# THE CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS OF BURNOUT AMONG GRADUATE ASSISTANTS

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## ABSTRACT

Acting as both a student and staff member of a university, the unique role of graduate assistants can often become a catalyst of burnout and stress. Recent studies found 60% of graduate assistants met the criteria for burnout (Park et al., 2021) and 43% of graduate students claim to be experiencing more stress than they can handle (Allen et al., 2021). Burnout is defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Parker & Tavella, 2022). Graduate students working as graduate assistants are a subpopulation of that is growing yet understudied. The goal of this research was to further examine prevalence of burnout and stress among graduate students working in sport.

This study focuses on master's and doctorate students who are currently contracted by a university as a graduate teaching assistant or graduate research assistant. Using an online survey method allowed for participation across multiple universities and locations. The 60-question survey includes two parts of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and the Financial Stress Scale (FSS) to measure burnout and stress. The survey also includes three open-ended questions to help determine potential strategies to prevent burnout and stress along with suggested coping mechanisms. Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed using a basic descriptive approach.

The findings suggest graduate assistants experience moderate levels of burnout and stress. When looking at graduate assistants working in a sport-related field, 63% reported moderate personal burnout, 48% reported moderate work-related burnout, 47% reported moderate personal stress, and 45% reported almost no financial stress. Coping mechanisms commonly used by current graduate assistants to reduce burnout and stress include sleep, exercise, watching television, spending time with friends, and listening to music. When asked

what advice participants would give future GAs, common responses included setting boundaries, utilizing time management skills, prioritizing, and taking time for yourself and self-care.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction and General Information ..... 1
Chapter 2: Review of Literature ..... 6
Defining the Graduate Assistant Role ..... 6
Current Graduate Assistant Disputes ..... 7
Further Defining Burnout and Stress ..... 8
Chapter 3: Methodology ..... 11
Participants ..... 11
Instruments ..... 11
Data Collection and Analysis Procedures ..... 14
Chapter 4: Results ..... 16
Limitations ..... 32
References ..... 34
Appendix ..... 38
Vita ..... 40

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Personal Burnout Results ……18

Table 4.2 Work-related Burnout Results ..……..19

Table 4.3 Personal Burnout Results ……..……..20

Table 4.4 Financial Stress Results ……..……22

## Chapter 1: Introduction and General Information

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022), during fall 2021, 15.4 million students enrolled in a postsecondary institution in the United States. Whether public or private, degree-granting institutions need faculty and staff across many disciplines to operate sufficiently and provide postsecondary education to millions of students each year. To aid in necessary university functions, institutions utilize students as vital university employees. At the graduate level, graduate assistants are often used specifically to support universities' educational and operational duties (Flora, 2007). Graduate assistant positions exist in various settings and cover a wide range of responsibilities. A graduate assistant (GA) position can be broken down further into either a graduate research assistant (GRA) or graduate teaching assistant (GTA). Graduate research assistants often focus on research within the university, while graduate teaching assistants provide educational support and typically assist with teaching undergraduate level courses. Other common duties of graduate assistants include coaching and various student affairs or administrative duties.

Although the enrollment of undergraduate students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions decreased 12% between 2010 and 2020, enrollment of postbaccalaureate students increased 7% between that timeframe (NCES, 2023). The total number of master's degrees earned is projected to increase 4% between 2016 and 2028, making the projected number of master's degrees earned 837,000 in 2029 (NCES, 2022). These numbers indicate a continuous increase of enrollment in master's level programs. As master's degrees increase in popularity, the need for support for these students will grow and remain an important topic of conversation. It is important that researchers continue to learn about graduate students working in GA positions and how universities can promote a healthy experience for all GAs.

Many postbaccalaureate students will seek a GA position because of the numerous benefits GA positions include. Students with an assistantship are more likely to be active members of the external academic community and participate in more scholarly activities compared to those without an assistantship (Ethington & Pisani, 1993). With an assistantship, students can connect with a professional network, gain marketable experience, and further develop vital skills for a successful future career. Beyond intangible compensation, the financial benefits of a GA position can ease the financial burden of higher education. During the 2015-2016 academic year, the average graduate assistant received a total of $22,000 in financial aid and the average value of a GA position was $13,400 (NCES, 2022). As part of the position, graduate students often receive benefits such as tuition waiver, health insurance, or stipend.

Unfortunately, GA positions can also come with increased levels of stress. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stress as, "A state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation" (WHO, 2023, para. 1). A recent study found 43% of graduate students claim to be experiencing more stress than they can handle (Allen et al., 2021). Looking specifically at graduate assistants, 29.9% listed work overload as a common stressor and 22.6% listed interpersonal conflict as a top psychological strain (Mazzola, et al., 2011). Acting as both a student and staff member of a university, the unique role of graduate students working in a GA position can often become a catalyst of stress that is caused by different stressors.

Work-life balance and role conflict can be especially challenging for GAs because their unique role within the universities allows them to work as an employee and learn as a student. Graduate students are tasked with juggling numerous roles within the university setting as well as personally, which can often lead to tension between various life roles. A previous study found that 95% of graduate students reported feeling torn between their role as a parent, significant

other, employee, or student (May, 2006). Between fostering a healthy work-life balance and filling numerous personal and professional roles, graduate students are put in demanding situations that can lead to stress.

