

Graduate Students' Feeling of Needing to Sacrifice Health for Academic Responsibilities

Graduate and professional students face challenges to their overall health and wellness unique from those faced by undergraduates. In the following report, the Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) has analyzed items from the Graduate and Professional Survey (GPSS) in order to understand to what extent graduate students feel they need to sacrifice their health for their academics, and the factors that drive them to feel this way.

Methods

Data Source

The [UCLA Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey \(GPSS\)](#) was developed to assess Student Affairs-related issues among graduate and professional students. It is administered every three years. The information collected via this survey provides those serving graduate and professional students valuable data about the population and how to best serve their unique needs. The survey requests information on wellness, campus climate, interactions with others, academic progress and skills, and use of time and resources, among other topics. The findings in this report represent data collected during the 2020 survey administration, which occurred during the spring and summer of 2020. A total of 2,862 graduate and professional students responded to the survey, a response rate of 24%.

For the data reported in this brief, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement to the following statement: "I feel I have to sacrifice my health in order to stay on top of my academic responsibilities." Possible response options were *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree*. A total of 2,706 participants responded.

Following that item, any participant who responded *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* was asked an open-ended follow up: "You indicated that you may sacrifice your health for your academics. Please tell us more about where these pressures come from." In total, 1,288 participants provided an open-ended response to that follow-up item.

Analyses

Group differences were calculated using t-tests in most cases. To test differences in responses based on gender identity, which contained three categories (Men, Women, and non-binary [X]), a one-way ANOVA was used. Significant differences are denoted in Figure 2 using an asterisk (*). Note that all significant p-values reported below meet an alpha of $p < 0.01$. Therefore, there is no separate denotation to represent values under 0.05. Effect sizes were also calculated using Cohen's d (with the exception of the one-way ANOVA used to test group differences in gender identity; the effect size in this test was calculated using eta-squared).

In total, nine group comparisons were examined, seen at right. Definitions of groups are listed in Appendix A.

Appendix B displays the number of respondents in each group. Please note that due to the need to exclude certain participants from specific comparisons (e.g., excluding participants with an unknown race/ethnicity or gender identity from those specific analyses), the total n differs across comparisons.

Group comparisons:

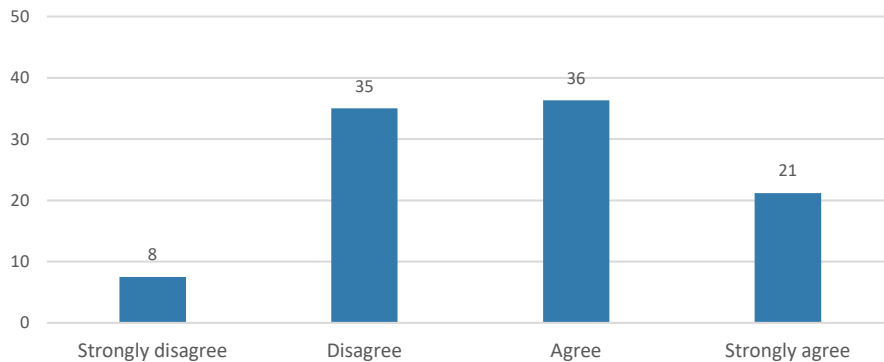
BIPOC / Non-BIPOC
 Students with / without disabilities
 First generation / Non-first generation
 Students with / without dependents
 Undocumented / Documented
 Pell grant recipients / Non-recipients
 LGBTQ+ / Heterosexual
 STEM / Non-STEM
 Men / Women / X

Overall responses

Overall, 57% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they needed to sacrifice their health in order to stay on top of their academics. A breakdown of responses is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Needing to sacrifice health to stay on top of academic responsibilities

% of respondents



Group Comparisons

Comparisons between groups are described below and shown in Figure 2. A higher mean indicates that participants tended to agree that they felt they needed to sacrifice their health for their academics.

Most groups showed a trivial effect size, meaning that group membership (e.g., BIPOC, student with dependents, etc.) had very little influence on responses, even if the statistical test was significant. Table 1 highlights any group comparisons that showed small or medium effect sizes.

