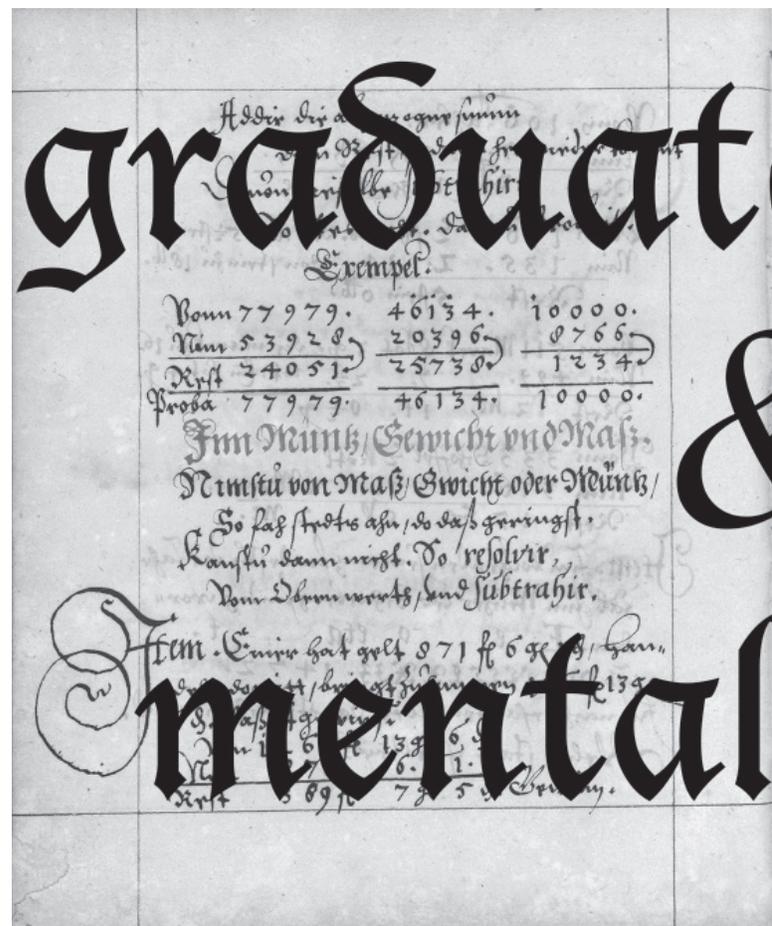


**B**eginning graduate school is a manifold socialisation. Even for those who were fortunate to experience research in some capacity as an undergrad, the structure and system of graduate school is a far cry from the bachelors pursuit. To wit, a new graduate student is faced with assimilation into a new community: a research group or supervisory partnership within a department and a discipline, all part of the larger institution called academia. This arrangement is voluntary, but certainly it belabours one's mettle; worse still, graduate students are increasingly susceptible to serious psychological strains. This article will focus on the bevy of mental health problems that typically afflict graduate students and the influence that those problems can have on the decisions associated with the graduate school socialisation process.

Chris Golde's article *Beginning graduate school: Explaining first-year doctoral attrition* gives a vantage over the questions facing a new graduate student<sup>1</sup>. Golde frames his research in four questions. Can I do this? This is usually the reaction to the initial plunge into graduate work. Few students avoid a second guess. Do I want to be a graduate student? Most students consider the opportunity costs as the lifestyle of the graduate student becomes apparent, and the sleep-deprived privation is contextualized. Is this the right choice (Do I want to do this work)? Especially in the sciences, specialisation occurs early in the socialisation process. This work likely determines the direction of a student's academic career. Do I belong here? Finally, persistence depends on integration into the department. This vital step often determines one's path through the first few years. Answering these four questions is difficult. And, unfortunately, the results of self-catchism are coupled heavily to mental wellbeing.

The stress of graduate studies can precipitate mental health problems, including anxiety and depression. In a study of over 3,000 graduate students, Hyun et al. found that more than half of graduate students reported having had a stress-related emotional problem in the past year<sup>2</sup>. Students' level of perceived stress has been associated with symptoms of depression and other mental health problems<sup>3,4</sup>. Moreover, the level of perceived stress has been shown to increase with each year spent in graduate school, with psychological wellbeing likewise declining over the course of a graduate program<sup>5</sup>. Alarming high rates of depression among graduate students have been reported, ranging from 25-35 percent of all students<sup>4</sup> – four times the Canadian national average. What factors lead to such high levels of stress? Psychological literature has suggested that financial difficulties, sleep disturbances and struggles with socialisation, namely social isolation and the supervisory relationship, can all contribute to increased stress and can lead to mental health problems. These and other mental health problems can significantly influence the context in which graduate students answer fundamental questions about their role in academia during early socialisation.

