

Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health at York University

The York University Graduate Students' Association united with 12 other graduate student unions in Ontario through the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario to engage in a two-year research project to identify and document the experiences of Ontario graduate students' mental health. The Federation launched Not in the Syllabus, a graduate student mental health campaign aimed to address the effects of bullying and harassment as experienced by graduate students in Ontario post-secondary institutions.

2,001 graduate students from across the province were asked about their experiences on their respective campuses and the resulting impacts on their mental health. 264 respondents were from York University.

Students described that experiences of bullying and harassment, along with other stressors, negatively impact their mental health and increases the likelihood of low self-esteem, poor school performance, anxiety and depression.

The Federation is proposing five recommendations to improve the mental health and well-being of graduate students on campus. The intent of our recommendations is to be used by graduate students' unions to influence and inform the development of campus resources to confront bullying, harassment and mental health issues faced by graduate students. This factsheet will outline the primary survey results as they pertain to the Ontario Graduate Caucus' recommendations for graduate student mental health resources on campus, while highlighting the experiences of graduate students at York University.

What impacts graduate students' mental health?



Time to completion anxiety



Anxiety of failing or appearing weak



Paying tuition fees and other institutional costs



Not feeling properly supported by their academic institution

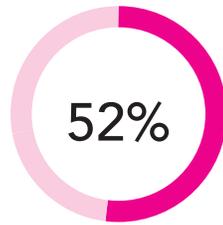


Anxiety around seeking and/or affording mental health support

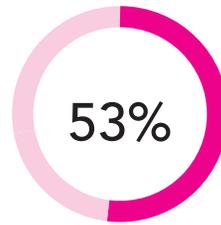


Graduate students at York University have reported that they have witnessed and/or experienced many instances of bullying and/or harassment that have been damaging to their mental health from administrators, faculty, instructors, students, colleagues, supervisors and even support service staff.

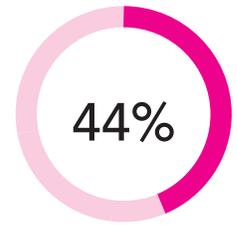
Survey respondents identified the following experiences of bullying and harassment as having negative impacts on their mental health at York University:



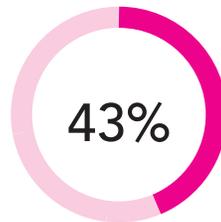
Verbal abuse



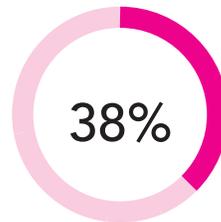
Pressure to overwork



Behaviours seeking to undermine



Sexism



Racism

York University students described their graduate school experiences in the following statements:

“Pressure to overwork, driven by both overt and subtle forms of competition. Graduate students are encouraged constantly to publish, present, write - at the expense of their social or personal health.

“I have been intimidated by professors who find that my research on race and racialization aren't on 'real' fields of interest.

“In a doctoral seminar, I was asked to place myself on a “race chart” on the black board. At the top were white anglophones and at the bottom, African Americans & Indigenous peoples.

“But it's hard to say something is bullying or harassment when you work in close quarters with the aggressor, since you see the context for their aggressive behaviour, and understand why they don't see what they're doing.

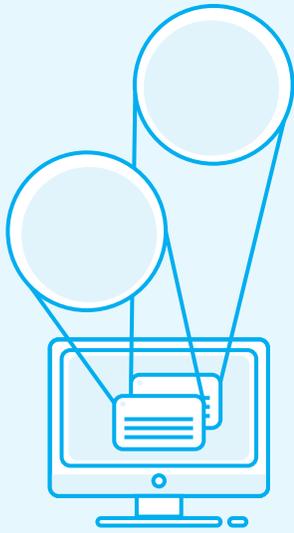
In their own words, York University graduate students described how these experiences impacted their mental health:

“I felt like dropping out of the program because no one [faculty] seemed to do anything about the situation because of 'academic freedom'.

“I felt uncomfortable, afraid, anxious, and insignificant. This was exacerbated by the fact that this professor consistently belittled me in-class.

“I feel traumatized. I had to engage in crisis counseling, could not eat or sleep, was not able to do my academic work and was put on anxiety medication.

“I felt let down, silenced, and vulnerable within the institution, as though I could not speak to anyone lest it impact my career.



What's keeping graduate students from getting support?

Students face a unique challenge accessing campus support services because they often do not want their supervisors, administrators or mentors to know that they are struggling and have sought help.

Graduate students have stated that they are reluctant to access mental health resources for fear of personal, funding and career reprisals.

Further, graduate students are wary of running into their undergraduate students and mentees when they do ask for help from service providers, because, often times, graduate students can only access the same service providers as undergraduate students.

Based on the content analysis, the four largest issues keeping graduate students from seeking support are:



Fear of reprisal



It made me feel as though I have little control and I felt cornered: either I write the review and feel as though I've done something unethical or I don't write it and I endure the consequences.



Reporting to academic and administrative professionals who are part of the problem



My academic adviser made unwanted sexual advances (verbal and physical) during our meetings. He would always emphasize the fact that I am a young woman and "beautiful".



Not knowing who to turn to



I felt threatened by him, he did not listen to us. I took this issue to the department program director but he kept saying he will do something but he didn't do anything.



Inability to commit the time or effort to navigate the formal complaints process



Being a grad student was always going to be stressful and overwhelming, you just have to find ways of coping so that you don't burn out.

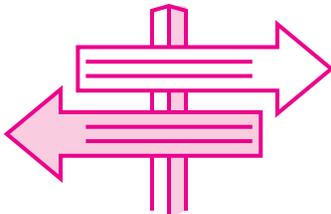
Graduate Students' Recommendations

The Federation has researched the influences, environmental factors and effects bullying and harassment have on graduate students. The Federation recommends that institutions improve support of graduate students by implementing the following recommendations:



Flexible counseling hours

Ensure that graduate student mental health services offer flexible hours, including evening hours. This is necessary to accommodate graduate students' schedules, which often involve being on campus in the evenings and on weekends, while also taking classes, facilitating labs and teaching during regular business hours.



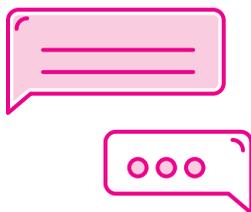
Private and separated space for graduate student counselling services

Choosing an appropriate location is important for maintaining student confidentiality so that graduate students are not in the same place as the students they may teach or facilitate labs for.



Comprehensive training of graduate-specific issues

Hire an on-campus counselor who will be available exclusively to graduate students and is familiar with the unique challenges that graduate students face. Additionally, provide all workers with training on graduate-specific issues and provide mandatory equity, anti-oppression and anti-stigma training.



Access to and promotion of e-health technology

A 24-hour mobile or chat line would allow students to have easy access to mental health professionals. Although this cannot directly replace traditional counseling, it is a useful first point of contact that would provide students with alternate methods of seeking assistance.



Building graduate student issues into a campus-wide mental health initiative

Institutions should embed graduate student mental health and development into the institutional vision and strategic goals of the campus. Doing so will increase knowledge, reduce stigma and expose the roots of the problem. Raising awareness helps encourage members' commitment to take action and foster change on campus.