Commentary on "'Simmering Pressure': How systemic stress affects graduate student mental health"

Nadine S. Bekkouche

Abstract

There is an increasing recognition that graduate student mental health is related to the systemic contexts of graduate education. Performing in-depth analyses of these systemic contexts is important. Not only do such analyses help refine our conceptual understanding of the mental and emotional struggles of students in the context of graduate education, but it also provides the groundwork for designing effective and comparatively low-cost mental health support initiatives. These initiatives can be implemented at the institutional and departmental levels and ultimately serve to support the success of graduate students in the academy.

Introduction

In our recent paper, *'Simmering Pressure': How systemic stress impacts graduate student mental health* (Bekkouche et al. 2021), my colleagues and I analysed the systemic factors related to graduate student mental health. The fact that graduate students experience high rates of mental and emotional distress is not news. The prevalence of considerable struggles among graduate students has long been known, and often, downplayed (Lovitts 2001; Cassuto 2015).

More recently, the issue of student mental health has been receiving more scholarly attention (Council of Graduate Schools and the Jed Foundation 2021; Eisenberg et al. 2007; Evans et al. 2018). This shift is likely due in part to activism aiming to de-stigmatise anxiety and depression. However, it may owe even more to the commercialisation of higher education: universities that operate as businesses are increasingly concerned with ensuring student experiences that contribute to attracting and retaining students. With this increased visibility, the lens through which mental health has been analysed has also evolved. Traditionally, mental health has been conceptualised as an individual issue – related to the person or to personal problems. But lately, scholars have pointed to the environmental and systemic factors that impact students' mental health and well being, such as discipline, department climate and socialization (CGS and the Jed Foundation 2021; Lipson et al. 2016; Sverdlik et al. 2018).

These insights matter. In the past, faculty and departments have often blamed high rates of student attrition on students rather than on issues inherent to the program or department (Gardner 2009). Students themselves would take the blame for their inability to succeed or thrive in graduate school (Lovitts 2001). New, systems-oriented analyses present appropriate challenges to such views.

That said, for systems-oriented analyses to be really useful, they need to be integrated into actionable frameworks that answer key questions. In our paper, the application of organizational systems theory and the frameworks of human performance technology (HPT) (Gilbert 1996; Kaufman 2005) to the issue of graduate student mental health yields a conceptual model which begins the work of organizing the different interacting systemic influences into an actionable framework. The conceptual model places the inherent stress of graduate study (increased by unclear department expectations or constant evaluation) as the central factor contributing to the development or worsening of mental and emotional issues in graduate students. Other factors, such as students' personal factors (their degree of preparedness, family or financial support) and study-related factors (the opportunity for socialization, professional

development, and the quality of their relationship with their supervisor) emerge as moderators of the stress of graduate study. These moderators either mitigate the stress of graduate study, contributing to a positive study experience, or exacerbate it, contributing to the experience of mental and emotional distress. (Note that in some cases, these moderating factors may also have a direct effect on student mental health.)

Ongoing work aims to further validate and iterate this conceptual model of graduate student mental health and elaborate the action-steps that universities and departments can implement to support students. The initiatives developed on the basis of systems-oriented analyses can be valuable, effective and comparatively low-cost. They include strategies like departmental process improvements (for example, clarifying procedures and expectations) and emphasising student socialization and professional development.

Another particular target of my work is the effect supervision on graduate student experiences. Gaining a greater understanding of the impact of supervision is especially important today, as there is a growing call to involve supervisors in the student mental health crisis. However, the data on supervision suggest caution in this regard: supervisors are often uncomfortable paying the role of counsellor and may have their own mental and emotional struggles (CGS and the Jed Foundation 2021). While the importance of supervision to graduate student success is uncontested, it may have a nuanced relationship with student mental health (UC Berkeley 2015), meriting sober analysis.

Ultimately, we must develop an actionable model that university stakeholders can use to improve the graduate student experience and support student mental health. According to the principles of HPT, small initiatives that enhance feelings of belonging and effectiveness might yield big results, helping students maintain the mental wellness to achieve their goals in the academy and encouraging them to take on challenges beyond it.