In addition to work-life balance and role conflict, graduate students often experience financial stressors. When looking at stress, financial difficulties were identified as a prevalent area of concern for graduate students (May, 2006). During the 2015-2016 year, 43.8% of master's students took out an average of $18,600 in student loans, including both direct unsubsidized loans and direct PLUS loans (NCES, 2022). Financial barriers related to the cost of graduate school remain cause for concern when looking at types of stressors.

Graduate students are subject to numerous stressors such as work-life balance, role conflict, and financial stress. Balancing countless roles and responsibilities, graduate students' overall health and wellbeing is easily subject to burnout. For this study burnout is defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Parker & Tavella, 2022). A previous study found 60% of graduate students at a small university in Canada met the criteria for burnout (Park et al., 2021). Studies indicate that in general graduate students experience burnout. However, less is understood about the experiences of graduate students who also have a GA position, which is an important aspect to consider when looking at the experience of graduate students who may be struggling with burnout.

With previous knowledge focusing on the graduate student population, health and wellness concerns for GAs drives the need for further research on this topic. Previous research has looked broadly at graduate students' experience in higher education, but current research has neglected to focus specifically on graduate students with a GA position. Graduate assistants are a

subpopulation that remains understudied and further research is needed to understand the implications of assistantships on graduate students' health and wellbeing.

The goal of this research is to further examine the prevalence of burnout and stress among graduate assistants, specifically those working in sport related fields. Working in sport provides unique challenges and barriers. The college sport industry has a turnover rate that is double that of similar industries (Huml et. al., 2021). In the sport context, burnout, stress, and work-life balance are prevalent issues across the field. Many administrators and coaches maintain a "team mentality" and high work ethic that often involves enduring heavy travel schedules, nontraditional work hours, and above average pressure to perform (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). In collegiate athletics, the work culture is highly demanding, competitive, and often requires numerous personal sacrifices (Coakley, 2015). With previous research supporting rates of burnout and stress among graduate students in general, specific consideration should be given to the additional demands of working in sport as a graduate assistant. The demands of the sporting industry can have major implication on the health and wellness of student workers. A more in-depth understanding of how universities and graduate assistants within sport can work to maintain healthy levels of burnout and stress can provide the opportunity to enhance the overall experience for future GAs. The aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. Do graduate assistants working in sport experience burnout?
2. Do graduate assistants working in sport experience stress?
3. What preventative measures or coping strategies might be suggested to reduce burnout and stress among graduate assistants working in sport?

The results of this study provide more insight into the life of a graduate assistant working in sport and what levels of burnout and stress are experienced. Researchers hypothesize that

burnout and stress levels will fall in the moderate to high range given the additional stress of working in sport as a GA. This study will also provide potential strategies for future graduate assistants to prevent and cope with burnout and stress. Recommendations on how to foster a healthy and balanced lifestyle will be suggested.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### *Defining the Graduate Assistant Role*

When evaluating graduate assistant burnout and stress, it is important to understand the policies, procedures, and status surrounding the role. The role of a GA is complex to define because GAs are students and employees of a university. In 2004, The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), who currently decides the relationship between GAs and private sectors, determined that GAs are students and not employees (Flora, 2007). In 2016, the NLRB reversed its 2004 decision and ruled that graduate assistants are employees and are protected under the federal labor statute (Flora, 2007). One of the major implications of this decision was the new right to unionize. At public universities, state labor relations policies are used to determine the rights of GAs. Some states have adopted the NLRB's decision towards collective bargaining, and some have not (Flora, 2007). At the federal and state levels, the role of graduate assistants as staff and students remains a continuous discussion.

Formalized policies for GAs are often not understood by GAs themselves (Anderson & Berdie, 1972). The roles and policies surrounding graduate assistants often vary across universities and between different departments, making it confusing to understand the expectations of the role. In 1972, a study of graduate assistants at the University of Minnesota was conducted and results suggest that 45% of GAs did not know their department's formal procedures regarding GA grievance, evaluation, or policies (Anderson & Berdie, 1972).

Research conducted in 2021 on the training of GAs in a school of criminology supports previous findings. Results of this study found only 6% of respondents indicated that they felt the school instructors offered sufficient information and guidance to prepare them for their role as a GA (Murdoch et. al., 2021). Researchers suggest institution-wide dialogue on the roles,

responsibilities, challenges, and recommendations could result in more effective mechanisms to support GAs (Murdoch et. al., 2021). When working with GAs, it is important to develop and communicate effective policies at the university level so the role can be better understood by graduate assistants themselves.

### *Current Graduate Assistant Disputes*

Across the country, graduate assistants continue to go on strike and plea for higher wages and better benefits. In April of 2021, nearly 2,000 graduate students at New York University (NYU) went on strike for higher wages and better health care benefits (Weiss, 2021). Students continued to argue the university had the funding to increase wages by significant amounts and provide more support for student workers. In a more recent case, graduate students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor went on strike in March of 2023. Currently, graduate assistants account for 30% of the staff at the university and earn $24,000 per year (Vicci, 2023).

