

## Graduate students on campus: Needs and implications for college counselors

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### **Abstract:**

Graduate students compose an important segment of university and college populations. However, institutions of higher education often have not addressed adequately their status as adult students with different developmental and life issues and concerns. This article defines and describes the needs of graduate students, discusses implications, and makes recommendations for college counselors to more effectively address their range of needs.

**Keywords:** college counseling | graduate students

### **Article:**

Although graduate students compose an important segment of the university and college population, institutions of higher education often have not addressed adequately their status as adult students with different developmental and life issues and concerns. The recent explosion of online graduate programs and online or hybrid courses represents successful efforts to meet the needs of adult graduate students for educational opportunities that demand fewer sacrifices related to work, family, and other aspects of their lives. However, there is more to being a graduate student than sitting in a face-to-face or online class, and student services historically have been designed to meet the needs and interests of traditional-age undergraduate students. In this article, we define and describe the additional needs of graduate students and make recommendations for college counselors to more effectively serve this student population.

The Council of Graduate Schools found that there are approximately 1.7 million graduate students in the United States, with just under 465,000 graduate degrees awarded each year (Bell, 2011). These numbers represent a continuous increase in graduate enrollment over the past 20 years, although this trend has slowed somewhat in recent years. More specifically, enrollment increases for women have continued to rise more quickly than those for men, with approximately 57% of graduate students in 2003 being women (Syverson & Brown, 2004).

Slightly more than half (54%) of all graduate students are full-time students, with substantial differences based on the type of institution. For example, whereas 72% of graduate students at

Research I institutions are full-time students, only 43% of graduate students in master's-granting institutions attend full time. A particularly noteworthy statistic, given issues related to role overload and role strain that will be discussed later in this article, is that 69% of graduate students in public master's-granting institutions are part-time students. Regional differences also exist; for example, almost two thirds of graduate students in the Western Association of Graduate Schools are full time (Allum, 2014). Thus, the proportion of full-time and part-time students will likely vary substantially based on the type of institution and geographic area.

U.S. graduate schools also have a strong international student presence, with international students composing approximately 14% of the total graduate enrollment (Bell, 2011). Consistent with the proliferation of international students in science and engineering doctoral programs, more than 50% of non-U.S. graduate students are enrolled in Research I institutions, where they account for more than 25% of the graduate student population. One alarming trend in recent years, however, has been a decline in applications from international students, largely because of post-9/11 influences, including greater difficulties in obtaining student visas and fear of safety. International graduate students have additional concerns related to cultural adjustments, language, and becoming integrated into campus culture, yet they tend to underutilize counseling and other university services (Mori, 2000). Thus, reaching these students with appropriate student services is even more challenging than with American graduate students.

Limited racial/ethnic diversity also exists among graduate students who are U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Across all graduate schools, 25% of men and 30% of women are non-White. White students compose 72% of the graduate student population, followed by Black students at 13%, Hispanic/Latino students at 8%, Asian students at 6%, and American Indian students at 1% (Bell, 2011). The general trend in graduate student enrollment is toward increasing diversity, however, with non-White students enrolling over the past 20 years at a rate greater than that of White students. For example, Hispanic/Latino graduate student populations have increased at an average rate of 6% over the past 20 years (Syverson & Brown, 2004).

### **Graduate Student Issues**

In the not-so-distant past, graduate students were considered simply as an extension of the undergraduate population. Because they were considered to be mature, well-focused, goal-oriented, and college graduates, it was assumed that they did not need special services (Polson, 2003). Previously, the achievement orientations and high motivation levels typical of adult students (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992) may have helped to create a picture of a self-sufficient student population that required little beyond academic challenge and opportunity. This view may have been reinforced by the tendency of graduate students to wait longer before seeking help (Gallagher, 2011) because of a stigma that such help-seeking behavior may negatively affect their academic status or suitability for advancement in their fields (Caple, 1995). This view also overlooks the many traditional-age college students who enroll in graduate programs directly after completing their undergraduate degrees. They face their own unique challenges, such as continuing their identity development (Erikson, 1959) and delaying other developmental tasks (e.g., starting a career, marrying or partnering). Still, Lago and Humphreys (1999) found that 47% of students who were 25 years or older felt that not enough thought was given by their institution to the nonacademic needs of mature students.

