

Universities, Psychology Departments, and the Treatment of Graduate Students

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We expect graduate students to maintain a healthy balance between the demands of graduate work and their lives outside of school, but for most graduate students such a balance remains at best difficult and too often unattainable. Graduate students lead unique and complex lives with intense workloads, little personal or political power within their departments, and high expectations for individual achievement. This combination can be detrimental for many students physically, mentally, and scholastically.

Graduate students face a complex web of duties. First, they are students, and, for at least the first few years of doctoral programs, they must succeed in demanding graduate classes. Second, they are learning to be researchers, and this process often includes time-consuming duties that are critical for successful research: data collection, data entry, data management and analysis, and so on. Third, many graduate students are learning to be teachers. Some learn through assistantships or apprenticeships, some attend classes or other training for university teaching, and others experience trial by fire as they learn in the challenging environment of the college or university classroom. Additionally, many graduate students participate in other modes of teaching, including advising and mentoring undergraduates or junior graduate students in class work, research, and teaching. Fourth, graduate students in applied areas of psychology fulfill practicum hours, complete internships, and otherwise work in their fields within or outside the university. Fifth, graduate students learn to be productive members of the academic community, and they partake in departmental, university, and regional or even national committee membership and other service activities. Education through all of the duties above prepares students to fill their own unique niches within the larger psychological community.

Regardless of their myriad responsibilities, graduate students face academic systems that are not always sufficiently tuned to their welfare. Despite the heavy load of duties, graduate students are often severely and knowingly overworked. Many institutional and cultural factors contribute to this systematic overloading and exploitation of graduate students. First, overworking graduate students is reinforcing to departmental and university administrators in several ways. Having a graduate student teach a course costs a fraction of a professor’s salary, and such savings are not overlooked by administrators. Teaching is an integral part of the learning experience for graduate students, and administrators can view graduate teaching assignments as experiential learning opportunities for graduate students. Many institutions count on graduate students to meet departmental teaching needs. Graduate students often fill the gaps, taking classes that professors do not want or courses that, for whatever reason, cannot be staffed by faculty. Additionally, graduate students are often called on in the middle of the semester to assume classes from ill or otherwise unavailable professors. Thus, graduate

students are often used to solve critical departmental problems, and department and university administrators are rewarded for approaching and using graduate students in these ways.

Second, although some of us were fortunate enough to have excellent advisors with genuine concerns for our lives and health, we should recognize that overworking graduate students is also adaptive for faculty advisors. Not only are graduate students usually literate in a research or professional area, they are often cheaper and easier to justify than hiring outside technicians. Fully funded graduate students work for a salary based on a 20-hour work week regardless of how many hours they actually work. Additionally, students' work may bring publications and other recognition to advisors. It is adaptive for professors to retain graduate students with successful research and publication records to assist in running a laboratory or a research program, even if doing so sometimes requires these students to postpone graduation.

Despite the financial, professional, and personal benefits of working with graduate students and despite departmental encouragement for faculty who do so, many departments continue to reward individual research by faculty more than collaborative work. Although some departments explicitly reinforce collaborative research with students, some departments may not. Single author publications that are adaptive for professors can be less financially, professionally, and personally rewarding for graduate students who are involved behind the scenes in such work.

Finally, graduate students willingly accept the intense and often unhealthy workloads offered by administrators and their faculty advisors. Why?

First, graduate students respond appropriately to the legitimate authority of advisors and administrators. Second, financial incentives cannot be ignored. In the 1999-2000 academic year, the median income for fully funded doctoral students in their intermediate years was \$10,000 for teaching assistants and \$10,174 for research assistants (Fennell & Kohout, 2002). In 1999, the national poverty threshold for a single individual under age 65 was \$8667 (US Census Bureau, 2000). The upper bounds of the lower quartiles of graduate stipends were \$8102 for teaching assistantships and \$8183 for research assistantships (Fennell & Kohout, 2002). Thus, at least one fourth of graduate students lived under or close to poverty threshold as defined by the federal government (even when student loans are taken into consideration). Graduate students cannot be expected to reject opportunities for supplementary income.

Third, political concerns cannot be ignored. If a student turns down a teaching, research, or similar professional opportunity, will a second chance be offered? This point is particularly relevant given that, in the 1999-2000 academic year, 68% of departments did not fund all of their doctoral students throughout their educations (Fennell & Kohout, 2002).

