

Executive Summary

Mental Health and the PhD: Insights and Implications for Political Science

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Abstract

There is a severe mental health crisis among graduate students in political science. We present findings from an original survey on the mental health of political science PhD students at seven US universities. Our results are concerning: 15.8% expressed thoughts of suicide in the two weeks prior to taking the survey. About 30% of respondents meet the criteria for depression and only a third of those are receiving treatment. Around 32% meet the criteria for anxiety and fewer than half are receiving treatment. We also find that students with poorer mental health are isolated, have fewer friends in their department and fewer people to turn to for help, and are more likely to contemplate dropping out of their program. Our study raises important questions about the experiences of graduate students during the program and serves as an urgent call to action to address the well-being of our colleagues.

1 Executive Summary

This study examines the level of mental health-related issues among doctoral students in political science departments across the United States. Our goals are to (1) identify the prevalence and severity of mental health conditions among graduate students in political science; (2) identify the environmental correlates of mental health conditions; and (3) provide suggestions to departmental administration for programming and policy changes that could improve mental health. The modules examine depression, anxiety, imposter's syndrome, drinking habits, seeking treatment, department experiences, and sexual harassment. Finally, a link to a separate survey asking three open-ended questions about department experiences is considered.

The seven departments included in the survey are the departments of political science at University of California-Berkeley, University of California-San Diego, Columbia University, Duke University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Michigan, and Princeton University. A total of 653 students received the survey and 308 responded (47%). Of these, 54% were male and 45% were female, and 72% were US citizens while 28% were international students. The beginning of the COVID-19 crisis likely affected students responding after March 8 (the earliest date that schools made significantly policy shifts in response). The 10% of responses completed on or after that date are dropped.

2 Findings

2.1 Mental Health Diagnostics

1. Almost 30% of respondents would likely receive the diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder and another 32% of students would likely receive the diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder from qualified clinicians.
2. Of these, very few reported receiving treatment: only 36% of respondents considered depressed and 45% of those with anxiety are receiving care.
3. A striking 16% of respondents reported having suicidal thoughts in the two weeks prior to responding to the survey. This is far greater than the average adult population.
4. About 57% of respondents self-reported having fair or poor mental health, placing them on the lower half of the subjective self-reported well-being index (17% reported theirs as being poor).
5. These indicators did not differ as students progress through the program. They also do not differ across the schools surveyed.

2.2 Department Experiences

1. Most students (75%) have friends within the department and only 5% find that they do not have anyone to discuss personal struggles with. 61% later reported strained relationships with at least some other students.
2. Students with poor mental health are isolated, feeling they have few friends in the department or people to turn to about their struggles. They were also more likely to contemplate dropping out of their program.
3. Only 30% of students reported that their peers were moderately or very competitive.

4. In ranking stressors, 75% of respondents included job prospects on their list. However, few respondents said that tenure at a top-ranked academic institution was important, though many students noted the great pressure they felt from faculty to pursue it. Many also noted there was no support for those pursuing non-academic jobs.
5. Another 70% ranked “never feeling off of work” as a stressor. Many students elaborated on the lack of encouragement for work-life balance.
6. Student satisfaction with their program averaged a score of 6.4 out of 10 (with 10 being “extremely satisfied”).
7. Relationships with advisers were of great concern to many students. Though a few reported misconduct, most reported lack of holistic mentoring, lack of concern for student well-being, and little feedback on performance after coursework completion.

3 Respondent Suggestions

3.1 Faculty

1. Provide more holistic advising: treat students as mentees as well as advisees. Establish reasonable expectations early.
2. See students as whole beings. Do not equate their work with their worth. Be constructive but positive when giving feedback.
3. Recognize the power held by faculty over student and the fear this can induce.
4. Be flexible. Students have lives outside of work and accommodations are often easy to make.
5. Recognize the difficulty of the job market. Be supportive and helpful regarding non-academic options.

3.2 Administration and Staff

1. Provide faculty with holistic advising and mentoring training.
2. Provide everyone with implicit bias and Title IX training.
3. Have open and honest conversations about mental health at orientation.
4. Provide a student guidebook at orientation. It should clearly communicate program requirements, funding details and opportunities, and other critical resources.
5. Provide mechanisms for students to resolve disputes with faculty.
6. Increase stipends to livable wages (based on local cost-of-living).
7. Change hiring practices: include students on committees and hire diverse faculty.
8. Organize (casual or formal) subfield groups to allow for more student-faculty interfacing.

9. Organize casual affinity or mental health group gatherings. Provide financial support if possible.
10. Make flexible pre-dissertation requirements (courses, exams, etc.) and provide early opportunities to learn how to conduct research.
11. Seriously reconsider number of graduate students admitted. Over-recruitment strains competition among students, advising capacities of faculty, resource allocation, and job market opportunities.