For many graduate students, issues related to managing multiple roles create additional stress during their college experience (Hansen, 1999; Mazumdar, Gogoi, Buragohain, & Haloi, 2012). Common responses include feelings of insecurity, decreased self-esteem, increased workload (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007), and increased levels of stress and anxiety (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Mazumdar et al., 2012). Kasworm (2003) noted the importance of creating “collegiate institutions and student services that support learning situated within complex adult lives” (p. 9). Fairchild (2003) characterized adult students’ “palette of life experience [as being] colored with older age, full-time employment, and the roles of spouse and parent” (p. 11). More than any other single consideration, challenges related to managing multiple, and often competing, roles, responsibilities, and expectations may be the most universal and defining characteristic of graduate student life.

The role strain of women in graduate studies has received particular attention from researchers and scholars. Role strain is defined as “the stress or strain experienced by an individual when incompatible behavior, expectations, or obligations are associated with a single social role” (“Role Strain,” n.d.). Home (1998) reported three dimensions of role strain among women: role conflict from simultaneous, incompatible demands; role overload, or inadequate time to meet all demands; and role contagion, or the tendency to be preoccupied with one role while engaged in another. Female graduate students have consistently been a high-risk group because they tend to experience more negative life events, greater symptoms of depression and anxiety, less support from and fewer relationships with other students, decreased communication and cohesion within their family, and decreased financial resources and leisure quality (Lynch, 2008; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Older female graduate students, in particular, typically add the student role on top of a set of established roles and may be at particular risk for stress-related mental and physical health difficulties (Anderson & Mieztis, 1999; Lynch, 2008). Moreover, cultural variables may have an influence over the amount of time a female graduate student can spend in various roles (Leyva, 2011).

The complex lives and needs of graduate students warrant special attention by college counselors and student affairs staff in colleges and universities. Understanding the challenges many graduate students must confront is one important aspect of meeting their needs. Assessing the needs of graduate student populations on individual campuses is a next step that should lead to interventions and services that can improve the academic experience for these students. In the following sections, we discuss ways for college counselors to better assess and address the needs of their graduate students.

## **Assessing and Addressing Graduate Student Needs**

### **Development Perspectives**

Even the youngest graduate students are typically at least 22 years old, and frequently considerably older than that, sometimes even past traditional retirement age. Most commonly, graduate students in many fields are in their 20s and 30s preparing for advancement in their chosen careers. However, as people increasingly have multiple careers during their working lifetimes, increasing numbers of graduate students may be older students (in their 30s, 40s, 50s,

and beyond) returning to school to prepare for a new career. Thus, although traditional-age college students are in a developmental period of late adolescence transitioning to early adulthood, most graduate students are adults, many of them in the midlife stage of life. This difference in age, and accompanying differences in developmental challenges, can have significant implications for the counseling process and relationship.

Compared with traditional-age students, graduate students “are in a different place in life and view the world and their future differently” (Kasworm, 2003, p. 9). Although numerous developmental theories can be applied to adult graduate students, the work of Erikson, Chickering, and Perry provides important and relevant theoretical foundations for counseling graduate students. From an Eriksonian perspective (Erikson, 1959), graduate students are less likely to be dealing with major identity issues that are the primary developmental focus for younger, traditional-age undergraduate students. Instead, they are often struggling with issues related to intimacy and generativity. Intimacy issues include developing meaningful and lasting relationships with family, friends, and significant others. Generativity issues, which are more characteristic of graduate students in their mid-30s through 50s, include concerns about giving back to society; a decreased focus on individual achievement; and greater attention to family and community, parenting, and the mentoring and development of younger colleagues or members of the community. Relatively healthy graduate students will have resolved many of the key issues around identity and will be able to take on these subsequent developmental challenges during graduate school. In fact, these developmental issues can be an impetus for individuals to decide to return to school for graduate study.

