

Chancellor's Graduate & Professional Student Advisory Board (CGPSA)
Mental Health Resources / Accessing Health-Care Subcommittee Report 2020-2021
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Background

Graduate student mental health and wellness is a growing concern. Many studies have used surveys to examine college student mental health but this has focused on undergraduates or grouped undergraduates and graduates together. In 2017, the UC Office of the President (UCOP) administered a survey of graduate students across all ten campuses in Winter/Spring 2016. The survey was administered to a sample of 13,400 graduate students and received over 5,356 responses. Within the UC system, over 33% of graduate students reported symptoms indicative of clinical depression. The top priority respondents reported the university to prioritize with attention and resources was mental health followed by financial resources/management. Additionally, approximately 27% of students reported not being generally satisfied with their lives, 23% being unsatisfied with mentorship and advising, and 65% not being financial confident, all of which were higher in the humanities and minority groups. These findings aligned with nationwide reports by Aguisanda (Science, 2019), Berreira et al (Harvard University, 2018), Levezque et al (Research Policy, 2017), and UCBG Assembly (UC Berkeley, 2014).

Graduate and professional students at UC Davis represent a truly diverse range of backgrounds. One problem facing previous committees has been the underrepresentation of graduate and professional students in Davis wide committees and initiatives. Additionally, there has not been comparable data relative to the wealth of data available on undergraduates concerning graduate and professional student mental health.

Objectives and Action plan

The Mental Health Resources/ Accessing Health-Care subcommittee was formed in Fall 2019 as a collaborative by students on the CGPSA motivated by personal or community-based challenges associated with mental health at UC Davis. In 2020, the subcommittee expanded our interests to include accessing mental health resources and services due to the pandemic. Our top priorities were to:

1. Identify the key barriers to accessing mental health services during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Work closely with the Mental Health Task Force (MHT) assembled by Dr. Cory Vu
3. Survey the impact of COVID-19 on mental health to a small population of graduate students.

These goals were guided by the concern for students to access mental health resources and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the subcommittee's representation on the Mental Health Taskforce (MHT) will help enable our cause to advocate for student's health concern to individuals across all disciplines.

Identify the key barriers to accessing health-care during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic

Following the health safety protocols implemented by UC Davis that included remote work and the hardening of global borders the subcommittee expanded its interests to include identifying the key barriers to accessing mental health services and resources during the pandemic. After conversations with graduate students, departments, the mental health Slack collective, and administration we concluded the key barriers facing graduate students during the pandemic were:

1. Availability of resources and options for graduate and professional students outside the immediate UC Davis area.
2. The awareness and accessibility of online mental health resources for graduate and professional students
3. The availability and quality of telehealth
4. The current ratio of available counselors to graduate and professional students

There were a wealth of online mental health resources however they are difficult to find and access particularly for those in crisis. While there is a wealth of available resources these act as preventive measures. The GSA conducted work to make them more accessible. Continued work needs to happen through individual departments to ensure resources are regularly promoted.

Many had difficulties in scheduling appointments via telehealth and anecdotal accounts shared with us included multi-month wait times and telehealth cancellations by the telehealth provider. Concerns on the telehealth availability were expressed to Dr. Jean-Pierre Delplanque and Dr. Cory Vu.

There is only 1 full-time psychologist, Bai-yin Chen for Graduate Studies which encompasses over 7000 students at UC Davis. The recommend national average is 1 psychologist per 1000 students. In addition to individual counseling services, the Graduate Studies psychologist leads weekly graduate student support groups composed of 5-10 members that address minority and at-risk groups. We feel that more personnel is needed to improve graduate and professional student mental health through the expansion of individual meetings and graduate support groups.

Work closely with the Mental Health Taskforce (MHT) assembled by Dr. Cory Vu.

The subcommittee continued the work of the 2019-2020 subcommittee by collaborating with Dr. Cory Vu to develop a coordinated and comprehensive approach to student mental health. We met individually with Dr. Vu and were a stakeholder in the community wide MHT meetings. We shared many common concerns and goals with the MHT including the promotion of student mental health resources and preventing the exacerbation of existing mental health problems. Preliminary joint-suggestions included outreach through social networks, identifying students at risk, and increasing access to effective services and resources.

We raised concerns on the underrepresentation of graduate and professional students in the MHT and the urgent need for UC Davis graduate and professional student data. The majority of data used by the MHT is undergraduate focused. It is critical that additional data on UC Davis graduate

and professional students is collected. It is important to consider the role that institutional and departmental cultures play in the exacerbation of existing mental health challenges.

Survey the impact of COVID-19 on mental health to a small population of graduate students.

We began a collaboration with Prof. Carolyn Dewa to survey her CHE 298 Tools for Becoming a Successful Professional and for Enhancing Your Well-Being and Work Environment. Our objective was to bring a small sample pool of graduate student data to the Mental Health Taskforce. Currently, MHT has only shared undergraduate student mental-health data. We envisioned to collect information on the state of graduate and professional student mental health and collecting student testimonials to present at the MHT. We intended to ask the following questions to Prof. Dewa's course:

1. Do you feel your home department supports the mental health of its students? Why or why not?
2. If you have used mental health resources made available to you by the university, did you feel it was easy and straightforward to access those resources and to get the care you needed? Were you satisfied with that care? Why or why not?
3. If you have not used mental health resources made available to you by the university, do you think you will be able to easily and quickly access those resources in the event that you need to do so? Why or why not?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share with the Mental Health Task Force related to any aspect of mental health on campus, including academic/departmental cultures, interactions with campus-based health services, and more?
5. Are you open to being contacted by a member of the CGPSA MHS about your experiences? If so, please provide your contact information below.

Our initial efforts to survey Prof. Dewa's course stalled. Prof. Dewa has then directed us to Elizabeth Sturdy to begin a collaboration to disseminate a university wide graduate and professional student survey on mental-health. Elizabeth will be working closely with the subcommittee next academic year with the following 1) Helping us establish a collaboration with the GSR hired for Thriving in Graduate School to meet with us regularly to help us gauge the status of student's mental health and 2) Share the results of the UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) to help inform our survey and 3) Inform us on the launching of the Faculty Academy of Graduate Student Well-Being which is an initiative that will train faculty to deliver well-being courses in their respective graduate programs.

Summary of Recommendations

We recommend the continuation of the CGPSA mental health subcommittee alongside collaboration with the GSA and Dr Cory Vu to develop and publish a grad student centered survey for 2021-2022. The subcommittee will be working closely with Elizabeth Sturdy to establish a connection with GSR and with UCGES. We aim to continue to address the current underrepresented and understudied state of graduate and professional student mental health. A CGPSA and GSA joint led survey with the help of departmental heads can embolden outreach to departments and underrepresented groups and address cultural and institutional change.