The following comparisons resulted in significant differences:

- The mean response score for **BIPOC students** was higher than that of non-BIPOC students.
- The mean response score for **students with disabilities** was higher than that of students without disabilities.
- The mean response score for **first-generation students** was higher than that of non-first-generation students.
- The mean response score for **LGBTQ+ students** was higher than that of heterosexual students.
- The mean response score for **non-binary (X) students** was higher than that of both men and women. The mean response score for **women** was also higher than that of men¹.

¹ A post-hoc Tukey test showed that differences between each group (men, women, X) were significant

Figure 2. Group response means
 Mean response value by group

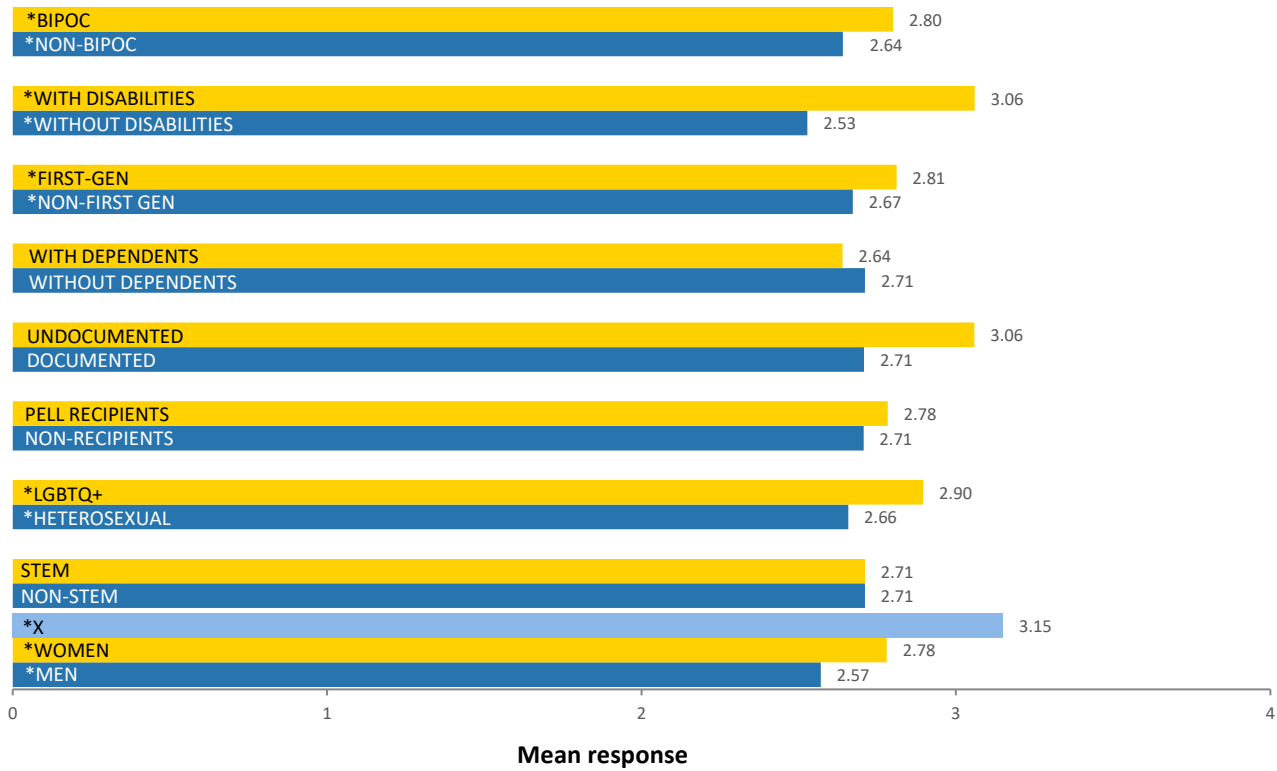


Table 1 displays all group mean values, p-values, and effect sizes. A yellow box indicates a significant group difference or medium-to-large effect size (defined as >0.2 and >0.5, respectively).