Based on Erikson's (1959) identity and intimacy stages, Chickering's developmental vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) were originally proposed as a way of understanding and intentionally fostering the development of traditional-age college students. Beyond this, however, Chickering consistently argued for development (including adult development) as the “unifying purpose or idea for higher education—that direct attention to life cycle concerns and aspects of personal growth can restore a sense of coherence and direction to our efforts” (Chickering & Associates, 1981, p. 7) on college and university campuses. Moreover, Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested that individuals can recycle through the seven vectors as they confront new situations and challenges in their lives. This developmental recycling may occur when adult students return to campus for graduate work. Typically, graduate study involves a somewhat different approach to learning and somewhat different expectations than are characteristic of undergraduate programs. For example, adult students may recycle through issues of competency (e.g., academic, social) and interdependence (in particular), as well as general issues related to integrating being a graduate student into their individual identities. Because they are usually just revisiting these issues (having more or less resolved them earlier in their lives), graduate students can move through these vectors much more quickly than they did as undergraduates. For some students, dealing with their feelings about being back in school and learning how to learn at the graduate level can lead them to seek out counseling or other support services on campus. Younger graduate students, recently graduated from undergraduate programs, may struggle more with different expectations for learning, thinking, and self-direction at the graduate level. If these students have failed to develop cognitively beyond Perry's (1981) middle stage of relativism discovered, they may face challenges related to evaluating different positions and conflicting information, committing to positions of their own, and being able to explain and defend those positions. On the other hand, they are more likely to make a

smoother social and lifestyle transition to graduate study, because they experience this transition as being a relatively minor adjustment in these areas of cognitive development from their recent undergraduate lives. That is, they are used to being students and are still likely to have fewer complicating factors (e.g., work, family obligations) in their lives outside of school. For these younger students, then, cognitive and academic challenges may create anxieties and the need for counseling and academic services to help them to understand and manage the new expectations for them at the graduate level. In addition, approaches to studying, learning, and managing time that may have worked well enough for them in undergraduate studies may need to be reexamined and relearned for success at the graduate level.

### **Mental Health Perspectives**

Counselors working in college and university counseling centers are likely seeing more and more graduate students as clients. One reason for this is the increased number of more severe mental health problems that have been appearing on college campuses across all ages and student populations (Gallagher, 2011; Kitzrow, 2009). Some traditional-age college students who currently have significant mental health issues will return to campus as graduate students still dealing with significant issues. In addition, the increasing social acceptance of counseling as a service that can be helpful for people struggling with developmental and life issues, not just those with serious mental illness, encourages more students of all ages to seek out counseling services on campus. Moreover, the complex lives that many graduate students lead can create or exacerbate problems in relationships; stress levels and coping behaviors; career and educational plans; and, in some cases, preexisting emotional conditions, such as depression and anxiety.

In a survey of more than 3,000 graduate students, almost half reported experiencing stress-related problems during the previous year (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006). Furthermore, more than half of those respondents indicated that they knew a graduate student peer who had experienced stress-related problems. In addition, 46% reported feeling overwhelmed “frequently” or “all of the time.” In the coming years, a substantial number of graduate students will likely be military veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, many of whom will bring their own psychological issues created or exacerbated by their combat experiences (Seal, Bertenthal, Miner, Sen, & Marmar, 2007).

### **International Students**

International graduate students present some special challenges regarding both developing appropriate programs and services and actually reaching these students with services. In a survey of about 550 international graduate students, approximately 44% reported that they had experienced an emotional problem that significantly affected their well-being, academic endeavors, or both (Hyun et al., 2007). Results from a study by Yoon and Jepsen (2008) indicated that international graduate students had greater discomfort with counseling than did U.S. graduate students. Given this reluctance, college counselors may need to develop creative outreach strategies for these students by working together with institutions' international or multicultural program offices. Examples of these collaborative efforts include support groups and programming on relevant issues, such as adjusting to the American education system, how to interact with professors, social considerations on campus, and meeting and forming relationships

with American students. Groups, primarily support groups, can be one effective way to work with these students, especially because international students from Asian and Hispanic/Latino cultures tend to have more of a collective focus than an individual orientation. In addition, psychoeducational programs might be appropriate for these students, who may prefer a more directive style of counseling compared with U.S. students (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008).

