



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE  
STUDIES & RESEARCH

# **Graduate Student Mental Health & Wellness Report July 2018**

**Robin Overall, PhD, RPsych  
Associate Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research**

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## SUMMARY

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The contentious issue of student mental health and wellness and the extent to which post-secondary institutions (PSIs) should be involved in providing mental health care and services has garnered an ongoing conversation and often heated debate in the past few years, both nationally and internationally. There is a consensus that stress and challenge are normal, particularly in an academic context, and that they provide the motivation for growth, skills development, and success. However, compounding and excessive stress that results in mental health challenges can potentially impact negatively on productivity, academic performance, and completion rates. Enhanced government and public scrutiny of PSIs is profiling issues related to student mental health and wellness and is promoting a momentum of change that is being demanded of the academy. A culture shift is in the wind.

Traditionally, graduate students have been objectified in that they have been perceived within the context of their status at the institution rather than as unique individuals engaged in academic pursuits. The culture change in PSIs parallels the increased awareness in the public discourse of mental health and acknowledgement of its impact on quality of life and productivity across all ages and stages.

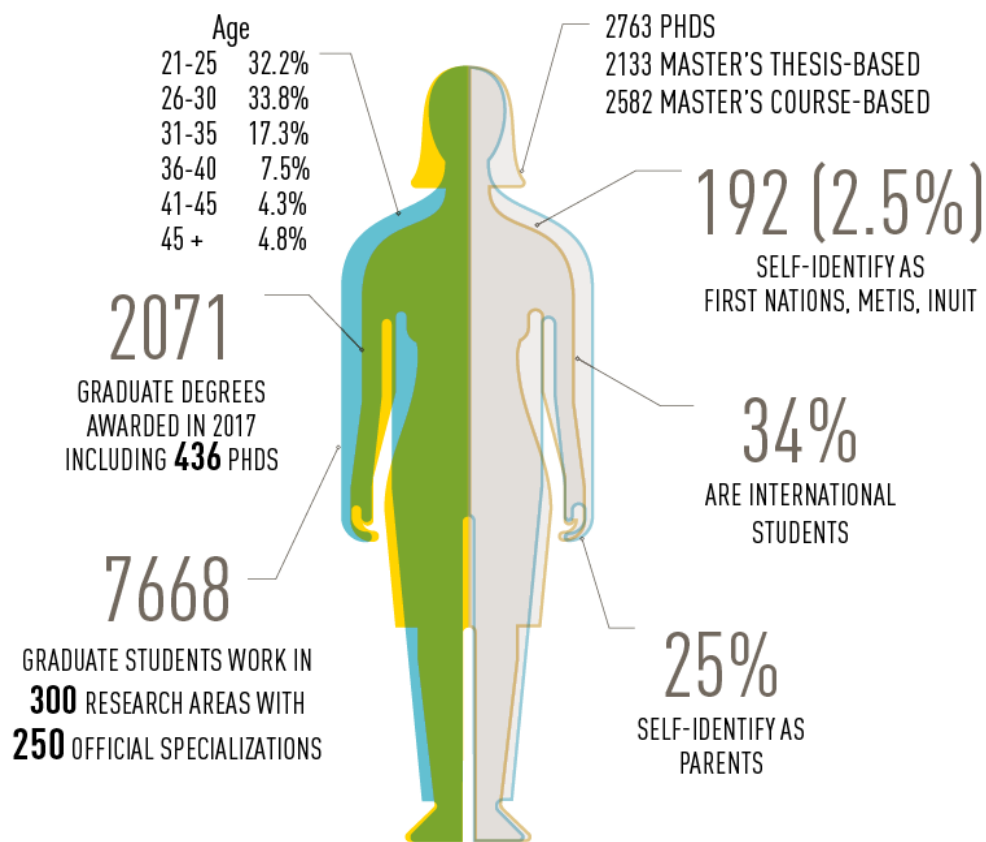
The importance of mental health and wellness and the issues that arise when people struggle with it are being normalized by government initiatives and high profile campaigns. Corporations such as Bell Communications with its “Bell Let’s Talk” campaign and the recent National Basketball Association’s campaign to combat mental health issues in professional athletes are but two examples of how this issue is being recognized and profiled. High profile suicides garner media attention and raise public awareness of the importance of mental health and wellbeing. Mental health initiatives have been incorporated into educational curriculum and resources for school-aged children and youth. Governments and corporations are increasingly focused upon enhancing health and safety standards, of which mental health is an important component. Workplace initiatives are being encouraged and progressively more required. Post-secondary institutions are not immune from the spotlight. There is concern, however, that changing the academic culture will result in lowered standards for academic excellence. Research counters this apprehension. With advancing academic inquiry into the impact of mental health and wellness on successful academic pursuits, significant attention has turned to identifying the influence of the relentless and high intensity environments that graduate students function within.