At the end of 2022, the University of California school system experienced a walkout of 48,000 teaching assistants, researchers, and other university employees, leading to the nation's largest strike of academic workers to date (Hubler, 2022). Like previous strikes, protestors demanded better benefits like expanded healthcare, childcare support, and public transit reimbursement. When looking at the University of California 92% of GAs stated housing consumed more than one-third of their income and 40% reported more than half of their income went towards housing accommodation (Hubler, 2022). In California and across the country, graduate students are not satisfied with the terms of their employment and are seeking additional support, often in the form of higher wages and better benefits.

### *Further Defining Burnout and Stress*

Although burnout and stress are often lumped together, they are not the same. Stress is typically associated with an overactive nervous system such as elevated heart rate or racing thoughts, while burnout typically involves a lack of engagement, thoughts, or feelings (Taylor, 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023, para. 1) further defines burnout as "A syndrome resulting from chronic, unmanageable, workplace stress." Most recently, the WHO recently included burnout in *The International Statistical Classification of Disease and Related Health Problems*, eleventh revision (ICD-11, 2019), which defines the three main symptoms of burnout as:

1. Feelings of energy deletion or exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism towards one's job
3. A sense of ineffectiveness and ack of accomplishments

The WHO now officially recognizes burnout as a syndrome, but not as a medical condition. In most used definitions, burnout is specifically referred to as a work-place phenomenon.

Unlike burnout, The American Psychiatric Association (APA) does consider certain types of stress as clinical disorders. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2022) lists both posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and acute stress disorder as diagnosable disorders (2022). The WHO defines stress as, "A state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation" (WHO, 2023, para. 1). Stress, whether considered good or bad, is common to experience in a day-to-day setting. Since stress can be attributed to various situations and experiences, the definition of is vague compared to burnout, which remains fixed to the workplace setting.

### *Burnout and Stress in Graduate Students*

In 2011, GradResources and Barna Research Group surveyed 578 graduate students across 26 majors in numerous colleges and universities around the United States. The results provide specific details on the life of a graduate student and highlight many concerns. Results from the study indicate that 41% of master's students reported feeling “A bit more” or “A lot more” stressed than they can handle. Looking specifically at master's only program participants, 58% reported school-life balance as a common major concern, 55% reported financial pressures as a common major concern, and 55% reported stress or burnout as a common major concern. The findings of this study suggest that concerns about school-life balance, career success, financial pressures, and stress levels are all major concerns for graduate students.

A study conducted by Lisa Duba-Biedermann in 1991 is one of the few studies focusing specifically on graduate assistants. The survey sample was 341 graduate assistants at the University of Oregon. The results of this study found that 63% of graduate assistants reported experiencing serious stress due to the academic workload, 35% reported serious stress due to GA workload, and 55% “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed to being emotionally drained from juggling many roles. Looking specifically at financial stress, researchers found 17% of participants held an additional job outside of their assistantship and 66% of these students’ owed money towards their degree. 81% of participants agreed that they needed the GA position to attend school and 6% of the master’s GAs owed over $20,000. The researchers suggested developing orientation and workshop sessions designed to help GAs balance their multiple roles. In addition, supervisors should consider the GAs academic stage and situation when assigning workload.

Taken together, these studies suggest that graduate students are experiencing rates of burnout and stress, pushing students to advocate for themselves across the country. With current

disputes continuing to arise, the need to better understand the role of GAs and how universities can aim to improve their support for student workers is vital to the success of GAs in the future. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how GAs working in the sport field are impacted by burnout and stress, and what coping mechanisms can be suggested to decrease burnout and stress rates.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were postbaccalaureate degree seeking students enrolled in programs at numerous universities in the United States. Inclusion criteria was that participants be a master's or doctorate level student contracted by a university as a current GA in some capacity (i.e., either as a GTA or GRA). Although this study has a focus on those working in a sport-related field, participants working outside of sport were also invited to participate. All degree programs, including those outside the sport context, were included in the study.

### *Instruments*

A survey was chosen as the data collection method to gain new insight regarding the prevalence of graduate assistant burnout, stress, and what coping mechanisms graduate students employ to reduce stress and burnout. The software used for the survey was *Qualtrics*. Using an online survey method allowed for participation across multiple universities and locations. The survey method's flexibility allowed participants to complete the survey using any device of their choosing and save their progress if the survey needed to be completed in more than one sitting. The survey consisted of 60 questions. The types of questions included in the survey were screening, multiple choice, 5-point-likert-scale, and open-ended response questions. By collecting quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers got an overall understanding of the topic and subtopics.

Two out of three sections of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) were used to evaluate both personal and work-related burnout. The first section, personal burnout, consisted of six 5-point-likert scale questions. Some examples from the CBI for this section included:

1. How often do you feel tired?

2. How often do you think: “I can’t take it anymore?”
3. How often do you feel worn out?

The second section of the CBI used for this study consisted of questions focused on work-related burnout. There were seven questions total on work-related burnout and they were all 5-point-likert scale questions from the CBI. Examples from this section include:

1. Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?
2. Is your work emotionally exhausting?
3. Do you feel burnt out because of your work?

