

Te-Erika Patterson (2016). Why Do So Many Graduate Students Quit? The Atlantic.

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With half of all doctoral students [leaving graduate school without finishing](#), something significant and overwhelming must be happening for at least some of them during the process of obtaining that degree. Mental illness is often offered as the standard rationale to explain why some graduate students [burn out](#). Some research has [suggested](#) a link between intelligence and conditions such as bipolar disorder, leading some observers to believe many graduate students struggle with mental-health problems that predispose them to burning out.

But such research [is debatable](#), and surely not every student who drops out has a history of mental illness. So, what compels students to abandon their path to a Ph.D.? Could there be other underlying factors, perhaps environmental, that can cause an otherwise-mentally-healthy graduate student to become anxious, depressed, suicidal, or, in rare cases, violent?

Research suggests that the majority of students who enter doctoral programs possess the [academic ability](#) to complete their studies, but systemic issues at schools may lead to high attrition and [mental distress](#) among graduate students. In exploring what exacerbates mental-health issues among graduate students, it may be wise to shift the focus away from labeling graduate students “deficient” to investigate how institutions themselves may be causing attrition.

The culture of Ph.D. programs can make some students snap, according to Karen Kelsky, a former tenured professor and academic career coach. In fact, she said in an email, “it isn’t usually a snap so much as a gradual disintegration.” Ph.D. programs are extremely lonely and based on a culture of critique rather than support in which professors and peers constantly look for weaknesses in the doctoral student’s arguments, she said.

During Kelsky’s 15 years as a tenured professor and advisor, she witnessed many students toil in solitude on their dissertations while sacrificing their outside interests. “You become overly fixated on what your professors think of you,” she said. “Paranoia is quite rampant in Ph.D. programs because Ph.D. students can get so isolated and so fixated on whether or not the people in authority [committee members] approve of what they’re doing since they have total authority to grant the degree.”

[Marcella Wilson](#), a [computer-science professor](#) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), completed her undergraduate work at Washington Bible College, a small, historically black institution. The close-knit campus with dotting professors, she said, did not prepare her for certain aspects of life as a computer-science doctoral student at UMBC. “[The graduate faculty] don’t have time to help you,” she said. “You get [the coursework] or you get out.”

After encountering a number of obstacles to on-time completion—including disagreements with faculty over shifting course-completion requirements, watching as a graduate faculty member warned other faculty not to advise her, and feeling that she was being ostracized—Wilson said she started to have panic attacks and feelings of paranoia. “I felt trapped when I was inside my car ... I was becoming agoraphobic,” she recalled. “When I would get into the car, I had visions of myself opening up the door and rolling out into traffic and hurting myself.”

Janet Rutledge, the vice provost and graduate-school dean at UMBC, said Wilson's recollections are reflective of a widespread problem at her university and graduate programs across the country: a lack of communication between faculty and students. "Very rarely is the faculty motive ... malicious," she said. Faculty members are often "very busy and they don't communicate the full reason for some of the things that they do, so it is only natural that a student makes certain assumptions based on what they have been able to observe."

In a brief titled "[Re-Envisioning the Ph.D.](#)," Jody Nyquist, the former dean of graduate studies at the University of Washington, asked doctoral students across eight disciplines about the flaws they perceived in the graduate-school process. An overwhelming number complained about a lack of quality mentoring and support from faculty. The study also noted that doctoral students believed mentoring needs to begin earlier, be more systematic, and be based on a multiple-mentor model.

Graduate programs that encourage a multiple-mentor model of advising are rare, but this type of support is precisely what helped Wilson complete her doctoral program, she said. After being informed of Wilson's troublesome graduate experiences, Rutledge introduced her to [PROMISE](#), a program that supports the academic development of graduate students at UMBC. "Once I began to believe I could graduate, I realized that it was not about [the professors]," Wilson said. "I have good relationships with them all now."

Scott Kerlin, a former doctoral-committee member at the University of Washington and the author of *Pursuit of the Ph.D.: "Survival of the Fittest,"* suggested that students [describe](#) the doctoral process as more "political" than intellectual in nature. There are "lots of issues of power and powerlessness that pervade the graduate experience," Kerlin said, which may induce extreme distress for students who feels powerless. Indeed, a common [reaction to highly stressful situations](#) is difficulty engaging in mutual problem-solving, which, according to Rutledge, makes it especially important for graduate-school administrators to mediate discord between faculty.

But that can be hard to achieve: Many students are convinced the doctoral experience sets them up to fail. "Dysfunctional graduate departments, toxic faculty, and the Navy Seal-like brutality of the Ph.D. process all contribute to the burnout experienced by the estimated 50-plus percent of Ph.D. students who fail to earn their doctorates," wrote Jill Yesko, then a doctoral student in geography, in [a 2014 op-ed](#) for *Inside Higher Ed*.

And many students enter their doctoral programs assuming that they're always expected to maintain the illusion of mental stability and confidence while interacting with faculty members, peers, or future employers—regardless of any issues that may arise. While colleges and universities are [expanding mental-health services](#) for students, many doctoral candidates feel they need to mask their weaknesses because asking for help would be detrimental to their professional reputations.

In 2011, the University of Texas at Austin's sociology department conducted a study of graduate students at 26 major universities across the United States. The study, "[Stress and Relief for American Graduate Students](#)," found that 43 percent of all study participants reported experiencing more stress than they could handle, with Ph.D. students expressing the greatest amounts of stress. Of the students polled, more than half listed stress or burnout as a major concern, about a quarter cited feeling like an outsider, and nearly a third listed their relationships

with professors. Only 6 percent of graduate students said they felt they could frequently turn to their mentors and advisors for [assistance during stressful times](#).

“I live and work in a context in which I am encouraged to conceal my [depression], lest it somehow devalue or denigrate my intellectual efforts or the currency of my reputation ... This is a toll that academia exacts from so many of us,” Jacqui Shine, a doctoral student at UC Berkeley wrote in a [column](#) on *Chronicle Vitae*.

Chester Goad, a graduate instructor at Tennessee Technological University and the director of its disability-services offices, said he’d never experienced an anxiety attack until he entered his doctoral program in educational leadership.

Goad thought he had been doing well managing his hectic schedule, which included being a father and husband, and maintaining a full-time job, often working on literature reviews or research that forced him to leave the university well after midnight. One day, he had a panic attack while en route to an examination with his peers. Feeling lightheaded and claustrophobic, he had to run away to catch his breath. When he regained composure, his first reaction was a feeling of shame. “As professionals you don’t want people to see you in that situation,” he said. “You want people to think you have got it all collected and together.”

Dion Metzger, an Atlanta-based psychiatrist who specializes in mental illness, argued that the graduate-student experience “produces unique stressors that may not necessarily be found in other career paths.” In pursuing an especially high level of education, she noted, many people may feel an especially high pressure to receive a return on their investment. [Alienation](#) from friends and family, an average of [eight years spent](#) developing and presenting research, and the cost, are just a few of the ways students feel they have invested.

But sometimes the emotional, social, and financial sacrifices doctoral students make during their studies are, at least initially, difficult to recuperate. In 2014, well over a third of doctorate recipients [reported no firm employment upon graduation](#).

“The students place these expectations on themselves, but sometimes feel the pressure from loved ones who have supported them through their education,” said Metzger, the psychiatrist. “A simple question of ‘Have you found a job yet?’ can [create] instant panic-like symptoms for graduate students. There is a greater pressure to get a job that measures up to the hard work that was put in. Depending on the graduate school path chosen, that is easier said than done ... This can be devastating.”

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

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