Table 1. Group comparisons

Statistics of group differences

Group	Mean	Significance	Effect size
BIPOC	2.80	<0.001	0.189
Non-BIPOC	2.64		
Students with disabilities	3.06	<0.001	-0.633
Students without disabilities	2.53		
First-generation students	2.81	<0.001	0.159
Non-first-generation students	2.67		
Students with dependents	2.64	0.194	0.082
Students without dependents	2.71		
Undocumented students	3.06	0.102	0.398
Documented students	2.71		
Pell grant recipients	2.78	0.335	-0.087
Pell grant non-recipients	2.71		
LGBTQ+	2.90	<0.001	0.274
Heterosexual	2.66		
STEM	2.71	0.886	0.006
Non-STEM	2.71		
Gender nonconforming	3.15		
Women	2.78	<0.001	0.02
Men	2.57		

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Sources of pressure

Survey participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they needed to sacrifice their health for their academics were asked an open-ended follow-up question about where these pressures originated. Fifty-seven percent of respondents indicated agreement, and of those 1,555 who were presented with the option to provide additional context, 1283 (83%) chose to do so.

In their responses², in addition to indicating the sources of pressure, students highlighted specific areas of their health that they felt suffered, which included the following:

- Diet
- Sleep
- Mental health
- Exercise
- Other aspects of physical health
- Social life

“I feel mostly behind on my research. Everything is new and I am always at the bottom of the learning curve. I believe I've made a lot of progress so far, but it is never ending and during my whole academic life, it has been rare to take a weekend off of work. I've had to sacrifice sleep, and time that I would take care of myself, like exercise or cooking, so I could fulfill my deadlines.”

“Shortage of time to cook healthy food and eat meals that aren't quick/on the go to classes and homework. Additionally, there's a severe lack of healthy food options on campus.”

“Course workloads can often be overwhelming, especially when trying to balance responsibilities of work, especially as a teaching assistant. Additionally, the stress of the above combined with persistent financial insecurity contribute to immense anxiety, which disrupts my ability to concentrate or fall or stay asleep. I'm always tired. I frequently can't afford basic necessities or food and regularly have to skip meals.”

“The pressure to perform in my lab and to make progress often leads me to prioritize my work over a healthy sleeping routine, eating planned and healthy meals, and exercise. This is in part due to the work load of my research, and in part due to the level of independence I have, which requires me to plan out experiments that I don't have much experience doing and therefore tend not to do most efficiently. I often find myself in lab having to figure out what I need to get done in that day, going from one task to the next. I rarely finish my work for the day by the time I wanted to be done.”

Students' explanations as to where they felt pressure on them came from are presented below.

Time and workload (728 responses; 57% of total)

Lack of time, heavy workloads, deadlines, and other scheduling issues, such a long days on campus, was overwhelmingly cited as the main reason students felt they needed to sacrifice their health.

“With how much homework I have, and the need to work in order to afford life in LA, it is hard to have time for myself, and time to sleep when there are so many things on my plate.”

“When you have to take 12 units of classes and teach 50% FTE, there just isn't enough time to sleep or do things to take care of yourself. I just feel extremely burnt out by the end of the quarter.”

“These pressures come from everywhere. Classes, teachers, professional guests, the barrage of emails and 'opportunities' and social events that are practically necessary for my work. Contests and competitions and teaching and interning and writing not only for school but for jobs and extracurriculars...the demands for my time, attention and care are seemingly endless.”

² Responses have been lightly edited for typos and mechanics. Some responses shown are excerpts of a longer paragraph.

In particular, several students highlighted the **quarter system** as a source of pressure, given its compressed timeline and lack of breaks, particularly for TAs responsible for grading.

“The quarter system. I need to have multiple jobs in order to live here while in grad school. Doing three or four jobs while taking classes and teaching is exhausting, esp. on this calendar but it is the only way I can afford rent. This plus the fact that the quarter system offers no breaks for grad students (since we are always working on papers/grading during the break windows) is very destructive and the quarter system is illogical.”

“The quarter system is brutal and it feels like once you fall behind you'll never catch up. By the time feedback is given it's too late to drop the course and there is a lot of pressure on the final.”

Expectations (458 responses; 36% of total)

Students also felt pressure due to the expectations they perceived to be on them. Expectations came from a number of sources:

Themselves

“My way of coping is by overworking, even though I may need to take a mental health break. These pressures usually come from my own self.”