The CBI is a relatively new tool for measuring burnout and consists of three scales overall measuring personal burnout, work-related burnout, and client-related burnout (Tage et al., 2007). Previous studies commonly referred to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) as a tool for assessing burnout. However, the CBI was later developed using a more theoretical approach with the intent to evaluate burnout in varying occupations (Milfont et al., 2008). Today, the CBI is a commonly used tool to assess burnout and has been proven to show high internal reliability and validity (Barton et al., 2022). For the purpose of this study, only the personal and work-related burnout scales were used to help determine the degree of burnout experienced by GAs currently working in sport-related fields. Previous research supports validity and reliability of an abbreviated CBI model and suggests numerous benefits to the use of a shorter model (Barton et al., 2022). The third section of CBI (i.e., client-related burnout) was not relevant to the typical role of a GA and was not used. By using the personal and work-related scales of the CBI, researchers were able to effectively evaluate participants' levels of burnout related to their personal and work lives.

To assess graduate assistants' perceived levels of stress, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was used. PSS measures how situations in one's life are appraised as stressful using a 14-item questionnaire. All questions in the PSS are 5-point-likert scale questions with response options ranging from "never" to "very often." The PSS was designed to give general insight into perceived stress and previous studies have used it when assessing college students (Cohen et al., 1983). Examples of questions from this scale include:

1. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?
2. In the last month, how often have you been able to control the way you spend your time?

To further analyze graduate student's experiences of stress specifically related to financial stress, the College Version of the Financial Stress Scale (FSS) was used. The FSS was developed by asking faculty, graduate students, and experts in the field of finance to compile comprehensive lists of sources of financial stress (Northern et. al., 2010). All questions in the FSS are 4-point-likert scale questions with response options ranging from "never" to "all the time." The FSS asks participants to consider the past six months and instructs participants to "please rate how often you have thought about the following financial events." Some of the financial events listed include:

1. Having large debt
2. Losing a job
3. Paying taxes

In addition to questions from the CBI, PSS, and FSS, open-ended questions were asked to determine how burnout and stress could be reduced in the future and what coping strategies might be suggested. Examples include:

1. What would you change about your graduate assistantship position to reduce the risk of burnout or stress?
2. How do you cope with work related burnout or stress?
3. What advice would you give to future graduate assistants to help create a healthy work-life balance?

### *Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

Using public online staff directories and departmental websites, faculty working in sport related departments were contacted via email and asked to share the survey with their students. Researchers chose several universities that represented different regions of the country to gain geographical diversity. Universities with relatively large student bodies and well-known programs in the field of sport were the primary program target to attract the most participants. In total, 55 emails were sent to numerous department heads and faculty working in a sport related department. The initial email included a consent form created by the research team which was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. In addition, public methods such as social media, LinkedIn, and personal relationships were used to contact potential participants. Social media and LinkedIn marketing posts were created by the research team and approved by the University Institutional Review Board to recruit as many potential participants as possible.

The survey remained open from January 9, 2024, to March 19, 2024. Throughout that period, the research team sent emails to faculty at different universities encouraging them to share the survey with students. The researchers also distributed the survey using a Quick Response (QR) code to personal contacts known to have current GA positions within sport throughout this time. After the survey closed, data were retrieved and downloaded from the Qualtrics software platform into an Excel spreadsheet, where participants remained anonymous.

No data were transmitted or sent electronically following the initial download and no identifiable information was collected.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2010). For each qualitative question, results were grouped into common themes of response, common styles of responses, and answers that stood out as outliers. Responses were also grouped based on length of response, as responses varied between one word up to paragraph blocks of text. Quantitative data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and frequency count. Reverse coding was used on some items of the scales as required by the scale.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this research is to further examine the prevalence of burnout and stress among graduate assistants working in sport and determine what preventative measures or coping strategies might be suggested to reduce burnout and stress. In total, 79 surveys were gathered. Of the 79 responses, four were excluded from the data analysis because "no" was selected when answering the question "I am currently a graduate assistant (GA, GTA, GRA) at a higher educational institution." 74 out of 75 participants answered all demographic questions. Of the 74 participants, 69% were master's students, 27% were doctoral students, and 4% were enrolled in both a master's and PhD program. When looking at age, 91% of participants were 21-29 years of age, 8% were 30-39 years of age, and 1% were 40-49 years of age. When asked about gender identity, 57% of participants selected "female" as their gender identity, 42% selected male, and 1% wrote in "pre-transition female." When looking at ethnicity, 88% of participants selected White, 3% Multiracial, 3% Black or African American, 2% Asian, 2% Hispanic/White, and 2% wrote in "American/Indian/White."

Responses came from numerous universities and departments. Departments being represented included sport management, exercise physiology, or kinesiology. However, three participants were working towards degrees outside of sport. These included degrees in agriculture economics, public administration, and counseling. Four participants did not hold an assistantship in a sport-related field. Assistantships outside of sport were held in housing, academic affairs, and one agriculture department. Researchers chose "sport-related fields" to encompass those working in athletics, nutrition, kinesiology, exercise physiology, physical education programs, facilities, recreational sports, or athletic training to be inclusive of potential GAs working in many different parts of the sport industry.

As shown in Table 4.1, personal burnout results from the CBI, 1% of participants reported almost no personal burnout, 28% reported low to moderate personal burnout, 63% reported moderate personal burnout, and 8% reported high personal burnout. Scale reliability was good, as the Chronbach Alpha score equated to 0.84. Questions scoring the highest, meaning high levels of personal burnout, included "How often do you feel tired?" and "How often are you physically exhausted?" Questions scoring the lowest, meaning lower levels of burnout, included "How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?" and "How often do you think *I can't take it anymore*?"