### **Needs Assessment**

A contextual approach to assessing the needs of graduate students is critical to potential success in working with them. Thus, a first step may be to conduct a campus-wide needs assessment of graduate students. Such a needs assessment should encompass a survey of the types of mental health issues with which students are struggling to inform the development of counseling and support groups. It is important that needs assessments include multiple methods of data collection. For example, a survey distributed to all graduate students may provide an initial broad picture of the counseling needs of graduate students. Focus groups or individual interviews then can be used to provide a more in-depth perspective of the needs of graduate students, including identifying specific needs of different graduate student subgroups. Alternatively, forming focus groups initially to collect information may inform the types of information that can be collected through a campus survey of graduate students.

In addition to a campus-wide needs assessment, it is important to assess fully the needs of individual students who present for counseling. Although the assessment protocol may generally be the same as that used for undergraduate students, it is particularly important to assess role strain issues. On the basis of the initial request for services and early disclosure by the clients, the following questions are examples of useful questions to assess role strain:

1. How would you describe your energy level?
2. To what extent are you able to manage all the responsibilities in your life?
3. How are you able to be fully present in whatever you are doing (e.g., avoid thinking about school when you are with your family, avoid thinking about family when you are at school)?
4. What have you had to give up, or cut back on, since returning to school?
5. How do significant others in your life feel about you being in graduate school? In what ways do they show their support or provide assistance?
6. What is the hardest part of being a graduate student? How is this experience different from your undergraduate experience?

### **Graduate Student Expectations for College Counseling Services**

Overall, adults who return to school have much more of a consumer orientation toward their educational experiences. As Hadfield (2003) stated, "Make no mistake: Colleges and universities that serve adult learners are in the business of providing customer service" (p. 19). Adult graduate students are more likely to be paying for their education themselves (or incurring educational loans that they will be obligated to repay later), have a greater sense of purpose in their study, and expect graduate study to help them reach life and career goals. When these students come in for counseling, they are more likely to be taking time away from their other life responsibilities (e.g., family, work) to make the time for a counseling session. Thus, they are

more likely to have specific needs and goals for counseling that they expect to have met in return for their investment of time and money. In counseling, then, these adult clients will expect counselors to be responsive to the issues they present, resourceful in helping them address these issues, and knowledgeable about adult development and campus and community resources that may provide additional services. Furthermore, they are more likely than younger students to want more collegial, less hierarchical relationships with their counselors (and with their professors). As adults, they are used to being treated accordingly, and being a client does not necessarily change that expectation. Counselors who are patronizing, inadequately informed, or overly directive may have difficulties relating successfully to many graduate students.

On the other hand, graduate students are more likely to be at levels of cognitive development that match college counselors' ways of thinking and relating to the world. This offers counselors opportunities to engage these clients and help them move toward change using a wider variety of counseling strategies and interventions. Many adults struggle not only with practical issues but also with more existential issues that relate to searching for meaning and creating experiences, careers, and lives that are meaningful for them and contribute significantly to life satisfaction.

College counselors also need to understand that many graduate students sacrifice income, family time, social activities, and relationships when they return to school for graduate study. These necessary sacrifices can create voids in students' lives that cause or aggravate problems in these life areas, especially with family and friends. College counselors need to be particularly attentive to understanding the context of these students' lives and the unique sacrifices they must make to get a graduate education. Presenting issues of time management or stress often have their sources in deeper life issues and struggles with balancing competing demands for time and energy.