## DATA & DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics reported in the FGSR Graduate Enrolment Report 2017-2018 provide a snapshot of the composition the graduate student population at the University of Alberta.

### 20% OF UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA STUDENTS ARE GRADUATE STUDENTS



The National College Health Assessment (NCHA) is an international research survey designed to compile a comprehensive data set on university and college student health and wellness. As a broad spectrum survey, it includes general health and wellness, disease and injury prevention, academic impacts, alcohol and drug use, sexual behavior, and mental health. Reported in percentages, the following statistics reflect the 2016 results obtained from a random sample of graduate students at the University of



Alberta. This data helps to quantify a previously suspected but intangible problem in our graduate student population: high levels of depression, anxiety and stress.

**Graduate students reported feeling the following  
within the previous 12 month period:**

Felt things were hopeless	44.8 %
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do	82.2 %
Felt exhausted (not from physical activity)	82.5 %
Felt very lonely	50.7 %
Felt very sad	60.2 %
Felt so depressed it was difficult to function	34.3 %
Felt overwhelming anxiety	59.6 %
Felt overwhelming anger	27.1 %

**Graduate students reported difficulty with the following issues  
within the previous 12 month period:**

Family problems	22.6 %
Intimate relationships	27.6 %
Finances	23.0 %
Health problem of a family member or partner	18.5 %

**Graduate students reported using the following Mental Health Service  
within the previous 12 month period:**

Counsellor/therapist/psychologist	39.6 %
University Health/Counselling & Clinical Services	25.8 %

As demonstrated by these statistics, it is important to note that not all graduate students struggle excessively or experience debilitating stress. For those that do, however, there may be serious consequences on their academic pursuits and personal successes.



## **OBSERVATIONS & INSIGHTS**

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Observers within academe are increasingly concerned about the potential impact of current academic working conditions on mental health, particularly in PhD students (Levecque, Anseel, Beuckelaer, Van Der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). At research-intensive universities, graduate students are the workforce and foundation of research productivity. The work environment has been demonstrated to have a negative influence on health and wellbeing so increasingly, the influence of work conditions imposed upon students within academe is being scrutinized (Levecque et al., 2017) and pressure is being put on institutions and graduate student supervisors to make changes (Pain, 2017).

There is a growing consensus that psychologically resilient students are more productive, more creative, and are able to work more collaboratively, thus maximizing their educational achievements (Patel, 2016; Berkeley Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2014). Within the context of the mental health debate, a substantial focus and the design and delivery of resources have been directed toward meeting the needs of undergraduate students, but it is clear from surveys (see below) and service use data that graduate students require specific attention and a different approach is required. While manageable levels of stress enable students to do their best work and make the most of their time in graduate school, chronic overwhelm and debilitating stress have the opposite effect. Social isolation, apprehension about career opportunities, higher than normal levels of depression, and anxiety have all been identified as contributing to graduate student distress. Conflict-laden advisor/advisee relationships, in particular, have been identified as a major source of chronic distress, as the graduate student is acutely aware of the power differential and threats to their academic career. Factoring in the demanding work loads of teaching, undertaking research, coursework, and constant evaluation by supervisors, it should come as no surprise that these compounding and multiple sources of stress can lead to, are associated with, and often exacerbate, mental health challenges.

The graduate student population constitutes a highly diverse demographic and thus requires a multidimensional approach that is oriented to academic and cultural supports in addition to the more traditional psychological services model. Psychological and professional services, while necessary, are not sufficient to meet the needs of graduate students who comprise a diverse group in age, background, experience, and cultures (as reported above). For the most part, graduate students are adults who have an array of



life responsibilities including financial commitments, work, parental, and family demands. The conversation about graduate student mental health is being framed predominantly within the context of academic support that is provided to, and specifically targeted for, graduate students. These factors prominently in mental health discussions, surveys, and initiatives across North American PSIs and, as such, university communities are being challenged to go beyond simply raising awareness to focusing upon the beneficial behaviours that foster mental health in an adult population.