As shown in Table 4.2 work-related burnout results from the CBI, 4% of participants reported almost no work-related burnout, 40% reported low to moderate work-related burnout, 48% reported moderate work-related burnout, and 8% reported high work-related burnout. Scale reliability was good, as the Chronbach Alpha score equated to 0.87. Questions scoring the highest, meaning high levels of work-related burnout, included "Do you feel worn out at the end of the workday?" and "Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?" Low scores, meaning lower levels of burnout, included "Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?" and "Is your work emotionally exhausting?"

As shown in Table 4.3, results from the PSS indicate 4% reported almost no personal stress, 47% reported low to moderate personal stress, 47% reported moderate personal stress, and 1% reported high personal stress. Scale reliability was good, as the Chronbach Alpha score equated to 0.83. Questions scoring the highest, meaning high levels of personal stress, included "Finding yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish" and "Feeling nervous and stressed." Low scores, meaning lower levels of personal stress, included "Feeling confident

Table 4.1

*Personal Burnout Results*

| Total Scores (6-30) | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Almost no personal burnout (6-12) | 1 | 0.01 |
| Low to moderate personal burnout (13-18) | 21 | 0.28 |
| Moderate to high personal burnout (19-24) | 47 | 0.63 |
| High personal burnout (25 +) | 6 | 0.08 |

Table 4.2

*Work-related Burnout Results*

| Total Scores (7-35) | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Almost no personal burnout (7-14) | 3 | 0.04 |
| Low to moderate personal burnout (15-21) | 30 | 0.40 |
| Moderate to high personal burnout (22-29) | 36 | 0.48 |
| High personal burnout (30 +) | 6 | 0.08 |

Table 4.3

*Personal Stress Results*

| Total Scores (0-56) | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Almost no personal burnout (0-14) | 4 | 0.05 |
| Low to moderate personal burnout (15-28) | 35 | 0.47 |
| Moderate to high personal burnout (29-42) | 35 | 0.47 |
| High personal burnout (43 +) | 1 | 0.01 |

about your ability to handle your personal problems" and "Dealing successfully with irritating life hassles."

As shown in Table 4.4, results from the FSS indicate 45% reported almost no financial stress, 29% reported low to moderate financial stress, 16% reported moderate financial stress, and 9% reported high financial stress. Scale reliability was good, as the Chronbach Alpha score equated to 0.93. Questions scoring the highest, meaning high levels of financial stress, included "Living paycheck to paycheck" and "Barely making enough money to cover unexpected expenses." Low scores, meaning lower levels of financial stress included "Having to declare bankruptcy" and "Getting something repossessed."

The first open-ended question was, "What preventative measures or coping strategies might be suggested to reduce burnout and stress among graduate assistants?" The results of the short answer response questions were analyzed, and numerous themes were found based off the frequency of responses. Coping mechanisms commonly used by current graduate assistants to reduce burnout and stress include sleep, exercise, watching television, spending time with friends, and listening to music. Many written responses referred to more than one commonly listed coping mechanism. One response stated, "Prioritizing things that bring me joy, such as exercise or cooking. I make a point to socialize even when I feel burnt out to avoid loneliness."

Another common theme was avoidant behavior, with one response saying, "Physical activity and avoidance of work." Other written response related to avoidance stated, "I take naps to avoid friends and family" and "I try to do some things that allows me to turn off my work/school brain, even if it's just for a short time."

Although a vast number of responses included social interaction either with friends or families, a handful of responses mentioned taking personal time to cope. One response stated, "I

Table 4.4

*Financial Stress Results*

| Total Scores (21-84) | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Almost no personal burnout (0-14) | 34 | 0.45 |
| Low to moderate personal burnout (15-28) | 22 | 0.29 |
| Moderate to high personal burnout (29-42) | 12 | 0.16 |
| High personal burnout (43 +) | 7 | 0.09 |

cut myself off from the rest of the world and do what I want to do for the rest of the day" and "Taking personal time and going for walks for instance." Less frequent but slightly alarming responses included turning to substance abuse and crying as coping mechanisms. One response stated:

> "I rely on my partner to validate my feelings of burnout/stress and talk through solutions. I indulge in my hobbies like playing video games or watching movies. I buy things unbudgeted for like games or fast food. I seek advice or support from other GTAs, even if it is just to vent about similar problems. Seldomly, I use substances like CBD/THC or drink."

When answering the second open-ended question, "What would you change about your assistantship?" one common theme throughout responses was increased pay. Some responses did not provide an explanation and simply wrote, "Higher pay" while a handful of responses provided more context, such as the following:

> "Higher pay/stipend is a good start because many GAs are having to eat poorly or pick up second jobs on top of their current GA position. Though it is not the same for all GA's because some will be working ~20 hours/wk while others will be close to 60+ hours/wk so it depends on the position."

Numerous responses mentioning higher pay also included specific financial expenses such as rent, food, or other basic needs. One response said:

> "I am happy with my GA position, but my monthly pay is barely enough to cover my housing month to month, eating my savings account alive of any spare cash to make up for my day-to-day expenses (food, gas, household items, etc.)"