Many graduate students live in relative poverty while pursuing their degree, with loans and awards barely addressing the most basic financial needs. Moreover, the uncertainty of finding gainful employment post-graduation can heighten the financial strain. These factors vary between disciplines. Several studies have shown that graduate students who experience financial hardship are more likely to experience mental health issues than those who are financially secure<sup>6,7</sup>, and students' financial status has been significantly associated with stress-related mental health problems<sup>2</sup>. The ethereal nature of funding is professionally frustrating; serving coffee to pay the rent while dreaming about one's thesis is emotionally frustrat-

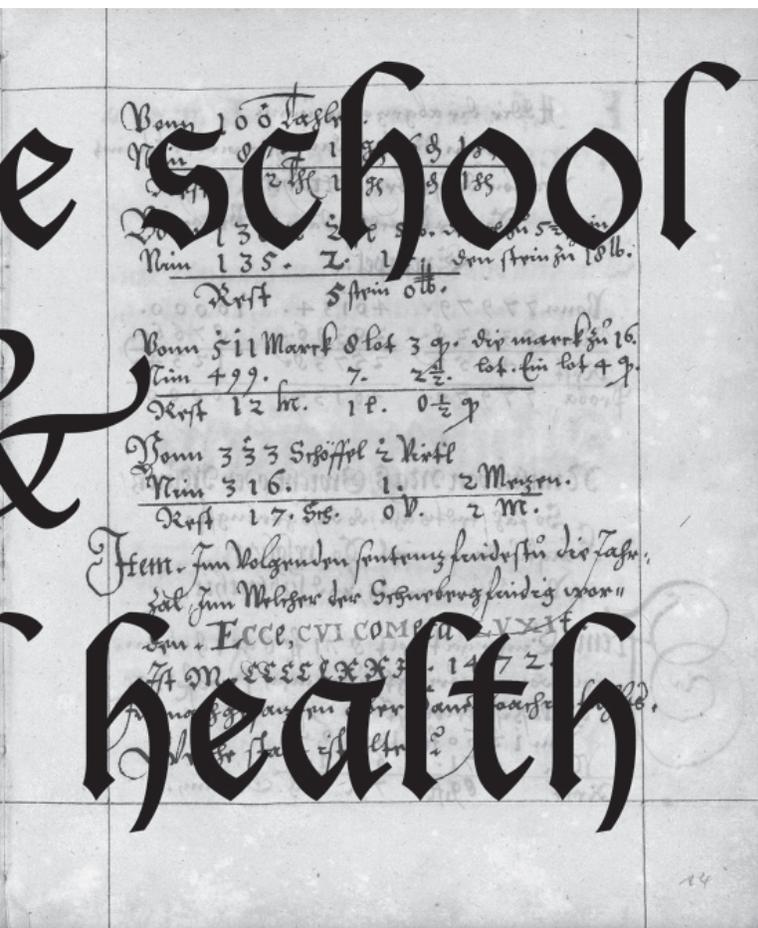


ing. Emotion tinges the question do I want to be a graduate student?

Sleep is another influence on consideration of the above question. Students' level of stress detrimentally impacts sleep quality<sup>8</sup>, which in turn impacts mental health<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, self-care practises that can improve sleep quality, such as meditation and exercise, are less likely to be practised by graduate students than by working professionals with a similar degree<sup>10</sup>. This may result in heightened vulnerability to depression and other mood disorders in graduate students. The editor was asked about his experiences:

*In the third year of undergrad, I would get two to six hours of sleep most Sunday and Tuesday nights; every few weeks add Wednesday night for a lab report. The all-nighters happened when I inevitably got behind as the semester wore on. At about about 12:30 or so, I've always been able to flip a switch, get a second wind. No coffee, just a robotic dedication to the work. My roommate in fourth year, he was something else. I witnessed several weeks where he'd alternate all-nighters: one night on, one night off...for a week. This I hadn't done, until finals month in each of my first two masters semesters. Oddly, these were the months that I felt the best about my potential as a student and an academic. It was research that left me empty, the weeks and months of paced daily effort with no breakthroughs.*

This all-encompassing nature of graduate studies, cited as the most common reason for graduate student dropout<sup>1</sup>, is evident in isolation from friends, family and colleagues. Graduate students who are socially isolated more often experience



graduate school, operates on a more extended schedule.