“From myself. I always have the feeling that I'm not intelligent/good enough and that I don't deserve to be at UCLA. I put a lot on pressure on myself.”

Family

“When you come from a low-income, disadvantaged background you always give up your health for academics. For those of us who have chosen the path of higher education, we see this as our “way out” of poverty as the answer to all the problems our parents/guardians had to endure... A lot of us are not only fighting for our future but for the futures of our loved ones like our parents, brothers and sisters. We feel like we not only owe it to ourselves but we also owe it to them.”

“It's a lot and lot of pressure. I come from India and have a large amount of student loans on my head. I need to repay that with 10% interest per year and my family is not so financially stable. So there is a lot on me at present. So most of the time I don't have time to exercise, I slept on average 4-5 hours the entire quarter.”

Faculty and departments

“The architecture department doesn't really give you sympathy. All nighters are almost encouraged - the assumption is that you're obsessed with your project. There were many times that I didn't eat enough or sleep enough or exercise enough because I was working on school. I lost 7 pounds my first year in the architecture program.”

“PhD advisors have far too much power. Without a guaranteed funding source and guaranteed graduation date, we have to do everything our advisors ask or risk losing funds and the possibility of a 7+ year PhD.”

The school or academia

“While institutional messages continuously push students to progress, they do not address the concerns raised by graduate students about pay and true access to the time it takes to complete a dissertation. This conflicting set of messages can interrupt a sense of calmness and joy in the writing process, especially as a number of different sources send emails, messages, and surveys to graduate students at random and unpredictable times. It often feels as though we are beholden to multiple invisible bosses or figures of authority, and any one of them could swoop in and interrupt what would otherwise be a good writing day with institutional requests, advisorial demands, TA duties that go beyond the call of the job, and departmental requests for 'proof of progress.'”

“I'm a graduate student. Being in academia inherently implies that you're supposed to sacrifice your mental health for the sake of doing more research and working more.”

The job market

“There is a general pressure from academia and the job market that if you aren't constantly working and producing research, you will not have your efforts paid off once you leave UCLA.”

“There is enormous pressure in the MBA program to do well in order to get a job after graduation. I never imagined how difficult it would be to get an internship or graduate with a job from UCLA compared to how I perceived it would be when I chose the program. Since I have sacrificed all of my life savings, my wife sacrificed her career, and I gave up a promising and stable job to come to UCLA Anderson, I feel enormous pressure to succeed. Sacrificing mental health in the short term is not what I want nor anticipated to be necessary to succeed, but I have sacrificed so much else to be here that sacrificing mental health in the short term is worth it if I can get the type of job that I came here for.”

Financial concerns (217 responses; 17% of total)

Students' financial situations placed additional strain on them due to the time spent working for pay instead of on academics, long commutes to bring down the cost of living, and the stress associated with the financial burden of graduate school.

“Spending long hours commuting because I cannot afford to live near campus has impacted my physical health enormously. I rarely have time to exercise and cook healthy meals. The financial insecurity that we are expected to bear is killing me. Why can't we be given a cost of living adjustment?”

“The financial strain of being a graduate student who has to pay upward of 80% of their income back to UCLA in rent makes it so that I don't have enough money to afford three meals a day.”

“The pressure on graduate students to publish, present at conferences, attend academic field schools and workshops, and cultivate a CV on par with those of salaried and tenured/tenure-track faculty members is enormous. And these activities are highly costly. Living in LA on a graduate student budget, plus having to absorb the financial costs of building a scholarly career, is a significant and enduring challenge for nearly everyone I know at UCLA.”

“A full academic workload (doctoral), combined with teaching responsibilities, does not provide enough income to survive in Los Angeles, particularly when one has dependents. I take extra jobs very often, leading to very late nights working, less sleep, and very little time for hobbies, or things that would help mental health.”

Lack of support (126 responses; 10% of total)

Graduate students who felt they needed to sacrifice their health often did so because of what they perceived as a lack of support from faculty or UCLA. Some complained that while the university claimed to prioritize students' well-being, its policies and actions did not support its intentions.