Another common response included wanting clearer guidelines and expectations. Participants said, “More guidance from supervisors at times” and “More oversight from university administration.” Another response said, “Having a more set schedule and list of responsibilities.” In addition to clearer guidelines and expectations, numerous responses also included comments regarding their advisor. One participant said:

> “Clearer guidelines of what is expected of us; I feel like GAs always have to be on their toes and adapt to constant change. Furthermore, the expectations of advisors vary greatly, with some students required to be at the office all day even though we have a part-time assistantship (20 hours/week). It seems unorganized and stresses me out as I feel expectations could change at any moment.”

Another response said, “My advisor increases my stress immensely by being generally unreasonable with a lot of the work relationship and almost never giving positive feedback.” Other responses did not give context but said, “My advisor.”

Another common theme throughout responses was having a more flexible schedule. Numerous responses mentioned remote work as one way to reduce the risk of burnout and stress. For example, one response said, “Being able to work from home sometimes. Most of what I do can be done at home.” Another response with even more detail stated:

> “I get stressed out from the requirement of being present on campus to do my job. I do not need to be physically present on campus to be able to grade student work, respond to emails, update class assignments, etc for an ONLINE course. (I am a TA/grader for online courses only).” Other participants referred to having a flexible class schedule. One response said, “Have online class flexibility to help with busy schedules.” Another

response said, “I would make it to where my class schedule was a little more adaptable to my work schedule.”

Not changing anything about the position was another frequent response, with one participant stating, “There really isn’t anything I could change. I feel like most of the burnout/stress just comes from being really busy.” Another response stated, “Nothing.”

When answering, “What advice would you give future Graduate Assistants?” responses varied more than when responding to the previous open-ended questions. Numerous themes from the previous open-ended questions showed up again when answering this question. Advice surrounding advisors was frequent, with one response saying, “Pick your advisor wisely. Talk to any potential advisor's former students.” Another previous theme found again was finances, with one response stating, “Save money before grad school.” Another response said, “Pick a GA position that really is what you want to do instead of just picking it because it pays the bills.” Having clear guidelines and expectations was another reoccurring theme. Responses included, “They (GAs) need to have a full understanding about what being a GA entails before accepting positions before they are ready.” Another response stated, “Clearly state boundaries you have as an incoming student and make PI's/advisors also clearly state their expectations.”

Setting boundaries was a major theme that came through in several responses. One response stated, “Set healthy boundaries for yourself!” Other responses went into more specific details such as, “Carve out time for work and play, and stick to those boundaries.” When examining setting boundaries, many responses mentioned setting boundaries regarding the number of hours being worked. One response stated, “Log working hours and make sure that you are not working more than your contract requires.” Another response said, “Work the hours you need to and no more. You aren’t getting paid enough.”

Along with setting boundaries, many responses included utilizing time management skills and prioritizing self-care. General responses included, “Make sure to set limits and prioritize time for yourself” and another response saying, “Time management! It's okay to say no to things, even from your boss. If you don't have the mental capacity, don't do it. Give yourself time to rest. Don't spread yourself too thin.” Finding a good routine, establishing a healthy schedule, planning ahead, and staying “on top of” work and school were also common phrases that went along with time management.

Another theme was establishing identity outside of work and school. One response stated, “Take the work that you do seriously, and do good work but don't let it consume you.” Another response stated,

> “You are not your degree. Your degree and academic and professional success do not define you. Set boundaries for yourself that will allow you to experience opportunities outside of academia (e.g. spend time with friends/family, set time aside to fill your personal cup and recharge).”

Finally, the last frequent theme was negative responses towards the assistantship. A few responses suggested not taking on an assistantship at all, with participants writing, “Quit. Get off the Titanic while you can.” and “Don't do it.” Another response stated, “Good luck.” These responses gave insight into the real challenges of working as a GA during graduate school.

***Discussion***

After reviewing survey responses from 75 participants, results indicated that many participants experience low to moderate levels of burnout and stress within the sports setting. When looking at personal and work-related burnout, both received less than four responses in the no burnout range and had 8% of participants fall into the high burnout range. There are similar

results for low and high ends of perceived personal and work-related burnout, however, 63% of participants reported moderate personal burnout whereas 48% of participants reported moderate work-related burnout. In addition, 28% reported low personal burnout, and 40% reported low work-related burnout. There are minor differences in low to moderate scores between personal and work-related burnout, but data trends are similar for both sections. However, there is a large deviation in the amount of burnout being experienced across participants with some falling in the almost no burnout range and others falling in the high levels of burnout range. Across the board, this result indicates less prevalence of burnout and stress than originally expected, but high levels of burnout and stress are still prevalent for some GAs. Results indicate that the GA experience is unique to the individual regarding how much burnout and stress is experienced.

When evaluating which questions scored the highest for personal and work-related burnout, results were similar. Questions centered around feeling tired and emotionally exhausted scored the highest for personal burnout and feeling worn out at the end of each day and being exhausted in the morning at the thought of another workday scored the highest for work-related burnout. This suggests that participants experience similar emotions such as exhaustion when thinking about their personal life and work-related situations.

Questions that scored the lowest for personal burnout included feeling weak and susceptible to illness and thinking “I can’t take it anymore.” Low scoring work-related burnout questions included feeling that every working hour is tiring and feeling that you have enough time for family and friends. This suggests that students do experience levels of burnout, but not to the point that participants feelings go beyond tiredness and mild levels of exhaustion. It appears other aspects such as physical wellbeing and social wellbeing are not as impacted.