In the feature article of the winter 2007 issue of Peer Review magazine, Christine Sismondo relates the indicators of the imposter phenomenon, that unshakable feeling that the admissions committee made a mistake when reviewing your curriculum vitae. She writes, "Not surprisingly, people with the Imposter Phenomenon also tend to over-prepare, as in, the two-hour lecture that takes an entire summer to get ready of the 78 research articles that lead to a brief 12-pager given at a conference." Imposter phenomenon strikes both of the aforementioned groups – those who grew up in the shadow of successful siblings and those who outshone their immediate contemporaries and garnered excess praise. The effect of family pressure has been studied extensively. There have also been studies of the effects of immoderate positive evaluation<sup>12</sup>. The effects of isolation, ego-tripping and imposter phenomena can each warp the context of all four of Golde's questions.

The final piece in our consideration of surviving the first few years of graduate school is the supervisor-supervisee relationship. It is intrinsic and particularly weighty in graduate study; supervisory conflicts can multiply stress in an already challenging program. Moreover, the multiple roles that graduate students must navigate with supervisors (who are often serve as both mentors and co-authors) can be tricky at best, and ambiguity about these boundaries can often make this aspect of graduate school particularly stressful. In navigating a poor advisor relationship, Golde writes, "these [...] students are answering the "Do I belong here?" question. The nature of the supervisory relationship is dependent on discipline. Students in the hard sciences often jump right into a research group, where the casual hierarchy of students, postdocs and collaborating professors creates a soft support structure. However, this group-oriented arrangement fosters a subtly competitive environment; medium to large research groups tend to work longer hours on several projects to generate a larger body of research. In the humanities and social sciences, however, the supervisory relationship typically takes centre stage in the early socialisation process. There is often little to no interaction with contemporaries after coursework, and the eventual thesis-writing stage is popularly a lonely systematic review of several years of study. Though unusual, personality conflict with advisors usually manifest early in the graduate tenure. In this case, students are forced into the ambivalence of seeking new supervision, grinding it out or leaving the program. Some choose to transfer to another institution, while others leave the academic life in favour of private sector stability<sup>1</sup>. Students who have high functioning relationships with their graduate supervisor report fewer mental health issues than other students<sup>2</sup>, while dysfunctional supervisory relationships may conversely contribute to poor mental health<sup>13</sup>.

Of course, the structure and nature of graduate study are not entirely gloomy. One author notes, "my favourite characterization of graduate school was that of a professor from first-year, that graduate school 'sequentially fluffs and crushes your ego.'" Expectations and successes can in turn jeopardize the effectiveness in dealing with negative situations. Lee Blanding is the GSS Director of Student Affairs, and as such he routinely meets with graduate students in academic crisis. He reports that:

*The biggest mistake students make is not asking for help. As graduate students we are trained to think and work independently; as such, we are often reluctant to seek advice. The assumption is "I can do it myself." I think that*

symptoms of depression than those who are not<sup>11</sup>. This can become persistently true as the increasingly specialised nature of graduate work can make it difficult to connect with others about work-related challenges. In addition, a sense of competition among graduate students may also prevent students from developing close, intimate bonds with other students that are necessary to maintain good mental health. Is this isolation intrinsic?

According to 2001 census data, one-half percent of Canadians have an earned doctorate. Many graduate students are the first in their family to enroll in post-graduate study, others, like one student approached by the author, are striving for the fourth PhD in their immediate family. She said:

*If we've survived this long, we were the kind of students growing up that collected accolades. In elementary school, they give certificates for perfect attendance. Approval and feedback in high school worked on weekly timescales. Even in undergraduate school, I never thought more than a few weeks ahead. In graduate school, I've been working on the same experiment for eight months without an end in sight. My self worth no longer hangs on feedback, it just hangs.*

To restate, ostensibly all graduate students succeeded in their past academic endeavours; academia is regarded generally as a meritocracy. Merit in graduate school, however, has been pushed well beyond the horizon. In undergraduate school, the private sector or in public service, the feedback loop is calibrated to a short timescale – term papers, audits or elections occur frequently enough to sustain the institution. Research, and hence

perhaps ego plays into this because we would all like to believe that we have a handle on our own academic lives. It seems to me (from some of the students I have corresponded with) that their ego and sense of independence have gotten in the way of their seeking help. Reluctance begets procrastination, then escalation, and eventually someone is sitting alone at their desk with a completed master's thesis and no committee, because they've alienated themselves entirely from the system.