3.3 Students

1. For those willing, create student-student mentorship programs for incoming students.
2. Be cooperative, not competitive.

4 Recommendations

After reviewing the data and the open-ended responses, we gathered and summarized a small but actionable set of recommendations. This list is not comprehensive, but we believe it will be a useful starting point for departments to assess what they are doing well and to identify the particular ways in which they can improve student well-being and mental health. It is worth noting that the vast majority of the solutions require relatively little financial resources (with a few noteworthy exceptions).

4.1 Faculty

Summary: Advisers must also be mentors. Relations with advisers seem to make or break the graduate experience for many students. Struggling students sought mentorship and a more supportive relationship, while more satisfied students noted the strength of their relationship with their adviser. Encouraging all faculty to view advising in a more holistic manner is critical. Additionally, most students are concerned about the job market, the pressure to get tenure-track positions at research institutions, and the lack of emphasis on non-academic jobs. Faculty must recognize these difficulties and be open to different career goals.

4.1.1 Recommendations

1. Provide more holistic advising: treat students as mentees as well as advisees. Establish reasonable expectations early.
2. See students as whole beings. Do not equate their work with their worth. Be constructive but positive when giving feedback.
3. Recognize the power held by faculty over student and the fear this can induce.
4. Be flexible. Students have lives outside of work and accommodations are often easy to make.

5. Recognize the difficulty of the job market. Be supportive and helpful regarding non-academic options.

4.2 Administration and Staff

Summary: Be more hands-on with regard to student-adviser relations; provide faculty with the trainings that all HR departments would provide to employees; and adjust and communicate expectations to students beginning at orientation.

Students recommended that the department be more involved in helping assist and regulate adviser-student relationships. Part of the recommendation included providing trainings where possible. In addition, students felt overburdened by requirements and under-supported. The suggested making requirements more flexible and tailored to students' needs. They also suggested providing clearer expectations and clearer guidelines on funding and other research opportunities. Finally, respondents also sought mechanisms by which to create more community. For some, this included having students participate on department committees. For others, this meant hiring more diverse faculty to support students from diverse backgrounds. Still others recommended creating groups that could allow for more socializing around topics of diversity, mental health, and even more substantive topics.

4.2.1 Recommendations

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4.3 Students

Summary: Students benefited greatly from student-to-student support. Respondents noted that support from fellow students was greatly beneficial while others suggested that competition from fellow students was detrimental. Though the department as a whole must create a non-competitive and cooperative environment for students, students still noted they could benefit from the mentorship of other, more experienced students.

4.3.1 Recommendations

1. For those willing, create student-student mentorship programs for incoming students.
2. Be cooperative with one another, not competitive.

5 Appendix

We asked students to answer three open-ended questions. Responses are not connected to the demographic information in the original survey and are therefore anonymous. Multiple-part answers are counted in separate categories.

Total responses: 169 (55% of all survey respondents)

- Q1: 148 responses (48%)
- Q2: 124 responses (40%)
- Q3: 119 responses (39%)

Question 1: What could students, staff or faculty at your department do that could improve graduate students' mental health or well-being?

1. Positive feedback and mentorship from faculty: 22%
2. Concerns about TT and non-academic jobs: 20%
3. Clearer guidelines: 20%
4. Open MH discussions: 18%
5. Address bad department culture: 18%
6. Access to resources: 17%
7. Reduce course load and exam intensity: 13%
8. Professor etiquette: 9%
9. Discuss identity more: 6%

Question 2: What are students, staff or faculty at your department already doing, that supports graduate students' mental health or well-being?

1. Good department culture: 40%
2. Advisercheck-ins and flexibility: 26%
3. Spaces for UR populations and MH: 22%
4. Clear communication: 13%
5. Resources available: 12%
6. Social activities: 10%

Question 3: Do you ever feel that an aspect of your identity or background (e.g. gender, country of origin, race, sexual orientation) makes it harder for you to feel personally or professionally supported at the department? If so, which aspect? What would make this better, if anything?

1. Female: 35 (29%)
2. Race: 25 (21%)
3. Socio-economic background: 12%
4. Not belonging to “old boys’ club”: 10%
5. International status: 7%
6. LGBTQ+ identity: 6%
7. Religion: 5%
8. Other:
 - (a) Career goals: 5%
 - (b) Mental health situation: 3%
 - (c) Being a white man: 3%
 - (d) Political identity: 2%
 - (e) Body and Ableism: 2%
 - (f) Age: 1%
 - (g) No: 22%
 - (h) Yes (no explanation): 2%