Undergraduate studies have traditionally been perceived as low stress environments, whereas graduate programs have been quests that foster thoughtful engagement with inspiring research. It has long been argued that graduate studies should be a time of intensified stress since reducing the level of demand would undermine the drive for success. As such, faculty have taken the role of 'gatekeepers' to identify weak and inadequate students as academe is a culture based upon critique and constant evaluation rather than support and guidance. A graduate student's persistent fear of failure is a unique stressor that is not generally a foundational component in most career endeavors. Graduate students are well aware of the dissonance between cultivating excellence and the culture of wellbeing. For the most part, to be successful there is little room for maintaining a healthy balance with other life responsibilities and the mounting pressure to perform is often accompanied by the gradual deterioration in mental health.

The literature consistently refers to the 'imposter syndrome' commonly experienced by graduate students that contributes to incremental increases in overwhelming stress. The perception that one does not meet the mark, viewing oneself as not as talented or capable as others perceive them to be, not yet having been exposed as a fraud is isolating and anxiety-provoking. The message that would be helpful to reduce the fear that accompanies this belief is 'You are not alone'. Recognition and acknowledgement of the prevalence of this common 'secret' can influence the stigma and fear about the potential negative impact on career attainment. Peer initiated support groups and community building opportunities have been demonstrated to alleviate the fear of being revealed as unworthy.

Graduate students rely upon their supervisors for research and financial support as well as for career guidance. Not surprisingly, supervisory relationships are highlighted as being critical to all aspects of the graduate student experience and an emphasis toward improving supervisor/supervisee interactions is gaining momentum (Chiappetta-Swanson & Watt, 2011). Of course, quality mentoring is a skill that can be developed



with support for faculty members. Mentorship programs are being introduced to address these expectations in a changing academic culture. These include clear communication, being respectful of students as ‘junior colleagues’, and recognizing that academic pursuits, while important, are one aspect of life that the graduate student is trying to juggle. In addition to overseeing their students’ research, faculty members (and particularly supervisors) are expected to be familiar with university guidelines and procedures, facilitate professional development opportunities, value the students’ decisions, understand the need to balance priorities, provide constructive and timely feedback, and provide ongoing encouragement and support. Graduate students turn to their supervisors for support that obviously falls outside of the realm of providing counselling and psychiatric services on campus. “Psychiatrists, after all, can’t do much about poor adviser relationships, social isolation, precarious finances — or career prospects, ... the top predictors of graduate students’ levels of both life satisfaction and depression” (Patel, 2015).

The large, culturally diverse international graduate student population is primarily comprised of adults whose needs differ from the domestic student population, so it is crucial that culturally sensitive approaches to health and wellness are available. For many, the stigma of mental illness has perpetuated a culture of silence, thus worsening suffering and distress through graduate school. Therefore, experts increasingly advocate for a conversation about graduate student mental health that is framed within the context of being or staying healthy by providing a diverse range of programs of support and initiatives. No single approach or single initiative to addressing graduate student mental health will suffice, other than the overarching promotion to maintain wellbeing to enable students to do their best work.

Advocates and researchers in the area understand mental health on a broad spectrum, from severe mental illness to emotional adjustment problems to mental wellness. There is a tendency within the public domain, and indeed the academy, to conceptualize ‘mental health’ predominantly at the severe end of the spectrum and as a permanent steady state. However, it is not uncommon to find issues of graduate student mental health referred to in the literature as a problem, not solely residing within the individual, but with the culture of graduate schools. It is a culture that breeds insecurity, fear of failure, exposure to constant critique and criticism and, in fact, one that is designed to push students beyond their limits to ‘test their mettle’ in ‘preparation’ for an academic career. The results of studies and student surveys have indicated that graduate student experiences are conceptualized as so stressful that they are described as a time of





‘anguish,’ ‘taking a psychological beating,’ and ‘severe distress’. Graduate students are reportedly at a higher risk of mental health issues than the general population because of “the environment within which they function. Our results show that graduate students are more than *six* times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population” (Flaherty, 2018).