Facing supervisory problems early is key in resolving issues amicably and creating space for a new way of working that can foster a successful relationship.

Similarly, it may be useful to work through, rather than suppress, the insecurities or inadequacies implicit in Golde's four questions. Understanding the structurally- and self-imposed expectations that magnify grad student neuroses and compromise mental health may offer a healthier approach to grad studies.

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- [3] G V Gupchup, M E Borrego and N Konduri, *College Student Journal*, 38 (2004)
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- [7] R Roberts, J Golding and T Towell, *The Psychologist*, 11, 489-491 (1998)
- [8] J Ellis and P Fox, *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 124(3), 129-133 (2004)
- [9] Valvano & Rasnake, 2007
- [10] D Fuselier, PsyD dissertation, University of Northern Colorado (2004)
- [11] S A Hudson and J O'Regan, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 50(6), 973-977 (1994)
- [12] H C Colvin, J Block and D C Funder, *J. of Personality and Social Psychology* 68, 1152-1162 (1995)
- [13] W B Johnson and J M Huwe, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 39, 44-55 (2002)(1994)

## Disability advocacy groups

### Access UVic!

Disability Advocacy Centre  
SUB Main Floor B-102  
(250)-472-4389

<http://www.accessuvic.ca/contact-access-uvic.html>

The purpose of Access UVic! is to lead the way to a barrier-free and fully accessible university that promotes and protects the rights and dignity of disabled students, staff and faculty.

### Resource Centre for Students with a Disability

Campus Services Building (Room 150)  
Voice and TTD: (250) 472-4947

<http://rcsd.uvic.ca/>

Services include: adaptive technology, arranging accommodations and alternate exams, general guidelines for accommodations, note-taking assistance, parking permits.

### Engaging Disability

(250) 721 6297

<http://web.uvic.ca/disinst/contact.php>

Engaging Disability 2007 (ED) is a disability institute gathering community members, community organizations, government employees, students and university faculty to think about, discuss, learn and re-vision the meaning of disability.

## "Fight Fear"

## "Fight Distress"

## "Fight Chaos"

These taglines would probably resonate with any grad student because we spend so much time doing just that – fighting. Fighting the insecurity and fear that line even our most brilliant thoughts. Fighting to keep our heads above water so that distress and chaos don't consume us. These taglines could be any grad student's mantra, but they are not. They are the taglines from the latest military recruitment campaign for the Canadian Armed Forces.

So why draw parallels between the latest public relations spin of the Canadian military and the reality of being a grad student? Mostly because of something Brent, a grad student at UVic, said when I interviewed him for this article: "I was told before I went into grad school that it's supposed to be like boot camp for your mind. But for me, it's been boot camp for my emotions." Concepts like discipline, structure, leadership and even honour are not unfamiliar in grad school territory. And while we all have heroic goals when we begin, I'm sure that, in the end, many of us just want to *survive* through the completion of our degrees. In fact, when I asked Brent what his MA degree will represent for him when he finishes, he said: "it will be the culmination of a lot of hard work, but I think it will also be a testament to the fact that I went through a lot of things that I don't know a lot of people have gone through and I survived and I persevered despite all of it."

While some of Brent's challenges in grad school may resonate with many of us (e.g. feeling lost and uncertain about how to find a supervisor, apply for funding and get good grades at the graduate level), he has also experienced other kinds of challenges and gained a unique perspective through navigating grad school territory with a disabling condition. "There have been times where I've felt that I've fallen through the cracks almost – especially in my first year. I felt extremely isolated... I can remember times when I would go to class and feel outside of the conversations people were having. Other students were making plans to go out on the weekend and I wasn't a part of that. Those were lonely days. Going through that was hard because I felt like maybe there was something wrong with me – that people were uncomfortable with my appearance."

## Help on campus

### Counselling Services and Support Groups:

Room 135 / Campus Services Building  
Phone: (250) 721-8341  
[www.coun.uvic.ca](http://www.coun.uvic.ca)

Individual counselling – by appointment (50 min), drop-in (30 min, for concerns that require immediate attention), or on an emergency basis.

Counselling groups and workshops – support groups offered for a wide range of issues including: anxiety relief, depression management, stress management, thesis completion and many more. For a complete list visit [www.coun.uvic.ca/groups/index.html](http://www.coun.uvic.ca/groups/index.html)