

Cornell University

Graduate & Professional Student Mental Health & Wellbeing

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Graduate & Professional Student Advocacy Committee



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Mental health: A top concern

- Open ended survey, administered to graduate student attendees (n=36) at the 9/26/2011 GPSA meeting asked:
 - *What are the main issues facing the graduate school community?*
 - 76% of respondents reported mental health to be of central concern



GPSA Student Advocacy Committee

- University data on Graduate and Professional Student mental health and wellbeing is sparse
- The need to better understand issues pertaining to mental health and wellbeing of graduate and professional students was clear
- To address this issue, the GPSA Student Advocacy Committee engaged in 2 data collection activities:
 - 1) Survey research
 - 2) Qualitative focus groups



1) *Survey research: Methods*

- **Method**: The pen and pencil survey was administered to attendees at the 10/21/2011 meeting of the GPSA
- **Survey instrument**:
 - What are the obstacles to mental health?
 - How many times per week do you exercise?
 - Do you own a membership to the Cornell Fitness Centers?
 - If not, what are obstacles to a gym membership?
 - Do you have any additional comments?



1) *Survey research: Results*

- Respondents exercise 2.5 times/wk on average
- About half own a CFC membership (57%)
- Of those without a gym membership (n=16), almost one third (63%) report cost of memberships to be a significant obstacle
- 13% of respondents voiced concern over inadequacy of fitness facilities