Graduate students are whole individuals and the pursuit of a graduate degree encompasses the totality of the person, of being able to identify and articulate who and what they aspire to be as an individual in addition to the acquisition of academic expertise. It is, and is intended to be, a transformative endeavor. Thus, graduate students are calling for institutions to address their emotional well-being directly and to adapt to the concept that they are not solely ‘students’. Although counselling centers and mental health supports are important and can play a role in students’ wellbeing, a change in the culture of graduate education is being highlighted, through a call that “Graduate student well-being [be] baked into the whole system” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016). Consistent with a growing body of literature, “Poor adviser relationships, social isolation, precarious finances and debt-load, stress levels and uncertain career prospects have been found to be the top predictors of graduate students’ levels of both life satisfaction and depression” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016).

There is increasing opposition, as well, to the long standing philosophy that graduate students be expected to endure excessive stress and high levels of distress. Many institutions are developing strategies to message that this is no longer tolerable and a culture change is required. The view that graduate students should be expected to ‘endure’ is being replaced with a more inclusive colleagues-in-training approach in which students are mentored and supported as they progress through their graduate programs. Of course, disciplines have different requirements and expectations of success vary so the potential perils that students face cannot be addressed with a one-size-fits-all approach. However, protecting all students from severe distress, in whatever ways make sense within the discipline, is not an untenable approach. Increasingly, students as a collective expect that they will have support from their institutions when faced with challenges that extend beyond their limits. With the internally - and externally - motivated demand for changes in academic culture, institutions are responding by providing collaborative workshops that span disciplines, writing support, career advisement, and other substantive efforts to create a sense of community among graduate students who may be less connected to the institution than they are to their scholarly field.



The misalignment between graduate student mental health concerns and institutional structures and priorities means that mental health advocates face an uphill battle. In 2017, FGSR built bridges with the Office of the Dean of Students through the creation of the Associate Dean, Mental Health and Wellness portfolio. The intent was to create a sustained focus on the issue of graduate student mental health and wellness and to implement changes and recommendations as appropriate. Although there is a rapidly growing body of literature related to graduate student mental health, there are few in the way of specific recommendations on how to address the issue at an institutional level. Rather, insights can be gleaned from initiatives implemented at institutions leading the charge for change. The UofA has the opportunity to build upon the successes of our sister institutions in our drive to enhance student success and become an even more cutting-edge institution.

### ***A FEW CURRENT INITIATIVES***

The following list includes some, but not all, University of Alberta initiatives that are consistent with those implemented at other North American, research intensive, post-secondary institutions:

- Recognizing that parents bring a different set of issues to their graduate studies than do those without responsibilities for families and children, group activities and targeted workshops are being designed to assist students who parent with a community of support. FGSR has undertaken an important initiative called [ParentLink](#) that has the potential to provide an indirect yet positive impact on the wellbeing of this demographic. The initiative is designed to support students who parent by profiling both on campus and community resources and information, providing the opportunity to connect with other students who parent, and creating a forum to discuss issues of concern. It also highlights community and career building opportunities.
- Ongoing concerns about professional development and career prospects are highlighted as a significant contributor to depression, anxiety, and extreme levels of stress. Although graduate students turn to their supervisors and/or advisors for career advice, academics are frequently unfamiliar with or uncomfortable providing guidance that falls beyond the academy. To address this issue, FGSR has implemented a mandatory individualized [Professional Development Requirement](#) with a devoted staff complement as a way to ensure that graduate students



