. It is critical to provide advisors with the preparation needed to appropriately support their students’ intellectual and personal growth, to recognize signs of distress that may require outside support, and to refer students to resources and services that can help.

7. Increasing the collective capacity of the graduate dean community to better support graduate students. It is critical to exchange ideas and lessons learned with peers in order for the graduate education community to make progress toward our vision.

8. Incorporating training on social and emotional skills into curricula and/or professional development for graduate students and faculty. Social and emotional skills such as collaboration, communication, cultural awareness, and building resilience, as well as other related topics, play an important role in the success of individuals and in the health of university communities.

Accountability: As graduate deans, each of us is committed to working with campus partners and our respective institutions to meet the following goals by the end of 2021. By this time, we will have pursued the following outcomes, in ways that reflect the context and circumstances of our own campus communities:

1. Supported the creation and institutionalization of a campus-wide consultative body that works on strategy and planning related to mental health and/or well-being of graduate students with a robust representation of various campus stakeholders.
2. Included explicit reference of support for graduate student mental health and well-being in the campus student health framework.
3. Developed and implemented a process to periodically assess graduate students' support needs or assured that any existing surveys address these issues.
4. Developed and implemented a plan to communicate to graduate program directors and graduate faculty about available campus resources and policies at the beginning of each academic term or assured that existing communication strategies include this information.
5. Developed and implemented a plan to communicate to all graduate students about graduate student mental health and well-being and information about available campus resources and policies at least once during each academic term or assured that existing communication strategies include this information.

Furthermore, we will know that we are making meaningful progress toward our vision when we see . . .

1. Fewer cases of attrition from master's and doctoral degree programs due to psychological and emotional distress.
2. Increased graduate degree attainment rates for both majority and traditionally underrepresented student groups.
3. More graduate students and alumni reporting satisfaction with the supportiveness of the graduate program environment.

About the Study

A growing body of evidence indicates that mental health challenges are common among graduate students. Unfortunately, many barriers exist to effective support and care. A collaboration between the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and The Jed Foundation (JED), *Supporting Mental Health and Well-being of Graduate Students* was designed to address this gap by creating a foundation for evidence-based policies and programs to support graduate student mental health and well-being. The project was generously supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

About the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)

CGS is an association of 500 graduate institutions that is dedicated to the advancement of graduate education and research. Working closely with our members, we advocate for graduate education, develop innovative research, and establish best practices. Our projects generate information and data that help graduate deans and their institutions better support graduate students and programs.

About The Jed Foundation (JED)

JED is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We're partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We're equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We're encouraging community awareness, understanding and action for young adult mental health.

