

# Supporting All Students: Identifying Factors that Influence Well-Being In PhD Students at Pharmacy Programs

Emili Anderson, PharmD Candidate, Jacqueline M. Zeeman, PharmD, Isabel Matt, PharmD Candidate, Suzanne C. Harris, PharmD

UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

## BACKGROUND

- Literature identifies concerning rates of burnout and decreased well-being across health professions and academic institutions, including PhD Students.<sup>1-3</sup>
- This is a distinctive population that ultimately represents the future of pharmaceutical academia and industry.
- While prior studies have quantified the degree of burnout and wellbeing in PhD students, more information is needed to understand factors that affect well-being and the influence of unique stressors in graduate training at pharmacy programs.

*The purpose of this study is to explore factors influencing well-being and burnout and identify recommendations for pharmacy programs to improve PhD student well-being.*

## METHODS

Online, 60-minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted with PhD Candidates in October 2022. Participants discussed burnout, well-being, and recommendations to foster graduate student well-being.

Six volunteers participated in three focus groups, with participants stratified by All-But-Dissertation (ABD) Status (ie, Pre-ABD and ABD) to explore experiences unique to each cohort.

### Data Analysis

- Inductive coding was used to identify common themes from responses.
- Each transcript was coded independently by two researchers. All codes were reviewed and any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

## RESULTS

### WELL-BEING

#### Cohort Themes

**Pre-ABD:** First-Year Program Design  
**ABD:** Shared Understanding



### Peer Relationships

*"I think my relationships with the other students in my division...but it cross[es] I think the PhD Program more broadly. Those are important for establishing a sense of well-being."*

### Supervisor Relationships

*"I would say, having an understanding PI who is attentive to your needs, willing to make changes, listens to you, and takes your ideas into consideration."*

### Curriculum & Research

*"Sense of accomplishment you get when you finish something related to your research or finishing up a class... felt like a huge milestone to me...it's really helpful."*

### BURNOUT

#### Cohort Themes

**Pre-ABD:** Inconsistency in Mentors  
**ABD:** Uncertainty in Curriculum and Research



### Curriculum & Research

*"First year you're cruising along, next thing you know you're starting your first project, taking exams, preparing for oral [defense]...and I wasn't as prepared as I expected to be."*

### Work Life Balance

*"If my [experiment] doesn't work, I feel it and it keeps me up at night. Even when I leave the school, I'm still thinking about it and it's hard to shut up."*

### Overtime

*"People feel like they have to work way over time, or they have to work through their vacation. And no one says you have to do this but that's kind of the unspoken expectation."*

### STRATEGIES

#### Cohort Themes

**Pre-ABD:** Respect Days Off  
**ABD:** Actionable Change



### Reduce Financial Burden

*"I would say look at the cost of living, and make sure the salary you're offering is aligned with the current cost of living... we should recognize that the [current stipend] does not meet the cost of living for most students."*

### Encourage PhD Connections

*"Getting PhD students to talk to each other, so that they don't feel alone in their confusion or struggles is one of the biggest things you can do."*

## CONCLUSIONS

Across both Pre-ABD and ABD groups, themes were found to positively impact well-being, contribute to burnout and be a source for recommendations, such as:

- curriculum and research,
- relationships and
- finances of students

However, due to the differences in the Pre-ABD and ABD programs, they also reported unique needs and recommendations to improve well-being.

The UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy has made the well-being of the School community a top priority. Examples include:

- adopting University Wellness Days
- hiring a mental health counselor, and
- increasing the minimum PhD stipend

These findings provide critical insight into the PhD candidate experiences in pharmacy programs and may be used to guide other programs and graduate education more broadly.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Michael Jarstfer, PhD, Sara Wasserman, PhD Candidate, and the Research and Scholarship in Pharmacy (RASP) program at the UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy for project feedback and support.

## REFERENCES

- APhA. Enhancing Well-Being And Resilience Among The Pharmacist Workforce: A National Consensus Conference (2019). <https://www.pharmacist.com/consensusrecs>
- Pizunzka D, et al. *Psychiatria Polska*; 2021;55(4):901-14
- Evans TM, et al. *Nat Biotechnol*. 2018;36(3):282-4