“There are very few spaces on campus that promote health above academics not just through words but also through practice... just because you talk honestly about [health] doesn't mean the institution has changed policy to support those values.”

“The fact that UCLA does not pay graduate students enough to live in Los Angeles, the university accepts PhD students and then does not fund their research, there have been no time to degree or funding extensions related to COVID-19, no support for students who cannot pay rent, no support for parenting students, very little work from home support (truly nothing that has made a material difference), and the UC refuses to return fees to undergraduate and fee-paying graduate students who are unable to access any of the resources that they are paying for. UCLA pressures anyone who wants to pursue a graduate degree to sacrifice their health for academics.”

“I don't feel that my advisor or department is comfortable dealing with mental health issues or looking into how they might be causing/exacerbating these issues. I hide that I go to a therapist every week. For physical issues, I'm on my own, to – my work is never flexible in a way that can accommodate migraines, for instance. I don't have an office or cubicle; for relative privacy and escape from light and noise I have the hallway, the bathroom or my car.”

“Professors/research advisors have no accountability and as a result can treat their students very poorly. Expectations are too high to live a life without mental health problems and it's often difficult to prioritize physical health when there isn't enough time in the day to exercise/cook healthy meals. Additionally, research advisors can hurt student progress by making up reasons to hold them back. There are no real guidelines to get a PhD so advisors can just make you do whatever they want and hold your degree over your head. Everyone in my lab is suffering, and there's nothing we can do about it.”

“The pressure **does not** come from my advisor, my advisor is amazing and is happy to help and be accommodating as needed. The problem is that the school elevates labs and students that **do** sacrifice their health and well-being and reward them... The school LOVES labs that work their students dry, and then gaslight you by saying 'we care.'”

Comparison and competition with peers (105 responses; 8% of total)

Peer pressure, competition, and comparison to peers was another source of stress for graduate students. For some, the feeling of comparison was made more acute when combined with other sources of pressure; for example, students with other external responsibilities or financial hardships felt they needed to push themselves in order to feel on the same level as their peers.

“You are constantly being compared to other graduates' work, and thus the pressure to be better leads to long nights of work, with sometimes no sleep.”

“These pressures come from financial burdens. Having to leave campus and work full-time has made me feel the pressure of not following the same pathway as other students.”

Evaluations (104 responses; 8% of total)

Keeping up grades and working towards other evaluations, such as board exams or patient evaluations, led students to sacrifice their own health.

“Everyone touts that 'grades don't matter' yet everyone cares.”

“Would often skip meals during my clinical rotations because there was too much work to do, patients needed me, needed to prepare for a presentation, needed to go the extra mile to get good evaluations.”

“Tough curves on exams that constitute up to 100% of my grades.”

Existing health conditions (35 responses; 3% of total)

In addition to one-off sicknesses, some students said that they felt they had to neglect chronic or already-existing health problems in order to manage their academics.

“During the last academic year (Winter) I almost took a leave of absence but felt that I couldn't at the time. Sometimes I regret it. I felt that my professors/advisors may have thought that I was just trying to take a medical leave of absence because I was unprepared and unable to make a deadline. I didn't want them to think of me in that way so I didn't take the medical leave of absence, but really felt that I needed it.”

“Every day is a battle against my chronic illness. I do not feel like I have the right to ask for accommodations (extensions, etc) because the quarter is so packed as it is. Every single week of the academic terms I have pushed myself past my physical (and often mental) limits in order to succeed in my classes, internships, work, etc. I don't get enough sleep, I don't get enough time to do the gentle exercises that help manage the pain. This vicious cycle often leads to extreme flare-ups that leave me all but bedridden - but I feel like I have to push through those too. I push myself until I achieve total and complete burnout. I don't know that there is any other way to succeed in this program without sacrificing my health.”

Isolated events (22 responses; 2% of total)

A smaller number of respondents described situations in which they felt unable to care for themselves during unexpected illnesses or family emergencies. Like the examples above, these isolated events were cited as occurrences that exacerbated already-existing hardships. For example, illnesses, family deaths, and other events were made more complicated due to lack of support from faculty.

“You don't get to stop. Professors won't accommodate if you get sick and many will only allow for retakes if you submit a doctor's note before the test day, so sucks if you get sick day of.”

