

**Graduate Student Wellbeing: Building Competencies to Combat Burnout During
Graduate School Executive Summary**

Faculty Initiative Fund Proposal, Tier I

Submitted to the Faculty Alliance Chair and Office of Academics, Students & Research Office

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This brief executive summary includes the deliverables of the Graduate Student Wellbeing: Building Competencies to Combat Burnout During Graduate School - FIF tier 1, 12-month project. This document includes a brief summary of the GradThrive program, the program evaluation, and a reflective narrative, including lessons learned and recommendations.

Overview of Project: Goals and Stakeholders

The project included the development and evaluation of GradThrive. GradThrive was developed as an embedded program for graduate student wellbeing at the University of Anchorage Alaska. This program provided professional development and wellbeing opportunities for all UAA graduate students, specifically learning about ways to buffer burnout and build professional skills for graduate school at UAA and beyond. The overall goal of this project was twofold: (1) to increase UAA graduate student engagement around wellbeing to increase professional skills and (2) to develop long-term UAA partnerships and structure for wellbeing at the university level. To assess these goals, we conducted a program evaluation and hope that this report and project data will contribute to developing a lasting and larger graduate student wellbeing program for UAA.

Stakeholders of this project included several groups at the university, including those already conducting wellbeing and professional development efforts. In addition, graduate students themselves were a key stakeholder group. Specifically, we identified the following stakeholders who we consulted and engaged with on this project: UAA's Graduate School/Dean Mary Jo Finney; UAA Student Services including Student Health and Counseling (and the health promotion team), DSS, Dean of Students/Care team, Pride Center, Multicultural Center; College of Health; College of Arts and Sciences; Graduate Students - inclusive of all UAA graduate students interested in attending, including students from the over 20 master's programs and 6 doctorate programs - with an emphasis on health programs; Community partners.

Design

This pilot project was conducted from January 2024 to December 2024, and the program evaluation process included the development, implementation, and evaluation of GradThrive, the graduate student wellbeing program. This programming focused on the unique wellbeing needs of graduate students at UAA. We engaged with stakeholders, including students, to design the programming, participate, and provide feedback.

Development. Development took place largely over Spring 2024 and Summer 2024 (See Appendix Image 1). During the Spring of 2024, our team started to develop relationships with stakeholders at UAA; we met with or consulted stakeholders to understand their perspective on graduate student needs and wellbeing concerns. This information was incorporated into all phases of the project. We conducted an Initial Graduate Student Survey to learn more about their perspectives and views on wellbeing and a program. We received 79 responses, providing information about the types of activities, times and days, and engagement information from UAA graduate students. We recruited a Graduate Student Service Assistant to join our team and provide essential perspective and support on this project. At this development phase, we started to develop the GradThrive program including an initial welcome kickoff event. We designed the program to include (1) educational professional development workshops on professional wellbeing and addressing burnout and (2) wellbeing activities designed to increase

wellbeing skills provided to graduate students. During the Summer of 2024, we hired the Graduate Student Service Assistant and began to recruit community professionals to provide wellbeing skill groups. We conducted outreach to several professional groups, including internal and external professionals to leverage and collaborate with UAA experts (including COH, CAS, art department, culinary department, community psychologist and yoga instructor). Using stakeholder feedback, we continued to plan the program, both part I and part II. Our team continued to hold stakeholder meetings and importantly, we were able to develop a partnership with the UAA Graduate School and planned joint events.

Program design. GradThrive was developed using stakeholder meetings feedback data and the student responses on the Initial Graduate Student Survey. The program included two types of offerings to allow for access and options for student participation. Part I included a weekly open, drop in model group for didactic learning and wellbeing activities and was offered synchronously via Zoom and in person. Part I included 3 professional development co-hosted events with the Graduate School. Part II was a 9-week online mindfulness group, adapting the CAFE cohort group model for weekly meetings. Groups were offered with multiple modalities when possible, including in-person and virtual to allow increased access for students studying across Alaska. Groups were led by UAA COH and CAS faculty, UAA Graduate School Dean, and community professionals. Group content included education on wellbeing and addressing burnout, and wellbeing activities including yoga, meditation, and opportunities for engagement with the UAA community.

Implementation. GradThrive was implemented in Fall of 2024, starting with a kick-off welcome event. Both part I and II were implemented and offered to students. Ongoing collaboration with stakeholders was conducted. The team continued ongoing planning and process improvements based on ongoing feedback. In addition, the program outcome survey was developed and disseminated to student participants who signed up for and/or attended any of the GradThrive events (both parts I and II) during the fall semester. The GradThrive programming offered during Fall 2024 included 23 events (see Appendix Image 2). This included a kick-off welcome event, a mindfulness group series led by Dr. Vanessa Meade, three professional development seminars co-hosted by the UAA Graduate school (one was canceled due to illness and rescheduled in Spring), a seminar on professional burnout, a yoga series provided by a community professional, physical activities including walks, celebrations to build community, and creative activities to explore the reasons for seeking graduate education. Events were hybrid when possible to increase accessibility.

