

UNDERSTANDING GRADUATE STUDENTS: Their Values, Beliefs, and Motivations

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If you want to understand the direction of this nation, examine the people who will soon be leading the country. Where do you find these people? In our graduate schools.

There are 2.5 million young adults enrolled in graduate programs in America today. If past performance is any indication -- and there is no reason to believe it is not -- they will quickly rise to positions of influence and authority in business, education, and government. A study of the CEO's of America's largest 1000 companies shows that the vast majority earned a graduate degree. Graduate training has become virtually a prerequisite for our federal lawmakers; more than three-quarters of our Congresspersons have a graduate degree on their resumes.

But what do we know about the graduate student population? In scouring the libraries and research computers for insights, it became clear that little attention has been focused upon the graduate student population. To address the paucity of information about this vital segment, the Barna Research Group worked in cooperation with Grad Resources to conduct a national survey of grad students. Using telephone surveys with a representative sample of 404 students, stratified by degree program and type of school, we evaluated their interests, lifestyles, and felt needs.

What we found tells us much about what we can expect the nation to be like in the years ahead. This is a complex body of individuals. As much as any other population segment we have examined, grad students are characterized by a variety of unique and distinctive attributes that bear further consideration.

Performance and Perceptions

Sacrifice is not scorned by grad students as it is by the typical American adult. In their quest for academic success, they accept it as a way of life. Time, money, and even personal relationships have been surrendered at the altar of scholastic progress.

Grad students are motivated to make these sacrifices by demands they place on themselves. They are, by and large, top achievers academically, and therefore maintain lofty requirements of their performance. These personal demands result from expectations placed on them by others; people they respect and those whose respect they wish to gain. Family, close friends, class peers, and professors are among these significant people. Grad students detect and respond to even the most subtle expectations.

Compelled to satisfy these ambitions, the typical grad student is self-reliant. The demands of excellence and achievement have honed their abilities to reach deep inside, to focus on their objectives. Total concentration is one skill that distinguishes them from most people.

Their experience and productivity have also led them to perceive themselves as leaders. They look forward to increased levels of responsibility in the future. Motivated by opportunities to influence people and institutions, to leave their imprint on society, they gravitate to the challenges generated by responsibility. Grad students are set apart by their eagerness to enhance and employ their leadership skill toward making a difference in their world.

Grad students see themselves as energetic and driven. Given their work ethic, being cast as a driven personality is viewed as a compliment, rather than a put down. They have developed a clear understanding of where they're going, and what it will take for them to get there. They are goal-oriented people, not to be deterred from the vision and path they have labored so hard to define and pursue.

Skepticism was revealed as a dominant trait among graduate students. Perhaps this can be explained by the educational process itself. Grad students are taught to challenge and test everything; to figure out what's real and what isn't, and not take statements and perceptions at face value. Engaged in an intellectual journey, they are too intelligent and inquisitive to accept dogmatic statements without closer scrutiny. They simply do not believe what they have been shown or told is necessarily the entire picture. Tangible, tested proof seems to be required before they will accept a perspective.

Another common trait among graduate students is a serious disposition. In the pursuit of higher learning they find little time to engage in frivolous activity. Leisure activities are considered a waste of time that could be spent in studying; they expect to have plenty of leisure time to pursue other interests after they graduate.

Grad students don't spend their time in solitary confinement, however. They do seek out interpersonal relationships, but as a means of release from the mental strain of school and of fulfilling of their desire to acquire knowledge and influence. Books and lectures dominate their academic experience, but they do not isolate themselves from people.

Priorities

When grad students were questioned about what they considered to be important in life, close personal friendships was deemed their top personal priority. But even this desire betrayed their single-mindedness of purpose. Friendships appeared to fuel their lust for academic growth by enabling them to learn from the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of their comrades.

Friendships also provided the emotional release from the intellectual intensity of their academic quest.

The unwavering goal of educational success has its costs as grad students found they were lacking in many levels of their relationships. Because of their narrow focus, fulfillment in their relationships was lacking. Research suggested that grad students recognize their closest friends as ultimately representing their most serious competition in the classroom or in the marketplace. As an added stress, many are also acutely sensitive to rejection by these close friends. The graduate students' non-conformist nature hinders their ability to form lasting and deep relationships with their peers.

Another top priority for grad students is scholarly achievement. The quest for scholastic success dictates nearly everything in their life: their leisure endeavors, emotional state of being, nature of their relationships, openness to religious beliefs, and acceptance of fundamental values.

It is the desire for, and prospect of, academic achievement that determines the parameters of their universe. The life of a graduate student is like a war game. Grad school represents the final days of training, moments before the soldier of knowledge launches his major offensive in life using his full arsenal of tools and weapons, battling to the top of his field. As many wartime leaders relate, this is a lonely pursuit. The role of community in the life of the grad student is largely for intellectual enrichment and helps to soften the reality of the sacrifices that have been made in the pursuit of a degree.

Free time is another priority in the lives of grad students. While research among America's adult population underscores the shift taking place from passive to active, challenging entertainment, grad students are bent upon integrating less productive leisure pursuits in their daily regimen. On average, grad students say they have 15 hours of leisure time per week. The most common extracurricular activities were music, sports, and exercise. Reading was surprisingly among the least cherished leisure activities.

Anxieties and Concerns

Grad school is a time of high anxiety for most participants. In fact, compared with measures of anxiety across different occupational groups, we found that grad students are more anxiety-ridden than most segments we have tested.