- expand the definition of 'career success,' broaden their scope of future prospects, and identify the breadth of strengths and abilities they bring to the job market.
- FGSR is committed to changing the University of Alberta's academic culture in order to enhance graduate students' experiences. Students in mental distress often show signs of it in their academic work and there is a growing awareness about how important well-being is to performance and productivity. Faculty members and those who interact frequently with graduate students are well placed to identify warning signs. The [Community Helpers Program](#), offered through the Office of the Dean of Students to faculty and staff, is designed to equip community members to identify and handle students who struggle.
  - The [Mental Health First Aid](#) training program, offered through HRS, is offered regularly to staff members and faculty. It provides training on how to identify those developing or struggling with mental health issues. No one expects faculty members or staff to diagnose mental health issues, but rather they should be able to notice changes in their students and refer them on to services or supports.
  - Counselling and Clinical Services has a dedicated psychologist for graduate students. The office resides in a location separate from the central CCS office, easily accessible, and familiar, to all graduate students on campus. The location ensures that graduate students can discreetly seek service.
  - In support of the FGSR initiative to improve mentorship skills, please refer to the [Supervisory Guide](#) (N. Krogman and S. Ficko, FGSR, 2018) for guidance on steps to take to safeguard and improve graduate student supervision and mentorship. Through FGSR, opportunities also exist to invest in good supervision and mentorship through our [Mentorship Academy](#) workshop series and other speakers and workshops. Workshops are generally offered in both the fall and winter terms, and address topics such as "What is a good mentor?", "How to most effectively help graduate students with writing projects," "Effectively addressing tension and conflict in graduate student-supervisor relationships," and "Constructive communication to maximize learning" among several others.
  - A series of seminars and discussions for graduate students are hosted by FGSR and the GSA on "Managing Up," or the skill of proactively directing one's own progress in their graduate program. Similar to the Mentorship Academy workshops, these sessions address communication, conflict, staying on schedule with one's research progress, and availing oneself of the many services on



campus that can support graduate student health, productivity, and personal and professional development.



## **FOR ENHANCEMENTS & FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS**

### ***EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH STUDENTS ABOUT WELLNESS AND ACADEMIC SERVICES***

- Although a diverse array of resources are available to graduate students, navigating the University of Alberta website can be a frustrating and often futile endeavor as information is fragmented and not cohesively organized. The current structure limits accessibility for the ‘just in time’ method of information seeking that is so frequently utilized by students, thus knowledge about and awareness of the available supports remains low. To address this issue, a website should be curated that compiles a comprehensive database of graduate student-specific resources into a central location that is easy to access and intuitively located. The site should include, but not be limited to, academic tip sheets, how-to tip sheets, links to services across campus, FAQs, etc.
- Develop a ‘one-stop-shop’ centralized website that allows graduate students to easily access all FGSR resources and services available and tailored to them (i.e., IDP, academic services or workshops, mental health resources, etc.). The website would parallel the DoS website under Current Students but would be housed and maintained as part of the FGSR website. It is common for graduate students to misunderstand that DoS services are not restricted to undergraduate students and are readily available to them as UofA students.
- FGSR and the graduate student services that it provides need to be highlighted on our campuses to alert graduate students that services and resources are available to them. A more comprehensive and specifically targeted communication strategy should be developed, preferably informed by graduate students themselves. Graduate student involvement in developing communication strategies would be an effective approach to designing and implementing relevant and appropriate information to the targeted population. The Graduate Student Association could play a major role in supporting and facilitating this initiative.
- Across national and international post-secondary institutions, there is a wealth of resources that are designed and distributed to address health and wellness issues of graduate students. Permission is frequently granted, and in fact encouraged, for use by other institutions. These would be of benefit to our faculty, staff, and



students. UC Berkeley, for example, has compiled a [Mental Health Handbook](https://uhs.berkeley.edu) for Faculty, Staff, and GSIs (<https://uhs.berkeley.edu>) that would be useful as a template for the development of a UofA specific handbook. A number of universities (i.e., Cornell University, University of British Columbia, Johns Hopkins) have websites that provide critical academic information to graduate students from 'how to read a research paper' to 'managing stress'. With appropriate attribution, they are amenable to other institutions linking to these web resources. U of A students also have access to online modules ([myGradSkill.ca](http://myGradSkill.ca)) available on the Queen's University website. The site includes: Coaching for Writing, Persistence, Resilience, Navigating Academe, and Time Management. For easy access, links to these resources should be included on the FGSR website.