Personal stress received the lowest amount of scores in the high stress range out of personal burnout, work-related burnout, and financial stress. The overall average score fell in the moderate range. In comparison to both personal and work-related burnout, personal stress has more scores in the almost no stress range. Personal stress scores fell equally between the low and moderate stress range. Overall, personal stress has the least variance between scores. Similar to personal and work-related burnout, many participants are experiencing low to moderate levels of personal stress. However, not every GA experiences the same level of personal stress and that experience is unique to the individual, which especially was true when examining the comments.

When looking at the types of questions that resulted in the lowest levels of personal stress, those questions centered around being in control of different life factors. Questions scoring the lowest included being able to control the way you spend your time and being able to control irritations in your life. Another low scoring question was feeling that you were on top of things. Results indicate participants do not feel stressed about controlling different aspects of their life such as the ways in which they spend their time and general life irritants. This might be because participants feel "on top of things."

However, when answering how often participants found themselves thinking about things they must accomplish and being angered because of things that happened outside of their control, participants reported high levels of stress. These results suggest that participants enjoy feeling in control and when presented with situations or events outside of their control, participants often experience feelings of stress and anger. It is also clear that participants are aware of the tasks and things they need to accomplish and feel "on top of things," but also feel that difficulties and tasks pile up higher than they can overcome. GAs might feel they are doing everything they can to control their life and their list of tasks to accomplish, but the sheer number

of things to accomplish and difficulties is stress inducing. This result is supported by much older research that found 63% of graduate assistants reported experiencing serious stress due to the academic workload, 35% reported serious stress due to GA workload (Duba-Biedermann, 1991).

Personal burnout, work-related burnout, and personal stress had similar results, but results from the FSS had outlying results. Most scores fell within the low to moderate range from the CBI and PSS, but the majority of FSS scores fell either in the almost no stress range or high stress range. In total, 45% of scores fell in the almost never range for experiencing financial stress. However, 9% of scores fell in the high stress range. Financial stress has the most scores in both the almost no stress range and the high stress range. This suggests a high variation of financial stress across participants as some report feeling no financial stress at all whereas others are experiencing extreme levels of financial stress. The data does not determine why this is, but researchers suggest factors such as socioeconomic status,  family support, lifestyle, and other financial obligations could impact financial stress results.

For 45% of participants, financial stress is not a major issue, however, qualitative results indicated that factors such as compensation and pay were common changes GAs would make. Financial aspects were also a theme when asked to give future GAs advice. Quantitative data seems to suggest financial stress is low to moderate, but qualitative data suggests that financial aspects such as pay are one of the major complaints and considerations for GAs. Previous research supports that financial difficulties have been identified as a prevalent area of concern for graduate students (May, 2006).

With FSS scores relatively low but frequency of responses regarding finances high, researchers suggest that participants are not necessarily financially stressed, but that does not mean that they are satisfied with their financial situation. Results indicate that higher

compensation is valuable to GAs and this idea is supported by the numerous strikes regarding student pay taking place around the country every year. Financial stress may not be as constant as other forms of stress, but it is still prevalent.

Low FSS scores could also be contributed to the relatively young age demographic of students and the types of questions being asked in the FSS. Most participants fell within the 21-29 age range, where some questions may not apply. Questions regarding stress related to investments decreasing in value, being contacted by creditors, or having to declare bankruptcy had lower scores and may be more applicable for an older demographic of students.

Based on results from the short answer survey responses, many suggestions can be made to help advisors and institution leaders promote a healthy and successful experience for graduate assistants in sport. Many students mentioned adding more flexibility both with work schedules and class schedules to improve their experience as a GA. If possible, the implementation of a hybrid work schedule was suggested by participants and might contribute to a healthier work-life balance and overall GA satisfaction. In some cases, allowing GAs to "flex" hours from one week to the next could also allow for more flexibility. If there is a busy week requiring more hours, GAs could log additional hours for that week and work less hours the following week.

In addition, it is suggested that advisors communicate organizational policies and procedures early in the on-boarding process in the hopes of decreasing confusion surrounding the role and promoting clear guidelines and expectations. Improving communication in regard to expectations and policies was a clear theme throughout the open-ended responses. By enhancing communication between advisors and GAs, GAs will hopefully feel comfortable and empowered to voice their boundaries, which was another theme when discussing advice to give to future GAs. Along with clearly identified policies, advisors might provide information regarding

resources on campus geared towards health and wellbeing such as student Health Centers, Ombuds services, and other graduate student resources offered by campuses.

Looking on a larger scale, departments and university leadership need to promote a culture of healthy work-life balance and meet the basic needs of graduate students. Some suggestions to promote health and wellness include offering paid vacation time for graduate assistants or providing built in mental health days. Numerous comments were made about working beyond contracted hours. To combat this, departments should strictly abide by the university policies surrounding contracted hours of graduate assistants to ensure graduate assistants are not working more hours than they are contractually obligated. Finally, a continuous evaluation of stipend and benefits packages is suggested to ensure GAs are being properly compensated for the work they contribute to the university.