The most crippling anxiety affecting grad students was the struggle to achieve balance in life. While there is gratification earned from academic achievement, grad students fear being transformed into academic machine, devoid of any real life outside the classroom or library. In conjunction with this fear was concern for their personal health. Many grad students indicated that stresses and pressures of grad school were taking an emotional toll on them.

Anxieties and Challenges

balance outside of school	70%
personal health	59%
dealing with stress/burnout	55%
not being successful in career	52%
financial pressures	46%
relationships with peers	40%
choosing wrong career path	40%
relationships with opposite sex	34%
relationships with professors	30%
failing others' expectations	29%
growing in relationship w/ God	28%
feeling like an outsider	17%

Surprisingly, the state of their relationships was not a contributing part of their anxiety. Success in career, finances, and scholarly pursuits, all ranked higher than their concerns about interaction with peers and members of the opposite sex. This limited concern could be related to a fear that excess energy devoted to interpersonal activities might drain them of the focus they need to excel academically. Sadly, though, some grad students pointed out that the very emphasis upon academics, at the expense of deeper relationships, is what has led them to a point of emotional emptiness.

The importance of the issue of balance in lifestyle cannot be over emphasized. Balance is not one of the post graduate realities for which students are being prepared. Discussions about balancing career achievement and personal wholeness are absent from classroom lectures, and missing from pages of the text books that are underlined and memorized. Yet the conclusion grad students arrive at regarding balance may be among the most important products of their studies. Their definition of balance, their means of achieving it, and the importance of balancing competing interests will set the pace for their post collegiate lifestyles. And that, as much as anything else they derive from their studies, will direct the quality of their lives.

Nine out of ten grad students concurred that stress and burnout were already major concerns in their life. Although the majority of grad students are in their twenties and early thirties, they are already wrestling with major issues ascribed to people in the later stages of life: those caught in the throes of a fast-lane career.

Coping with Pressure and Stress

How do grad students handle the weight of pressure they encounter? They turn inward. Independent and self-reliant, they turn to the one person in whom they have ample trust and confidence: themselves. Nine out of ten grad students

claimed that they "frequently" rely upon themselves for growth and stability. Other common sources of encouragement and stability cited were friends and family, but these were called on for help with limited frequency.

During times of weakness, doubt, or crisis, students are unlikely to reach out to their professors for aid. Only 6% said they "very frequently" turn to their mentors for assistance. This does not intimate that they have little respect for their professors. On the contrary, the impression was that grad students avoid any show of weakness before those whose respect they try so desperately to win. Transparency is not thought to wear well in the academic community; signs of strength and fortitude characterize champions.

The data also indicated that religion is not generally perceived to be a source of comfort or encouragement. Only 11% said they seek support from the Bible during tough times. Support from clergy is also low on the list of potential sources of assistance.

There is a distinction between how the grad student currently copes with pressures and crises, and how he or she would like to do so. There was a noteworthy discrepancy between the proportion of students who said they did feel close to their professors and those who desired that closeness. There was a similar disparity in a desire for close relationship with peers. Thus, grad students are in a catch-22 situation. On one hand, they desire to have more vibrant relationships with the people they share their time and space with. On the other hand, to pursue such relationships would increase stress from the fear of rejection and in the compromised focus of their energies.

Pressure, stress, self-reliance, limited free time, mistrust. Do grad students glean a sense of fun or joy from the educational pursuit? Yes, but it is the joy of achievement. Acing a test. Earning the highest grade in the class. Having conclusions in a paper affirmed by a respected mentor. Intellectual affirmation is the source of joy in grad school.

The Essence of the Grad Student

Grad students appear to be motivated by knowing rather than by being. Their mission is to obtain, retain, and utilize knowledge. The test of success in grad school is the ability to manipulate information as required by the academic process. The heart of the individual tends to be less important than the brain. The students are what they know.

Grad students are motivated by respect as well. They want people to respect their intellect, their drive, their time, and their mission. Anyone wishing to influence the grad student must gain their respect and show respect for them.

The Religious Component

With so much emphasis placed upon the religious character of the American people, where does religion fit in the picture of grad students? For most, it simply doesn't. For instance, while just over half of the adult population claims that religion is very important in their life, barely one third of the graduate students interviewed expressed the same view.

Grad students do not dismiss the existence of a religious dimension. In fact, seven out of ten acknowledge that there is a spiritual dimension to life. Most grad students acknowledge a connection between religion and a person's purpose in life. (See Prof. Keith Yandell's article *Reason and Religion*.)

It appears that religion also holds some attraction to grad students, if only from a conceptual or theoretical perspective. Most students said they would like to hear their professors discuss the influence of the different faiths and world views on the current social and ethical issues of their fields of study. Research showed that rather than sift through religious philosophies on their own, they would trust the faculty to provide a balanced and informed presentation of how religious faiths and world views influence the foundations of their own academic disciplines. Such discussions promise personal benefit (new knowledge) and an opportunity to engage in further discovery (the joy of learning).

The Three P's

In summary, grad students can be described in light of their passions: performance, preparation, and people. Their level of conduct and achievement (performance) is integral to their personal identity and their sense of growth. Their purpose for living through the challenges and risks of grad school is to be ready (prepared) to assume positions of responsibility, leadership, and influence. And through it all, they recognize the importance of establishing relationships with people; short-term ties which will further their ability to climb the academic ladder, and long-term relationships which will boost them past the hallowed halls of academia into the real world, pursuing the security of emotional acceptance and support.