

ENVIRON 245 Project Brief • Fall 2017

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Research Questions: Which factors contribute the most to student stress at Duke? How are existing campus programs addressing them? If there are areas where Duke's existing resources are lacking, which programs or other measures will be most effective at closing these gaps?

Background:

On college campuses, promoting students' mental, emotional, and physical health is becoming a higher priority for administrators, as this can affect grades, relationships, eating patterns, extracurricular involvement, and overall sense of wellbeing. Duke has recently taken steps towards finding solutions and making improvements in these areas as well. Construction finished in 2017 on the new Wellness Center, which is designed to address student health in a holistic way by bringing many aspects of wellness (including mental and physical health) under the same roof. Duke has also launched the Healthy Duke Initiative, which focuses on five core areas of health (Food & Nutrition, Mental & Emotional Wellbeing, Physical Activity & Movement, Fulfillment & Purpose, and Environment & Culture).

Lately, the Sustainable Duke office and the Wellness Center have been examining the overlap between sustainability and wellness on campus. They are interested in helping students better understand the interconnectivity of these two concepts and apply sustainable principles to personal wellness practices.

It is well documented that that stress and anxiety are the two largest factors impacting students' individual academic performance (American College Health Association, 2016), and the effects of stress can ripple out and cause damage to personal relationships, physical and mental health, and many other aspects of life. Duke University is an elite institution, but it often attracts students who pressure themselves to perform at unsustainable levels due to an intense campus culture or personal expectations of excellence. By addressing the root causes of stress, it is possible for Duke to reduce stress levels in the undergraduate population and promote a healthier and more sustainable educational model.

Objectives

- ❑ Uncover the leading causes of stress in Duke's undergraduate population
- ❑ Promote existing programming and resources on campus while developing further recommendations for measures to alleviate student stress
- ❑ Draw the attention of students to the connection between wellness and sustainability



Image 1: Duke's new Wellness Center provides a calming refuge from the stresses of campus life for many students.

Methods and Data Collection:

Overview

An initial consultation with Jason Elliott, Assistant Director of Sustainable Duke, served as a chance to establish clarity and background information for the project along with methods to improve sustainable wellness on campus.

Next, an interview with Tom Szigethy, Associate Dean and Director of the Duke Wellness Center, about his vision for sustainable wellness on Duke's campus helped narrow down the topic of the project by focusing on major sources of student stress.

A survey distributed through Facebook and two focus group meetings were held to collect more in-depth, qualitative data from individual undergraduates in order to develop a broad, yet thorough, understanding of the stressors present in student's lives. Focus group data was manually coded and analyzed for common themes; survey data was analyzed using quantitative methods.

Components of Sustainability

Economics: Monetary factors are frequently sources of stress, and healthy lifestyles can enable greater productivity and financial security.

The environment: A person's physical surroundings have powerful effects on stress.

Social aspects: Wellness is promoted or harmed by interactions with others, and positive relationships fuel healthy and sustainable lifestyle practices, creating a cycle of positive effects.



Image 2, left: Freshman in the first focus group discuss their experiences with stress.

Table 1, right. A summary of interviews conducted.

Interviewee	Affiliation	Date
Jason Elliott	Client and Assistant Director of Sustainable Duke	10/3/17
Tom Szigethy	Associate Dean and Director, Duke Wellness Center	10/12/17
Focus Group 1	Freshmen at Duke	11/6/17
Focus Group 2	Seniors at Duke	11/6/17

Methods

One focus group was conducted with 11 freshmen (6 female and 5 male) recruited by flyers distributed on campus and sent out via email to applicable groups of the student body. The other focus group was conducted with 7 seniors (5 female and 2 male) recruited through social media and in-person networking.

Researchers provided an overview of the purpose of the research, disclosed that the discussion would be recorded, and explained that participants' anonymity and privacy would be respected throughout the study. Researchers initially relied on a prepared set of 12 and 7 questions respectively, then facilitated discussion among students by asking for clarification or asking follow-up questions as needed.

The survey was created using the Qualtrics platform and distributed through posts in the official Facebook groups for (1) the class of 2020, (2) the class of 2021, (3) All Duke, and (4) current members of the service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega. Responses from 78 undergraduate students (28 freshmen, 33 sophomores, 7 juniors, and 10 seniors) were collected from November 4 to November 7, 2017.

Survey Questions:

- Demographic information (graduation year, gender, field of study)
- On average, how would you rate your stress levels over the last 30 days?
- What factors cause the most stress for you overall?
- How do you cope with stress?
- What programs or practices could you do to help decrease your stress level?
- Do you have any recommendations of stress reduction/management programs that Duke should provide for students?

Findings:

Distribution of responses to the survey question
“On average, how would you rate your stress levels over the past 30 days?”