Although many suggestions can be made for advisors and university leadership to help shape the culture of working in sport, graduate assistants should also take accountability for their own experience. Graduate assistantships provide young professionals with the opportunity to develop personal and professional skills such as communication, time management, setting boundaries, and developing working relationships with supervisors and faculty. Setting boundaries for GAs might include learning how to say *no,* asking for help, and communicating needs effectively. Graduate assistants should rely on time management skills to improve work-life balance and allow time for self-care to prevent burnout and prolonged stress. Transferable skills learned during an assistantship will be useful in future careers, especially if continuing further into the field of sport, to prevent burnout and stress. Through experiences provided by graduate assistantships in the field of sport, young professionals can improve key skills that can help contribute to their future health and well-being by promoting healthy work-life habits.

***Limitations***

Results of this research determined low to moderate levels of burnout and stress among graduate assistants working in sport. However, further analysis is required to determine why varying degrees of burnout and stress are prominent. Future research might include informational interviewing to further understand the why behind burnout and stress among GAs.

In the future, having a larger sample size to provide stronger and more reliable results would best represent the population. Collecting survey responses was a constraint throughout the research process. Emailing the survey to different sport management, kinesiology, or other sporting department faculty made it difficult to track the response rate of the survey. Beyond knowing the survey was sent to 55 department faculty of department heads via email, researchers do not know if the survey was sent out to any graduate students.

Originally, the survey was open to graduate assistants working in any department across campus and was marketed via newsletter and social media to the general student body. Early feedback suggested narrowing the participant pool to sport-related assistantships only, so only sport related departments were contacted directly. Expanding research beyond the scope of sport and looking at other unique graduate assistant roles such as those within Housing and Residence Life or Student Affairs might help create a more holistic understanding of the state of graduate assistants across the university setting. Follow-up studies might consider comparing burnout and stress rates across different departmental settings.

The purpose of this research was to further examine the prevalence of burnout and stress among graduate students working as graduate assistants, specifically in the sport context. After surveying graduate assistants from across the United States, results suggest that GAs do experience moderate levels of burnout. The data gives an overall picture, but rates of burnout and stress along with coping mechanism vary case by case. Results suggest that GAs experience

feelings such as tiredness and exhaustion regarding personal and work-related burnout, but not to the point that their physical and social health are impacted. GAs enjoys feeling in control of their time and situations that arise and feel stressed and angered when faced with things outside of their control. For many GAs, finances are not a major cause of stress, but increased pay was a major suggestion to improve the GA experience. Other suggestions to improve the GA experience included setting boundaries, establishing clear guidelines and expectations, and relying on time management to allow time for activities outside of work and school.

GAs utilize many helpful coping mechanisms such as exercise, social activities, and taking time to rest and recover, but other suggestions can be made outside of coping mechanisms to improve the GA experience moving forward. Advisors should work with GAs to set clear boundaries and expectations early on. Instructors and advisors should work towards creating flexible class and work schedules to provide GAs autonomy and an easier way to balance both school and work. Finally, universities should continue to promote the health and wellbeing of student workings by creating a work culture that supports healthy work-life balance and continuous evaluation of how the basic needs of students can be met.

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## Appendix

Below are the numerous scales and instructions used in the survey. These include the CBI, PSS, and FSS scales.

### Personal Stress Scale

Stress:
In the last month, how often have you...

| | Very Often | Fairly Often | Sometimes | Almost Never | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Felt nervous and "stressed?" | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Dealt successfully with irritating life hassles? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | Very Often | Fairly Often | Sometimes | Almost Never | Never |
| Felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Felt that things were going your way | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Been able to control irritations in your life? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Felt that you were on top of things? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | Very Often | Fairly Often | Sometimes | Almost Never | Never |
| Been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Been able to control the way you spend your time? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

### CBI: Personal-related Burnout

Personal Burnout:

| | Always | Often | Sometimes | Seldom | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How often do you feel tired? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How often are you physically exhausted? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How often are you emotionally exhausted? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How often do you think "I can't take it anymore?" | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How often do you feel worn out? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

## Financial Stress Scale

OBJ

Financial Stress:
Consider the past six months. Please rate how often you have thought about the following financial events.

| | All the time | Often | Sometimes | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Being behind on payments | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Having a low credit score | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Being contacted by creditors | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Having to declare bankruptcy | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Not having any emergency money (e.g. savings | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Living Paycheck to paycheck | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | All the time | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| Getting something repossessed | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Being in a job where work isn't steady/predictable | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Barely making enough money to cover unexpected expenses | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Worrying about having enough money to retire | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Knowing you make less money than most of your peers | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Having large debt | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | All the time | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| Having loans with high interest rates | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Being turned down for a loan | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Christmas/holiday expenses | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Childcare expenses | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Losing a job | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Investments decreasing in value | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | All the time | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| Having to borrow money from family/friends | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Services being turned off due to being behind in payments | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Paying taxes | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

## CBI: Work-related Burnout

Work-related Burnout:

| | Always | Often | Sometimes | Seldom | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Is your work emotionally exhausting? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Does your work frustrate you? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Do you feel burnt out because of your work? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

## Vita

Katie Kuka was born in Kirkland, Washington. She grew up in Spokane, Washington with her parents, younger brother, and English springer spaniel before moving to Idaho to attend Boise State University. After earning her Bachelor of Science in Psychology, she moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where she is working towards a Master's of Science in Recreation and Sport Management. In her free time, Katie enjoys hiking, paddleboarding, watching Netflix docuseries, and exploring new places.