### **Counseling and Support Groups**

Counseling groups can be a viable option for graduate students. Group counseling can allow students to share issues with others who are dealing with similar issues, thereby fostering both universality (i.e., a sense that their problems are also experienced by others) and social connections with other graduate students on campus. Groups can be led by college counselors or set up as support groups, with group members ultimately taking responsibility for the groups. In either case, one significant challenge is how to advertise these groups effectively to graduate students (i.e., to find ways to reach them with the information) and to offer them at times that these students are on campus. Shorter workshops and programs for graduate students that can stand alone as information sessions may offer greater opportunities to reach graduate students with limited time on campus. In addition, these brief programs can serve to introduce graduate students to the possibility of participating in counseling or support groups around common issues, such as maintaining relationships; family and parenting issues; balancing school, work, and home; and time management. Including significant others, such as partners or spouses, may allow college counselors to reach deeper into students' lives outside of school and actively involve those people who are most affected by challenges inherent in the graduate school experience.

### **Technology Challenge and Opportunities**

Advances in the use of technology on campuses, particularly instructional technology, can be intimidating for some graduate students and welcomed by others. Younger graduate students in particular (but also many graduate students in their mid-20s to mid-30s) are likely to be comfortable with many types of technology used in and outside of the classroom. Although computers have been infused into the fabric of American society for more than 20 years, the explosion in the use of (and familiarity with) the Internet over the past decade has, in many ways, transformed teaching and learning, perhaps more so in some disciplines than in others. In fact, few aspects of higher education have been untouched by the vast capabilities of the Internet. Increasingly, graduate students expect to experience technology integrated into all aspects of their college experience because they are more likely to be used to and comfortable with using e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, and the web in their daily lives. Many graduate students relate well to technology and depend on it in their personal lives, making it an effective and efficient way of connecting information and knowledge to their daily experiences.

Graduate students who have been away from school for more than several years may need help with learning the necessary skills and competencies to use the Internet for research and communication purposes. Although e-mail has become an integral part of many people's lives, older graduate students may not be used to relatively newer technologies, such as electronic mailing lists, instant messaging, chat rooms, and online learning platforms. The advance of highly integrated teaching platforms (e.g., Blackboard) and the increased use of Web 2.0 technologies allow for such nontraditional learning approaches as online discussions using both asynchronous discussion boards (for posting and responding at any time) and synchronous virtual classrooms (allowing a class to meet online in real time). This innovative (and increasingly common) use of technology in higher education may take some graduate students time to get used to, whereas others will expect it. Counselors may find these issues surfacing for some graduate students as part of their struggle to adapt to changed expectations and a changed learning environment. With some knowledge of these systems and issues, college counselors can help allay fears and anxieties of the unknown and the unfamiliar. Furthermore, being able to direct student clients with limited techno-literacy to people and resources that can help them to increase their technology skills and comfort level can be a valuable service for many adult students.

The other obvious impact of technology on colleges and universities is the vast amount of information available on an institution's website related to student services, student affairs, academic policies and procedures, calendars and forms, and most other kinds of important information. This increased availability of critical and current information in one centralized place (i.e., an institution's website) can help to address the concerns of adult graduate students who want information to be available in one central location, rather than having to physically travel from one office to another on campus to get needed information. Also, the constant availability of this information allows graduate students (as well as undergraduates and faculty) to get information they need whenever they need it. Adult students are no longer restricted to getting information and help during the often-limited business hours of campus offices. As with most websites, a key challenge is to make sure that information is kept current so that graduate students can count on it to provide them with timely and accurate information. Similar to physical resources, information on institutional websites should be comprehensive and easy to access.



Cybercounseling is another counseling approach that is becoming more widely accepted, with approved standards for the practice of online counseling from professional organizations such as the National Board for Certified Counselors (2012) and the American Counseling Association (2014). On campuses, career counseling centers may often take the lead in offering services online, providing career information, testing, and even career counseling through secure web services. Several companies exist that provide assistance to university career centers in making these kinds of services available to their students and alumni.

Similarly, providing online personal counseling to graduate students can allow busy graduate students to take advantage of counseling without having to come in to an on-campus counseling center, where scheduling, parking, and diminished privacy can all be deterrents to seeking needed mental health services. Online counseling needs to be carefully planned for and implemented, with attention paid to educating (and training) college counseling professionals (who may have significant misgivings about offering services in such a nontraditional format) and establishing secure communication systems that ensure client confidentiality and privacy. College counseling centers are also encouraged to explore the viability (and need) for offering cybercounseling to students who may be less likely to take advantage of the on-campus counseling center services (e.g., commuters, adult students).