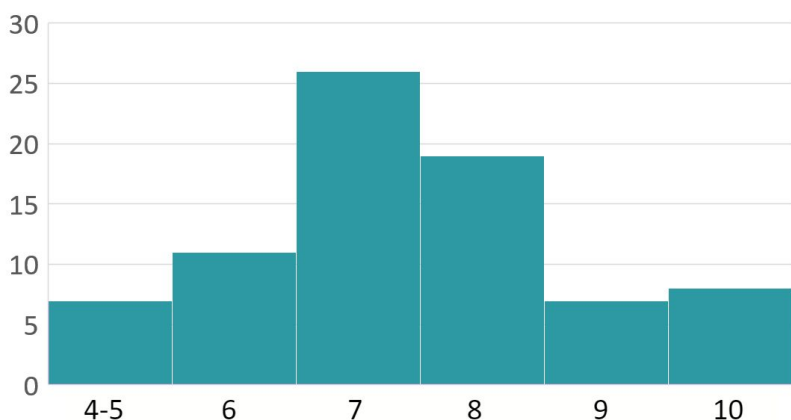


Figure 1: This histogram shows that most survey respondents reported stress levels of 7 or more, with no responses lower than a 4. (1 is not stressed at all; 10 is extremely stressed.) The mean response is 7.4 and the median response is 7.0.

“Sometimes I feel like I am the only one feeling this way.”

“You can’t control what’s around you — you can only control the stress you cause yourself.”

“Stress is just part of life; I don’t even notice it anymore.”

“This is just how Duke is.”

Survey Results

Overall, no correlation was found between stress levels and gender, graduating class, or field of study, indicating that **this issue affects all students equally regardless of demographic factors**.

Students responded that their **academic workload was the most stressful factor**, closely followed by **sleeping habits and time management**. “Listening to music” was the most popular coping strategy, along with going out with friends, exercising, and spending more time in the dorm or library or skipping sleep in order to work. Just 9 respondents said that they go to the Wellness Center when stressed.

Factors related to friends/social life were ranked highly as both stressors and coping strategies. This may be because friends provide support for each other and social events serve as distractions and ways to let off steam, but at the same time, stress may result from making or maintaining friends and relationships, which may be particularly true for freshmen.

Focus Groups

For the freshman who participated in the focus group, the idea of **effortless perfection** on campus had a large influence on their stress levels. Other factors revolved around **balancing their schedules** with school work, sleep, and their social life.

Among interviewed seniors, the most-discussed issues causing stress were **heavy academic workload, post-graduation planning, and pressure from others** (i.e. peers or parents).

The difference in stressors identified by seniors versus first-years suggests that stress is an evolving issue that would need to be addressed in different ways throughout a student’s college career. The **lack of knowledge** about programming and events geared toward reducing stress levels was evident in the first-year student focus group. Students were unaware of events such as Healthy Duke week and amenities like the Oasis room in Bell Tower dorm.

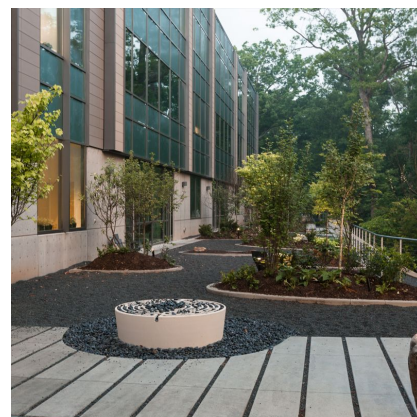
Conclusions and Recommendations:

Overall, the research completed makes it clear that not only is stress a huge problem at Duke, but that any steps that Duke takes to relieve stress in students must be focused on helping them deal with their academic workloads in productive, healthy ways. **Students' preferred coping strategies** — such as going out with friends, skipping sleep, and taking fewer study breaks while spending longer hours working — **can often be destructive in the long term**. Additionally, **students may be reluctant to admit that they are struggling**, and overcoming a campus culture that glorifies or makes light of extreme stress is a significant barrier to progress.

Fortunately, there is a multitude of resources already available to students. As there is no single dominant stressor — and given the interrelatedness of various factors — **variety is crucial to ensuring that every student can find a strategy that works for them**. However, there is a significant **lack of awareness** of these resources, particularly among freshmen. Therefore, education about sustainable, healthy alternatives is imperative in order to make improvements. As such, **the group's recommendations are as follows:**

- ❑ Create a centralized and easy-to-navigate website with a collection of campus wellness resources as well as an educational section about smaller, easier habits or practices to decrease stress (for example, walking in the gardens, drinking water, or doing a 5-minute meditation). Alternatively, update the DuWell website so that it is easier to navigate and includes a wider variety of information and educational resources.
- ❑ Create an event just for freshmen during O-Week to talk about wellness resources on campus (this could also be achieved by combining such topics with an existing event such as True Blue).
- ❑ Following the example of other large universities, Duke should consider integrating wellness principles at a classroom level in coordination with the Wellness Center. “Mindfulness minutes” or other practices could be added to the Green Classroom certification in the future to encourage faculty to lead their students in mindfulness practices to reduce stress.

Image 3: The meditation garden outside the Wellness Center.



Next Steps

- ❑ Create a new, centralized website dealing with stress and wellness topics, or update the DuWell website to include a greater variety of information
- ❑ Host a stress and wellness-themed event for first-years
- ❑ Work with faculty and staff to implement sustainable wellness into the classroom

To learn more, visit studentaffairs.duke.edu/duwell

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Sources:

[American College Health Association. National College Health Assessment. Fall 2016.](#)

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