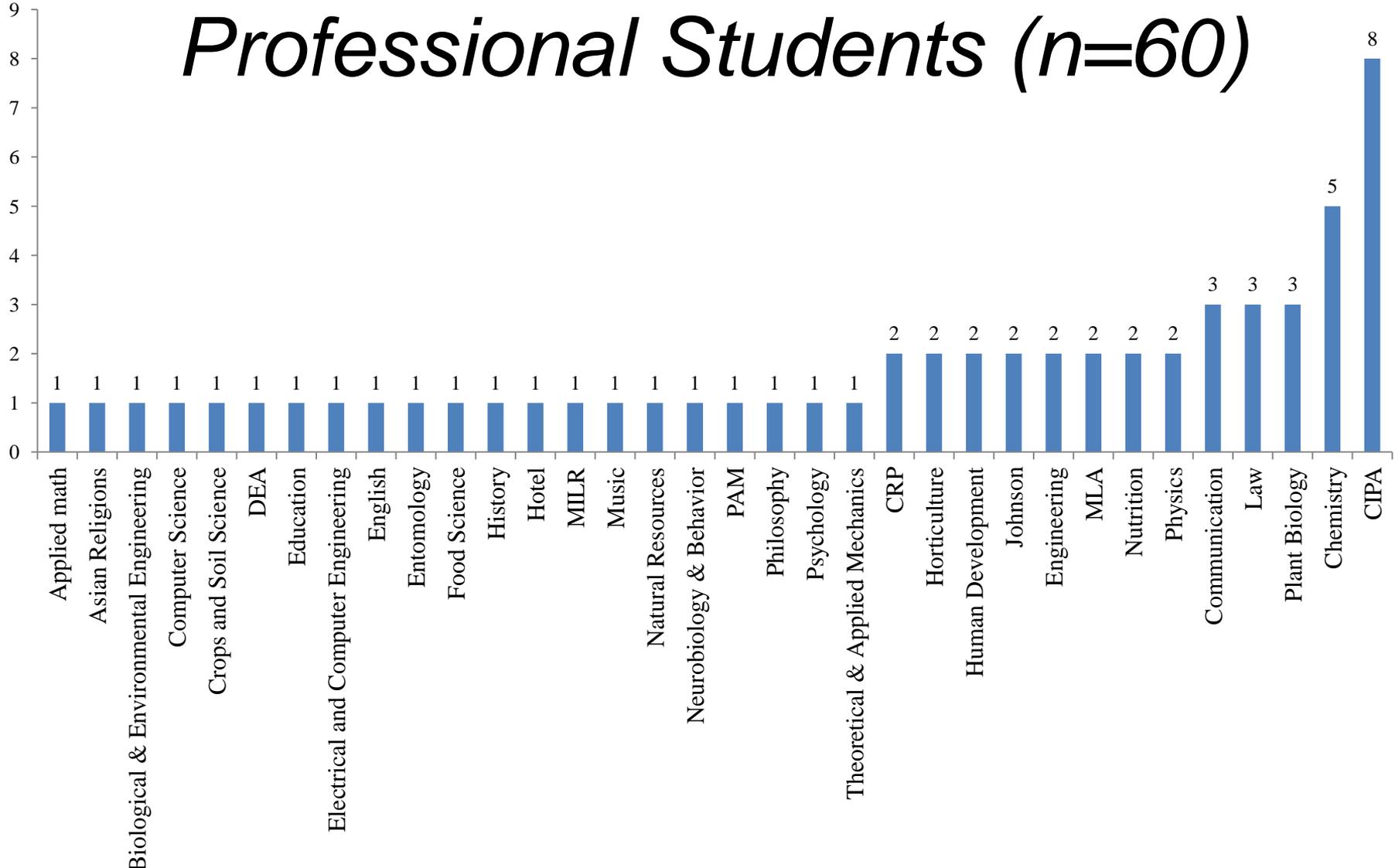


2) *Qualitative focus groups: Method*

- Recruitment: An event titled “Graduate & Professional Student Mental Health: Dine & Discuss” at the Big Red Barn on 12/9/11 was publicized as an opportunity to discuss issues pertaining to mental health and wellness.
- Participants: Students (n=60) attended from diverse disciplines.



A diverse sample of Graduate & Professional Students (n=60)





Vice President Murphy delivered keynote





Food provided through funding from the Graduate School





Breakout discussion

- Focus group format: Participants broke out into small groups (6 – 10 people)
 - Discussion guided by a trained facilitator
 - Discussions transcribed by a note taker
- Discussion prompts:
 1. What do you do to unwind?
 2. What is the current state of Graduate & Professional Student Wellness?
 3. What are areas the University can improve on?
- Analysis: Transcripts collected were thematically analyzed by the Student Advocacy Committee



“What do you do to unwind?”

Socialize

*“TGIF at the big red barn”
“Call friends”*

Physical activity

“Moving my body, walking”

Involvement

“Being involved in a student organization”

Relax sleep

“Meditation is really helpful for me”



“Current state of mental health?”

- ***Lack of publicity***
 - *“People need to sometimes see the value of an event in order to attend”*
- ***Stigma around socializing***
 - *“There needs to be a message: we’re all in this together”*
“Mental health is such a stigmatized term; people are reluctant to ask for help”
- ***Resources underutilized***
 - *“Graduate students sometimes know about resources, but can’t take advantage, due to poor appointment management software, reduced availability of counselors, etc”*
- ***Lack of knowledge***
 - How to help others *“I don’t know what a ‘warning’ sign would look like”*
 - How to help oneself *“No instruction on how to live your life”*
- ***Workload***
 - *“I don’t have time for counseling here... Thank goodness I don’t need it”*
- ***Graduate housing does not serve the community***



“Barriers to mental health?”

- ***Individual differences***; preferences
 - *“The notion about unwinding varies widely from one department to the next; one individual to the next”*
- ***Cultural barriers***
 - *“Many people who are most isolated are international students who are less familiar with the American culture of involvement, may not want to make connections”*
- ***Dispersion of individuals***
 - *“It’s hard to reach out to all graduate students with advertising about an event, etc”*
- ***Overcoming stigma***
 - *“It’s hard to get people who do not normally ‘go out’”*



“What are improvements?”

- **Centralized Resource for graduate students**
 - *“Online calendars, dashboards with events, and resources specifically for graduate students would be helpful”*
- **Need for more, better physical graduate space**
 - *“Big Red Barn, it’s always over run with undergrads”*
- **Access to health and wellness**
 - *“Gym memberships costly”*
 - *“Exercise classes not conducive to graduate student schedules”*
- **Events & programming**
 - Simple, off campus events for graduate students
 - Better events in the graduate student living centers
 - Food is a great attractor; *“Find ways to ‘kill two birds with one stone’ like socialize and eat; graduate students are always so busy”*
- **Training**
 - Orientation – how to be a graduate student
 - Ongoing–
 - How to identify warning signs of mental health problems
 - Built in systems of mentoring, attrition
 - University-wide education on work-life balance



“Improvements,” cont’d

- **Build a sense of community**
 - *“A sense of community in, and outside, the department”*
 - *“Colloquiums are a great place to build community”*
- **Strong, supportive learning environment**
 - Advisor accountability
 - Workshops on conflict resolution
- **Need for a joint effort**
 - *“Such a tricky issue, so cultural”*
 - Administration, Deans, Graduate field representatives
 - Collaboration across colleges



Programming at Columbia

- International



Online resources

- Harvard Newsletter
- MIT Website
 - RSS feed
- ISSO international student newsletter
- Cornell Graduate School Newsletter
- Centralized

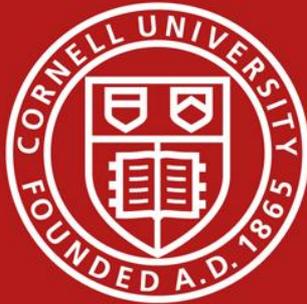


Insert the Wheel



Gym Information in the Ivies

- Columbia: free
- Cornell \$150/year
- Dartmouth/brown/Princeton
- Harvard: Free
- MIT: Free/subsidized by student fee
- Penn: \$360/year
- Free



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Thank you!

Questions?

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