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STUDENT LIFE

How Has the Pandemic Affected Graduate Students? This Study Has Answers

By *Megan Zahneis and Audrey Williams June*

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"The graduate school culture feels so toxic."

"I've already lost over 3 months' time worth of research."

"I may have to delay my degree to care/provide educational support for my children."

"I have never felt so depressed, anxious, and inadequate."

"The feelings of being useless and left out...are even worse in times like these."

ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

The pandemic has posed a [unique set of challenges](#) for graduate students, who find themselves navigating a new educational environment as both students and instructors. Now, a new study quantifies just what those challenges are.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the study asked more than 4,000 graduate students at 11 institutions — including one historically Black college and two Hispanic-serving institutions — across the country about their experiences with the pandemic. That large sample size makes it one of the most comprehensive surveys of graduate-student experiences of Covid-19 to date. The team of eight researchers at four institutions (none of which was in the survey) provided a preliminary report of their findings to *The Chronicle*. (They said they planned to expand the report and submit it for peer review.) Here's what they found.

Concerns About Food and Housing

For some graduate students, it was “often true” or “sometimes true” that they worried about having housing or enough food to eat during the pandemic.

I worried about having secure housing options.	25%
I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.	24%
The food I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more.	12%

About a quarter of the respondents indicated they'd experienced at least some food insecurity, and the same proportion said they'd struggled with housing insecurity. For many, that uncertainty stemmed from not knowing whether their institution would reopen in the fall, or whether they'd be able to get out of their leases. In open-ended comments, many students wrote that their institutions had set up food pantries, which they found helpful, said Rachel A. Smith, an assistant professor of higher education and student affairs at Iowa State University and a member of the research team.

That same engagement was reflected in students' submissions to the open-answer field at the end of the survey, which asked them to write "anything else you would like to share with us related to your experience of graduate education over the past several months." Such a field, Smith said, is often "kind of a throwaway — students who fill out surveys often skip them or are ready to move on. But we got a lot of students sharing their words and perspectives and stories and real trauma in their situations."

"I feel like I have no support from my adviser or institution," one student wrote. "The graduate-school culture feels so toxic that even my peers and I have trouble admitting to each other that we are struggling with productivity because there is so much guilt and anxiety."

Another wrote: "The feelings of being useless and left out, that are already so common and unbearable for graduate students, are even worse in times like these."

For Smith, the written responses highlighted the range of responsibilities graduate students face, even under normal circumstances, and how the stress of those roles grew in the throes of a global pandemic. "They were caring for undergraduates as TAs. They were trying to continue working with faculty on their research,. They were trying to continue their own research. They were trying to deal with their own families," Smith said. The "disparate impacts" of each of those areas, she said, often amounted to respondents' "feeling like maybe no single entity was kind of recognizing that intersection."

What can institutions do to ease that burden? The team offered a number of suggestions in its preliminary report. They included making financial support, for food, housing, and degree extensions, easily accessible; more deliberately considering graduate students in institutional policy and communication; and emphasizing the importance of health and well-being in messaging. Career services, too, are an important focus as students express more pessimism about future employment.

Mental Health at Risk

Struggling to maintain productivity during a public-health crisis and a time of social unrest had a negative effect on some graduate students' mental health.

Low well-being	67%
Moderate or higher levels of depression	35%
Moderate or higher levels of anxiety	33%
Symptoms consistent with PTSD diagnosis	31%

Chart: Audrey Williams, June

More than two-thirds of the graduate students reported low well-being, as measured by the World Health Organization's [five-point index](#), while about a third said they'd experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression. And 31 percent reported they'd had symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

It's important to note, Smith said, that the results don't indicate whether those feelings had been caused by the pandemic. Students were asked to complete the survey, which asked them to reflect on the previous two weeks to one month, during June and July — at the height of national conversations about race in the wake of George Floyd's death, and during the period in which the Trump administration announced, then rescinded, a [visa policy](#) that would have forced international students to enroll in in-person classes this fall or leave the country.