“When one of my family members unexpectedly passed away in a tragic incident summer 2019, my critical care professor was not very helpful nor sensitive to my situation... When I asked her what she recommended I do regarding attending my family member's funeral services; to attend or miss clinicals for her class, she rudely dismissed me, telling me there was nothing she could do and directed me to the coordinator... When I notified the faculty that I would be attending the services (therefore missing clinicals), I received an email from my critical care instructor on the day of the viewing recommending me to STRONGLY reconsider attending the services as I could risk not being able to make up my days. Not only was this a huge source of stress to deal with while trying to coordinate an unexpected death funeral service, I was given no extra support or outreach. Furthermore, I still had to make up the two days during a very heavy week with major assignment and exams due. I really had to put my mental health and healing process to the side in order to successfully complete the quarter on my own. I did not have a chance to process everything correctly and in a timely manner.”

COVID-19 (64 responses; 5% of total)

Finally, COVID-19 took an additional toll on the physical and mental health of a number of respondents, increasing feelings of anxiety and creating a barrier to sources of help that would have otherwise been available to them.

“I am a working professional, I have kids and a family to support. In order for me to keep on top of my academics, I have really forgone my typical fitness routine... I don't have family available to help me, and this COVID-19 situation has really made things more challenging. The little help I once had, well, I work in health care and often visit clinics so I do not want to put anyone at risk of possible exposure.”

“Some professors used COVID-19 quarantine to increase the number of assignments, quizzes, etc. This has caused me to choose between doing well in school or getting a few hours exercise every few days.”

Appendix A: Group Comparisons and Definitions

BIPOC / Non-BIPOC

For this analysis, BIPOC includes students who identified as American Indian or Alaskan native, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, or two or more races. Non-BIPOC was defined as students who identified as white, as well as international students. Students whose race/ethnicity was unknown were excluded from this specific comparison.

Students with disabilities / Students without disabilities

Students with disabilities includes any participant who indicated they had at least one of the following disabilities: physical, learning, cognitive, mental, or other.

First-generation / Non-first-generation

First-gen students are defined here as those for whom neither parent completed a four-year degree.

Students with dependents / Students without dependents

Students who indicated on their FAFSA (if they completed one) or on the survey itself that they had one or more dependents age 0-17.

Undocumented / Documented

Undocumented students are defined as those students not holding current, valid visa documentation for the US, and those students on DACA status. .

Pell grant recipients / Non-recipients

Pell grant recipients were those who indicated that they have ever received a Pell grant to fund their education.

LGBTQ+ / Heterosexual

LGBTQ+ students are defined as anyone who identified as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual.

STEM / Non-STEM

STEM students are defined as those from the following schools or departments: Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, David Geffen School of Medicine, Henry Samueli School of Engineering and Applied Science, Jonathan and Karin Fielding School of Public Health, Basic Biomedical Sciences (Life Science), Basic Biomedical Sciences (Medicine), School of Dentistry, and School of Nursing.

Men / Women / Non-binary (X)

Participants were asked to self-report their gender identity. For the purpose of this analysis, gender has been collapsed into three categories: men, women, and non-binary (X). “Non-binary (X)” also includes trans men and trans women. Participants who declined to state a gender identity were excluded from this specific comparison.

Appendix B: Participant overview

Number of participants in each comparison group

Analysis	N (%)		
Race/ethnicity	BIPOC		Non-BIPOC
	1115 (44%)		1399 (56%)
Disability status	Has disability(ies)		No disability
	793 (35%)		1494 (65%)
First-gen status	First-gen		Non-first-gen
	704 (29%)		1698 (71%)
Dependent status	Has dependent(s)		No dependents
	288 (13%)		1925 (87%)
Documentation status	Undocumented		Documented
	17 (1%)		2589 (99%)
Pell status	Pell recipient		Non-recipient
	129 (5%)		2477 (95%)
Field	STEM		Non-STEM
	1229 (45%)		1477 (55%)
Sexual orientation	LGBTQ+		Heterosexual
	529 (23%)		1786 (77%)
Gender	Male	Female	X
	936 (39%)	1385 (58%)	53 (2%)