Literature on adult students often cites the need to attract non-traditional-age students back to campus by offering activities and programs that appeal to their interests, including some that can involve their families (e.g., Benschhoff & Lewis, 1992; Hadfield, 2003; Kasworm, 2003). College counselors might consider expanding counseling services to offer family or marital counseling to graduate students and their families. A graduate student's family can be critical in his or her success and well-being while in school. Thus, working directly with family members to help the graduate student successfully negotiate issues of balancing multiple responsibilities can provide needed information and interventions to keep the student enrolled and invested in his or her graduate education.

### **Institutional Consideration and Responses**

College counselors can also serve as critical advocates for the needs of graduate students on campus, helping to create “a climate of mutuality among administrators, faculty, and students as partners in the activities of inquiry and discovery” (Hadfield, 2003, p. 21). Like most institutions, colleges and universities can be slow to recognize and respond to changing student populations on campus. For example, even though adults can make up more than 60% of students on many campuses (Fairchild, 2003), college life in many ways continues to be centered on the needs of traditional-age college students. Failure to update programs and services to make them relevant and appealing to adult graduate students decreases the potential use of student and academic services by older students who either are unaware that services exist or are unable to take advantage of these services at the times they are offered. Not only may graduate students pay for services that they underutilize, but without some of those services, these students may run into hurdles that will adversely affect their educational efforts, goals, and experiences.

Polson (2003) stated that having adult graduate students on campus challenges colleges and universities to change, including the need to rethink and restructure student services. She

presented a number of areas that can be addressed by colleges and universities, including (a) role socialization needs of graduate students; (b) orientation programs specifically geared to the needs of graduate students; (c) support for graduate students as they move through their programs of study, including addressing issues of managing multiple roles, finding support, mattering, academic program planning, and mentoring; and (d) transition from school to career, including traditional career planning and counseling services, helping students explore both academic and nonacademic career opportunities, and transitioning out of school (e.g., graduation rituals; Polson, 2003).

Rice (2003) presented a number of key components of adult student services, including (a) respectful management of initial contacts with students, even in the earliest stages of exploring application to graduate school; (b) availability of appropriate resources for graduate students, including referrals; (c) availability and accessibility of staff during nontraditional hours (e.g., nights, weekends); (d) development of orientation programs that “address their needs and situations ... [and] that [fit] into an adult student's life” (p. 55); and (e) availability of support and discussion groups that meet at different times of day. Services such as these should be available to graduate students both on campus and online. In addition, campuses can be more welcoming of graduate students by more overtly recognizing them in printed materials and publicity for campus events and in programs and services directly targeted to them.

As previously mentioned, building alliances with other campus offices is an important step in meeting graduate students' mental health needs. Collaborative efforts between college counselors and professionals in other student affairs offices (e.g., career services, multicultural affairs, adult services) are essential. Counselors may also consider connecting with academic departments to increase the awareness of graduate student needs as well as developing strong, positive relationships with graduate advisers to increase the likelihood of referrals of students in need of mental health services (Hyun et al., 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Although it appears that the enrollment numbers of graduate students may be leveling off somewhat (Allum, 2014), graduate students and adult undergraduate students will continue to be significant populations on college campuses. One primary challenge for college counselors is to use the resources that are currently available to reach out to graduate students, who are often less likely than traditional-age students to seek out services. E-mail, websites, and social media offer affordable and readily available means to reach out to graduate students in ways not possible just a few years ago. College counselors (as well as faculty and academic advisers) may benefit from specific information about the needs of graduate students and their associated developmental tasks. As demographics in the United States change over the next few decades, and as multicultural perspectives become more widely integrated and applied here and abroad, college counselors may need to help other campus offices to develop effective programs for promoting cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. In addition, college counselors can encourage their student clients to advocate for themselves through the identification of resources and action planning. Finally, college counselors can take advantage of opportunities to advocate for the needs of adult graduate students, because such advocacy (when paired with effective institutional

responses) can contribute significantly to an institution's ability to attract and retain qualified graduate students.

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