Fourth, we hope graduate students have chosen these paths in their lives because they truly enjoy the subject matters they study. Therefore, they are not likely to pass up opportunities that may further the development of their expertise in a given area.

Fifth, the short-term concerns regarding income or political issues pale compared to the long-term concerns for future employment. A graduate student attempts to build a vita that stands

out for prospective employers. Standing out requires going the extra mile beyond one's peers in terms of class success, hours worked, and investment in teaching, research, and other professional activities. A healthy balance in life is rarely rewarded financially, with formal awards, or other types of recognition. Overwork, overachievement, and imbalance seem to be clearly adaptive for graduate students.

The above pressures interact with faculty and administrative attitudes and expectations. Expectations for graduate students have changed significantly in the last 50 years. For example, most academics would now frown on Harry Harlow for walking through his laboratory late at night and checking on his graduate students (Blum, 2002), and few professors conduct seminars until 2 a.m. though Mutzafer Sherif was known to do so on occasion (W. Viney, personal communication, February 28, 2003). Although many contemporary graduate students may be working at these hours, the institutional pressures toward these behaviors have lessened. The changes have occurred slowly, however, and the attitudes that drive such faculty behavior also change slowly. Many advisors were educated with such historical expectations, and many may still hold these attitudes.

Scholastic mistreatment may run in academic families. We learn and often use the mentoring styles we experienced as students, and few departments have training programs for faculty advisors. Faculty may pass the treatment they faced in graduate school on to their own students. All too often we hear colleagues refer to the oppressive conditions they faced in graduate school to justify overworking, exploiting, or even degrading their own or other graduate students.

We acknowledge that indecent treatment of students is not healthy, and we hope that overwork, exploitation, and excessive demands will be recognized and avoided by faculty mentors despite mentors' prior experiences. The analogy with domestic abuse is clear. Mistreatment should be an obviously poor choice in parenting, but it occurs all too often; the same remains true in academia. Advisor/advisee relationships in graduate school are highly individual and unregulated. This lack of regulation has a dark side—it combines with the large power differential between advisors and advisees in a situation with few checks or balances and little recourse for students in cases of mistreatment. Faculty attitudes integrate with a system that reinforces the systematic overworking of graduate students.

The factors that encourage a lack of balance between graduate school and life are overwhelming. Graduate students have huge temporal, financial, and personal investments at stake in their educations and in the future job market, treatment of graduate students is largely unregulated, and when graduate students are overworked or exploited numerous advantages come to advisors, supervisors, other faculty members, department administrators, and the students themselves. What can we do as faculty members with concerns for the appropriate treatment of graduate students?

At the departmental level, one practical step is to change departmental policy where needed to reward faculty for collaborative work with students. More fundamentally, departments need specific policies to protect graduate students from overwork and excessive responsibility in teaching, research, and professional activities. Many options to protect students are available

at the university level. Universities can train faculty regarding treatment of graduate students and the detrimental effects of overworking these students. Many programs now include health insurance as a benefit in graduate school; such benefits reduce the financial and personal stress that students face. Universities could aid graduate students in their attempts to unionize in order to acquire benefits and a more powerful voice within university communities. Additionally, a university ombudsman dedicated to graduate student issues and unfettered by college or departmental political ties could serve as an unbiased moderator of grievances. A more radical possibility, in place at some institutions, is to prohibit graduate students from independently teaching classes so that we protect them from the immense workloads involved in teaching a class for the first time. Although this program saves graduate students from one form of overwork, it deprives them of opportunities to include direct responsibility for a class on their vitae in preparation to enter the job market.

As psychologists, we know the correlations of poverty, lack of personal control, and overwhelming workloads with mental illness, relationship distress, life stress, and other negative outcomes associated with graduate school. To protect against the mistreatment of graduate students, a department must work against the financial, administrative, and cultural grains, and to do so is not as adaptive as overworking graduate students. The costs are high. The benefits for challenging the system include physically and mentally healthier graduate students, happier students, and future scientists and professionals with more positive recollections and recommendations about their graduate experiences. Beyond the more easily measured benefits, we collectively gain by valuing students holistically. The field prospers and grows as we provide students with the tools they need to live well and successfully complete graduate school. Their future is our future as a discipline; “progress occurs when our students move beyond us” (Woody & Thomas, 2002).

References

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