Because the research team used validated survey instruments, they couldn't be modified to more specifically identify the cause of the graduate students' mental-health issues. "We can't always isolate the effects of one particular event because people are complicated, and they're living in context," Smith said, but even so, "these levels are certainly concerning, and they definitely warrant institutional resources and support for students."

Those negative feelings were, in some cases, exacerbated by students' perceptions of how their institutions were communicating with them during the pandemic, said the

Some of those suggestions may seem like a tall order for institutions already strapped for cash, and time, in their responses to the pandemic. Ogilvie acknowledged that, but said he saw “two scales” of change university administrators could make. On a larger scale, extended funding can make a difference for students, “but it just may be that that administrative change could make a big difference in people’s lives,” too.

Ogilvie said he hopes his team’s data will compel his colleagues in administration to offer more support to grad students. While their findings match anecdotal reports, from individual students’ accounts of the pandemic as well as [collective action](#) by graduate-student unions, raw numbers can provide a different sort of jolt.

“As university leaders,” he said, “sometimes numbers cause us to almost turn and go, ‘OK, well, I thought there might be something there, but that is bigger than I expected.’”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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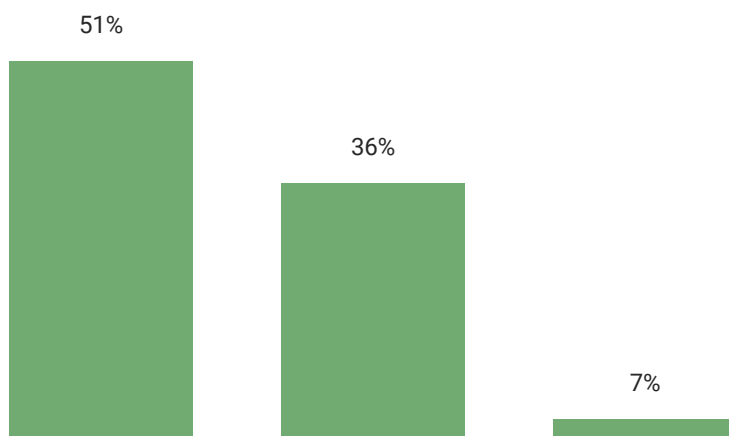


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project's principal investigator, Craig Ogilvie, dean of the graduate school and associate vice president for research at Montana State University at Bozeman. The focus of some institutions' messaging, Ogilvie said, was on degree completion, "which is received from several of the student respondents as 'Does the university really care about my health?'"

Delays in Degree Completion

One out of four graduate students said they thought it would take them longer to complete their degrees. Here's how much more time they expected to need:



One in four graduate-student respondents said they expected it would take longer to complete their degrees — most said they would need another six months to a year — and 14 percent were not sure whether they'd need to adjust their degree timeline. More women than men said they'd extended their timeline.

A Change in Plans

Some graduate students, 17 percent of them on average, said their career plans had changed since the pandemic began. The humanities was the discipline with the largest share of students making a shift.

Field of study	Percentage of students whose career plans changed
Humanities	25
Social and behavioral sciences	18
Computer sciences and engineering	17
Natural sciences and mathematics	16
Business	15
Education	15

Seventeen percent of respondents said their career plans had changed since the pandemic began. That sentiment was most frequently expressed by humanities students, 25 percent of whom indicated they'd changed plans. Humanities students were also most likely to express pessimism about the conditions for pursuing their career goals after graduating, which they did at an average rate of 55 percent, compared with a 29-percent average across all disciplines. The study's findings do not predict whether the stresses on graduate students will have a long-term impact on graduate programs.

Sharing 'Real Trauma'

There are more insights to come from the team's study: After completing the survey, respondents were asked whether they'd like to participate in a focus group to share their experiences, and thousands volunteered. Fifty-six wound up participating in 10 focus groups, and Smith and Ogilvie said many of the themes that emerged in the survey data were mirrored in those sessions.