- It is an open secret that the 'imposter syndrome' is a common phenomenon within the graduate student body. Silence only serves to reinforce and enhance its' prevalence and power. Normalizing and acknowledging this commonly held fear and other self-deprecating perspectives so often associated with being a graduate student reduces the stigma and shame affiliated with the post-graduate endeavor.
- In addition to academic and psychological supports, there are a number of affiliated services that could be highlighted as available for graduate students on campus. These include, but are not limited to, the [Interfaith Chaplains Association](#) that provides both spiritual guidance and social support, the Multifaith Prayer and Meditation Centre, plus dedicated prayer spaces on campus, and the [Peer Program](#) and international student orientations run by University of Alberta International, Student Services. The breadth and diversity of resources available to graduate students should be profiled to encourage students to access them accordingly.
- The Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey is regularly administered by FGSR. The inclusion of questions about the influence of graduate programs and their working environments on mental anguish, when paired with NCHA data, would produce important insights into the causes of graduate student distress at the UofA. Data could then be used to identify the student population or demographic most in need of specific focus and initiatives. Prioritization of initiatives would result in the most efficient use of resources.



## **PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT AVAILABLE SERVICES**

- National and international surveys confirm the critical need for targeted and specialized counselling and mental health services that differentiate between graduate students and undergraduate students. It is crucial that Counseling and Clinical Services (CCS) maintains a satellite location where graduate students can discreetly seek mental health counselling. Budget cuts, however, threaten the institution's ability to offer adequate individualized services. Because demand exceeds its' current resources, the Office of the Dean of Students is working toward enhancing partnerships and improving coordination between CCS and community treatment providers to ensure that more students receive effective and necessary mental health care. The DoS has also purchased [WellTrack](#), an interactive, self-help online therapy program that will be available to all UofA students. The soft launch occurred in Summer 2018 with full availability in Fall 2018. Graduate students should be recruited to participate and provide feedback over the summer months prior to the hard launch. Again, a communication plan must be designed to alert graduate students to the availability of WellTrack and to ensure that they are aware that the program is intended for their use as well as being available to undergraduates.
- Academic writing support, such as the FGSR Reading Week Writing Bootcamp, offered in parallel with the Dean of Students structured and unstructured support services and writing and presentation workshops are specifically designed to meet graduate students' needs. Some departments and faculties also provide writing support. Graduate work, particularly while completing a thesis or dissertation, can be viewed as a lonely endeavor, so regularly scheduled programs and/or dissertation workshops allow students to reduce the isolation and discuss ideas with fellow students from across disciplines. These initiatives facilitate graduate students' progress through their programs, potentially easing excessive stress.
- When graduate students are trained to identify distress in the student population with whom they interact as TAs and/or RAs, they are more likely to identify their peers and colleagues who appear to be struggling, as well as recognize their own challenges. Brief training sessions should be made available to all TAs and RAs to equip them with knowledge about how to spot signs of potential emotional distress. Many PSIs use a bystander intervention model that is available through open access videos and facilitated discussion forums to train their graduate student population. The UofA has a program based upon Community Helpers.



## **ADVOCATE FOR GOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING PRACTICES**

- Parent Link is an excellent model for creating social support communities based upon shared life circumstances. Building a strong sense of community has been demonstrated as a crucial factor in supporting graduate students through their academic journeys. The university community should place a high priority on creating opportunities to enhance social connections, and on creating support groups and networking initiatives across the institution. It may take a concerted communication plan to inform students about what is available, so a concerted strategy implemented over time will be needed to engage students and encourage their participation.
- The Office of the Dean of Students spearheads many of the services and resources that provide support to all UofA students. It is crucial that FGSR has a presence at the table to represent the interests and needs of graduate students specifically. These committees include, but are not restricted to: Suicide Prevention Framework Implementation Policy Review Sub-Committee, The Homelessness Project, Residence Services family housing initiatives, Healthy University Strategic Plan committees (including Policy, Implementation etc.).
- On campus full-time and drop-in daycare facilities have been confirmed across North American institutions as a service that reduces some anxiety about finding appropriate child care and alleviates concerns about securing safe and appropriate placement for children of all ages. From the perspective of equity of access, several institutions have daycare providers available not only for daily needs, but also during graduate student events/workshops and social gatherings.
- The Quality Assurance Framework for Graduate Education at the University of Alberta <https://www.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/about/quality-assurance> provides a guide for assessing graduate programs based upon the University's mission for the public good. Engaging in the self-study assessment is an opportune time to evaluate the current state of the program and aspirational initiatives through the lens of, and with consideration of, the impact on student mental health and wellness.
- A supervisor's mentorship and guidance has been highlighted as one of the most important aspects of the graduate student experience. In a survey of doctoral students on three continents, Woolston, (2017) reported that "Mentorship





