Washington State University
Graduate Student Health: Brief Report

Cougar Health Services, Health Promotion
Report Completed Fall 2020

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Introduction
Graduate student health is becoming a pressing issue for universities across the United States (Cheesman & Ahonen, 2019). Due to the increase in rates of mental illness and diagnosis, there has been a growing recognition of graduate student mental health needs (Evans et al., 2018). Currently, mental health is the priority for many graduate students seeking care and requesting services (Evans et al., 2018). Despite the increase in discussion, there remains a dire need to understand the mental health issues and needs within this population (Evans et al., 2018). Recently the global pandemic, SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), has marked an increase in graduate student mental health struggles (Woolston, 2020). Researchers found indications of anxiety among graduate students rose by 50% and depression by 32% compared to last academic year due to COVID-19 (Woolston, 2020). Furthermore, there are disparities between fields of study, for example, depression was more common for students in the physical sciences while anxiety was more common for those in biomedical research (Woolston, 2020). This article highlights the situational complexities in service provision, treatment, and resources offered for graduate students.

Purpose
Washington State University (WSU) recognizes the need for more awareness of graduate student mental health and overall wellbeing. The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA), the Graduate School, and Health Promotion created a graduate student health liaison position to advocate for graduate student health programming and advocacy. The goals for this brief are to: 1) identify WSU specific and community medical and mental health resources 2) identify specific areas of mental health need, 3) suggest guidelines for future mental health programs.

Data
Data used in this assessment were analyzed from the ACHA-National College Health Assessment III (ACHA-NCHA III). This assessment looked at domestic graduate students (DGS), international graduate students (IGS) and undergraduate students (UG) use of medical and mental health services on and off campus. Additionally, a short survey was sent through Qualtrics to graduate students and graduate student programming professionals asking about mental health programming and resources. This survey data was analyzed to identify perceived access to resources and offer guidelines for future programming. Findings from this assessment will be used to guide future programming, awareness campaigns, and identify immediate need for graduate students.

Results
Health Service Use
Overall, the findings suggest graduate students are more likely to use campus health services for both mental and medical purposes compared to undergraduate students. Both groups, domestic graduate students and international graduate students, tend to not seek services off campus or in their hometowns. The survey results shows nearly 60% of graduate students have sought mental health services in their lifetime and 33% have sought services within the last 12 months. Within the past 12 months, of those students who sought mental health treatment, 75% of graduate used campus services (Fig 1.1), particularly international students (Fig. 1.2). This highlights the opportunity to maximize campus resources to increase service utilization whether it be the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) or student insurance through WSU provided graduate student insurance.
Note: For Fig. 1.1 and Fig. 1.2, both graphs indicate students who have received services on WSU’s campus.

**Mental Health**
According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 73% of students with a behavioral health condition experiences a mental health crisis or suicidal thoughts (MacPhee & Ponte, 2019). A study done by De Luca and colleagues (2016) found undergraduate students, for various reasons, were less likely to attempt or die by suicide compared to graduate students. Per this report, 7% of graduate students have had a plan to kill themselves and really wanted to die. It is concerning that 27% of graduate students have thought of suicide. At WSU, 55% of WSU undergraduate and graduate students have reported anxiety and 48% have reported depression.
**Insurance and Service Awareness**

When graduate students were asked if they had a basic understanding of their health insurance, 53% said no and only 9% said yes. Services offered through insurance would be an added benefit to WSU. This education and understanding of insurance would not increase cost for WSU while increasing service utilization. With 55% of students reporting anxiety and 48% depression on WSU’s campus, this creates an opportunity to help increase access and awareness of resources for students.

This assessment evaluated resource awareness. When graduate students were asked about their awareness of mental health resources, 66% of respondents said some resources but not all resources while 30% said no. Only 4% said yes. The data shows an area for improvement of health service awareness. When asked if there are enough mental health resources for students system wide, the combined rates of respondents who said I no or definitely not were 50%. Half of respondents believe WSU is not providing enough services, when in reality, they may not be aware of what is offered.

**Campus Stigma of Mental Illness**

Stigma is also very prevalent at WSU. Stigma refers to the perceived need to “power through,” which refers to the process of coping with mental illness in order to achieve a desired outcome (Hattangadi et al., 2019). Specifically, “their present situation [is] temporary” and “the prospect of a better life after university” (Hattangadi et al., 2019). Additionally, the Washington State University Clinical Psychology Graduate Student Organization (CPGSO) and GPSA identified stigma as a primary objective. CPGSO specifically mentioned confidentiality, mentor accountability, and department level training as objectives that need to be met in order to decrease stigma on campuses.

When asked if the stigma of “powering through” is associated with graduate school, the overwhelming majority said yes and definitely yes. This combined response was 98% while 2% said maybe. In total, 0% said there was no stigma associated with graduate school.
**Recommended Guidelines**
This report has highlighted gaps within graduate student care that need to be addressed. This is a call to action and a need for WSU graduate student mental health program services. COVID-19 is also having an impact on these students. The pandemic has simultaneously increased the need for mental health services and decreased service availability (Wasil et al., 2020). Moving forward here are some recommended guidelines on how to close the gaps this report identifies:

- **Resource Availability**: This report identifies a lack of understanding about current and available resources. Mentors should provide information on health resources available to their mentee(s) that include but are not limited to: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) number, link to Student Care Network (studentcare.wsu.edu), National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255), and Mental Health Promotion programming opportunities [here](https://cougarhealth.wsu.edu/mentalhealth-promotion/mental-health-trainings/).

- **Programming**: This report identifies the importance for student programming and accessibility. GS mental health programming should be non-time consuming, easy to understand, and easily accessible.

- **Stigma**: This report identifies the systematic change required for mental health awareness and education to shift on campus. Talk about stigma by creating departmental discussion around mental health and encourage faculty to start the conversation of mental health with their mentoree(s).

- **Insurance**: This report identifies a lack in understanding and education about GS health insurance and how it works. There is a website that explains GS insurance [here](https://cougarhealth.wsu.edu/studentinsurance/graduate-students/), however insurance is complex and difficult to understand. Cougar Health Services needs to be able to offer billing and insurance information and consultation sessions, especially to IGS.

- **Diversity**: This report recognizes graduate students are diverse which brings diversity in their needs. Programming and information must be inclusive between DGS and IGS, or create programs targeting specific problems each group may face.

**Conclusion**
WSU’s mission statement of Academic Services “is to provide innovative student-centered services tailored to individual needs that integrate a positive and proactive learning environment.” The needs identified in this report are adamantly showing a need for increased mental health service capacity, decrease in stigma associated with graduate school, increased awareness of graduate student services, and understanding of insurance information. Experts within the field of psychiatry and mental health are predicting a “tsunami of psychiatric illness” due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gutierrez, 2020; Ghebreyesus, 2020; DeSousa et al., 2020; Tandon, 2020). There is an increased risk for depression rates in graduate students during this period of time which just under half of WSU graduate students have reported depression.

Creating awareness, encouraging service utilization, and education on basic mental health care could have positive outcomes on graduate student. The university needs to make this a priority and create prevention-based measures focusing on resource availability, mental health specific programming, stigma, insurance education, and recognizing the diversity in graduate student mental health needs.
Suggested Citation:


Resources


