CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
President's Leadership Development Program

Stress and Work–Life Interaction Among Graduate Students

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Leadership Action Project Executive Summary

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Project Overview & The Social Issue

This project examines psychological stress and work–life interaction among graduate students, a growing concern across higher education. Graduate students in intensive training programs are often associated with high levels of stress and burnout. Medical education, in particular, has received significant attention in research due to its rigorous structure and clinical demands. Other emerging evidence suggests that similarly high levels of stress may also exist among PhD students and other graduate populations. However, because most studies examine these groups separately, it remains unclear whether stress is truly higher in certain programs or whether it reflects broader structural issues within graduate education.

At the individual level, students must navigate pressure to succeed, uncertainty about the future, and challenges in managing time, finances, and mental health. At the community level, competitive environments, inconsistent mentorship, and limited peer support can contribute to isolation and increased stress. At the systems level, structural features such as heavy workloads, high-stakes evaluations, financial strain, and limited institutional support create conditions that can sustain chronic stress across programs. Together, these factors create an environment where graduate student well-being is at risk, yet institutions may lack the data needed to develop targeted and effective support systems. This project aims to address that gap by exploring how each level of stress and work–life interaction is experienced across different training environments.

Project Type & Approach

This was a research-based Leadership Action Project grounded in an exploratory, cross-sectional mixed-methods study design. The project was designed to directly compare stress and work–life interaction across two naturally occurring groups: medical students and other graduate students, including those in master's, PhD, and clinical training programs.

The methodology combined standardized quantitative measures with qualitative data to provide both comparability and depth. Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), a widely used instrument that assesses how unpredictable, overwhelming, and uncontrollable individuals perceive their lives to be. Work–life interaction was measured using an adapted Work–Life Interaction Scale, which captures how academic responsibilities interfere with or support personal life, including fatigue, missed activities, and emotional spillover. In addition to these structured measures, the survey included open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their main sources of stress, coping strategies, and experiences with institutional support in their own words. This qualitative component was intentionally included to capture aspects of student experience that cannot be fully understood through numerical scores alone, while also helping identify specific concerns that can inform more targeted future research and interventions.

The study was designed for anonymous online distribution through Qualtrics, with a recruitment strategy that involved faculty and program coordinators sharing a standardized message with students. This approach ensured voluntary participation while minimizing coercion. The project also incorporated a full ethical framework aligned with IRB standards, including informed consent procedures, anonymity protections, and safeguards to minimize psychological discomfort.

Deliverables & Impact

The primary deliverable of this project was a fully developed, implementation-ready research proposal that serves as a foundation for continued study of graduate student well-being. The proposal includes a comprehensive literature review, detailed study design, validated survey instruments, a structured recruitment plan, and an ethical framework aligned with institutional review standards.

By examining comparable groups within a single framework, the study is designed not only to identify whether differences exist, but also to begin pointing toward why those differences may occur. Identifying patterns across programs can help highlight specific structural factors—such as workload, program design, financial pressure, or emotional demands—that contribute to student stress and perceived burden. In this way, the project moves beyond simply documenting stress levels and instead creates a pathway for understanding the underlying drivers of those experiences.

Although the study itself has not yet been conducted, its impact lies in its applicability and potential for future use. It provides a clear framework that can guide future data collection, generate more targeted hypotheses, and support the development of evidence-based interventions and continued research.

Leadership Reflection

This project is closely connected to my commitment to the values of integrity, humility, justice, and impact. The project was grounded in existing research and designed a study that prioritizes accuracy and ethical responsibility. At the same time, my decision to take an exploratory approach recognizes that the goal was not to prove a predetermined conclusion but to learn from the data and from the experiences of others. By examining differences in stress across graduate programs, the project seeks to better understand how institutional structures may advantage or disadvantage different groups of students. This understanding is essential for creating more equitable support systems. I aimed to produce work that extends beyond theory and has the potential to inform real institutional change.

Further, the four leadership assumptions from the program were evident throughout this process. Credibility was built through careful research, thoughtful design, and attention to methodological rigor. Relationships played an important role in shaping the project, particularly through outreach to faculty and consideration of the diverse experiences of students across programs. This project also reflects the idea that leadership is non-positional. As an undergraduate student, I took the initiative to explore an issue affecting graduate populations and contribute to broader academic conversations. Ultimately, this project reinforced my understanding that leadership is not just about identifying problems, but about creating pathways for understanding and change.