contributed more to respondents' overall satisfaction with their PhD programme than did any other factor. Specifically, guidance from, and recognition by, an adviser proved to be the top determinant." FGSR should maintain its focus on educating faculty members about the importance of mentorship and enhancing their ability to guide their students. Many faculty members in the academy are 'naturals,' but for those who could benefit from assistance to improve their skills, a workshop series, mentorship academy, new hire orientations, or any combination of initiatives should be vigorously supported by senior administration, deans and chairs. <https://cloudfront.ualberta.ca/-/media/gradstudies/about/faculty-and-staff/resources-for-supervisors-and-graduate-coordinators/20140619krogmanreportongraduatesupervisionfgsrcouncilmay2014.pdf>

- New faculty members attending orientations or training as fledgling supervisors would benefit from presentations on the impact of graduate student mental health and wellness on academic pursuits and available on-campus services. Over the course of their careers, it is likely that every faculty member will encounter students who are struggling. It is incumbent on each of us to be familiar with how to respond, either by consulting a graduate coordinator or associate chair, or consulting listings of available services and resources. Faculty members are not expected to take on the role of 'counsellor,' but rather connectors between students and resources.
- Students in the grip of mental distress often show signs in their academic work. Faculty members and graduate coordinators, as well as graduate assistants who interact frequently with distressed students are well placed to observe warning signs. Although not tailored specifically to graduate student supervisors, the [Community Social Work Team](#) (CSWT) offers the Front Line Staff training workshop as well as a Community Helpers program designed to equip faculty and staff members to identify students' mental health concerns and to be familiar with the process of appropriate referrals for support.
- As FGSR is a service unit that interacts directly with graduate students, all staff should be encouraged to take the Front Line Staff training workshop. The CSWT will customize the workshop to be unit specific. In addition, Mental Health First Aid is a program available to all university staff through Human Resources.



- Advocate for the implementation of the [Healthy University Strategic Plan \(HUSP\)](#), a joint initiative undertaken with the collaboration of Human Resources, the Office of the Dean of Students, and the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation. FGSR has an important role to play in ensuring that graduate students factor prominently in the initiative through membership in the HUSP working group.
- Development of a Mental Health Handbook for faculty and staff would provide a 'need to know' guide of what services and supports are available to students and provide information as to how faculty and staff can make referrals. It could also provide information about online resources, accessible videos, etc.
- To augment their ability to guide and refer graduate students, each Associate Dean located in FGSR should be provided with information about campus student supports, initiatives, and programs. Not only are services and supports available at the institutional level, but individual faculties also provide resources to their graduate students, who often indicate that they are unaware of the full scope of resources designed for them specifically.
- Commonly, students identify with and feel a strong affiliation with their home departments and laboratories. As a result, those who are passionate about graduate student mental health frequently initiate, develop, and offer mental health workshops and programming to students in their cohorts or departments. Small financial awards are available through the GSA that, while helpful, do not cover the costs associated with the event. FGSR should match the GSA funding to encourage student initiated workshops and social events.



### **ENGAGE STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

- Engage the GSA in the recruitment of focus group participants to obtain student perspectives with the aim of finding the right combination of approaches necessary to promote and enable action at the UofA.
- Encourage the GSA to complete a cost/benefit analysis of the Health Benefit Plan and survey students regarding their satisfaction level following their experiences of accessing counselling services specifically.
- FGSR commends efforts by the GSA to be a strong proponent of creating a sense of community among graduate students who may not feel strongly connected to our institution beyond their academic program or laboratory. The GSA is strongly encouraged to continue with their efforts and to develop initiatives that engage students in support of their mental health and wellness. Grass roots, student designed, student initiated, and student led efforts to create a community of support, a sense of safety, and opportunities for social engagement outside of their specific disciplines are often the most successful at raising awareness and addressing graduate student mental health needs. Peer to peer has been demonstrated to be a powerful method of enhancing engagement and connection during challenging and demanding post-graduate academic pursuits. The GSA is ideally situated to champion and facilitate initiatives that enhance graduate student mental health and wellness at the UofA.



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