Evaluation. Evaluation of the GradThrive included triangulation of data from multiple sources, including process data, survey data, and engagement data into a SWOT analysis utilizing the program evaluation model from the Center for Community Health and Development (summarized below). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data from outcome surveys and engagement numbers reviewing engagement and effectiveness. Engagement was defined as attendance data at GradThrive events gathered during the project implementation. This was measured using the engagement and participation data. Effectiveness was defined as a student report of effectiveness, as reported on the Outcome Survey. It was sent to all individuals who registered for a GradThrive event during the fall semester. Process data, including observations and reflections from the GradThrive team, were also included as contextual information.

Results

Engagement. Engagement in higher education can be understood as behavioral, emotional, or cognitive (Trowler, 2010). This evaluation generally measured behavioral engagement focused on registration and attendance behavior. Cognitive and emotional engagement was seen based on qualitative responses and student feedback during the project. Across the 23 events, there was an average of 2 student attendees per event. Overall, students were more likely to participate over Zoom ($x = 2$) versus in person ($x = 1.5$). This may be influenced by some events only offered via Zoom (yoga series and mindfulness series). There was a pattern of students registering and not attending, which may indicate interest but challenges in attending events. Student feedback data also supported this. Overall, 65% of students who registered for an event attended. They were more likely to attend if they registered in person (72%) than when registering online (34%). Attendance was also impacted by the type of event offered. At the welcome kick-off event before the start of the semester, 19 students and 4 UAA staff attended. This event had significantly more attendance than offerings during the fall semester. There was an average of 1.44 individuals in part II mindfulness group versus .92 individuals in the open part I events. Several seminars were recorded, and several students requested access to the asynchronous video (only recorded with permission from all attendees). Students actively participated in the development phase as well, through surveys (79 students completed the initial survey), emails with ideas and support, and the project GSA was a key stakeholder with valuable perspective and contributions. While we know that at least 35 graduate students participated, we did not track unique individual event participation.

Notably, there was significant participation of stakeholders at the University. An average of 1.9 staff supported these events (including the PIs). The Graduate School was a key partner to develop and implement this project. One of the events co-hosted with the Graduate School included stakeholder involvement, where 4 UAA departments presented and participated (10 University staff were in attendance). Faculty (not PIs) volunteered their time to present and participate. In addition, stakeholders actively engaged in the development phase to provide their valuable perspective on graduate student wellbeing.

Effectiveness. Thirteen ($n = 13$) students across UAA graduate programs and degrees completed the Outcome Survey. The sample included students who attended both parts I and II. The majority of students heard about the program from email (78%). Students who responded and attended an event reported attending 1-3 GradThrive events and reported attending 75% via Zoom and 25% in person. The majority of respondents to the survey indicated that they felt that the events contributed to their skills, knowledge, and resources for wellbeing (43% “very true” and 29% “somewhat true”). All respondents indicated that they were glad they attended the events. Half of the sample (50%) reported they would recommend the program to other students (50% felt neutral). They indicated that the method and content of the events were useful. One student expressed appreciation for the focus on graduate student wellbeing. Individuals who registered for the events but could not attend cited other commitments such as work and classes as barriers to attendance. This is consistent with the literature on student engagement in extracurricular activities, noting that commitments and time are barriers to participation (Dickinson, Griffiths, & Bredice, 2020). In addition, students wanted to see more opportunities to build community and access resources asynchronously.

SWOT. This project data and our experience revealed several strengths and weaknesses of GradThrive. In addition, these efforts allowed us to identify opportunities and risks to wellbeing efforts at UAA for graduate students. These will be summarized into recommendations for future wellbeing efforts.

Strengths. UAA stakeholder engagement with staff and faculty were high, especially the Graduate School. Students expressed gratitude and interest. UAA has knowledgeable staff to support these efforts and volunteerism of faculty and staff were significant. Students shared that content was appreciated and they felt the program contributed to wellbeing generally. Students gave feedback they were able to form connections with other graduate students. Flexibility of online and Zoom allowed for accessibility. Good emotional and cognitive engagement was noted with answering surveys, responsiveness to requests for participation, and verbal feedback given. The GSA on this project contributed significantly to support, outreach, scheduling, and offered a valuable perspective. Having a graduate student who was currently enrolled informed the project and assisted with reaching and communicating with other graduate students.

Weaknesses. Administrative challenges outside of the control of the PIs impacted the project significantly, limiting the use of funds (although the aims of the project were met). In addition, having a wellbeing project led by faculty with various duties was challenging to balance all of the administrative tasks associated with grants and financial spending (e.g., paperwork to spend funds, shopping, etc.). Due to scheduling and availability, programming was offered generally on two evenings, but not all students who wanted to attend were able to accommodate these times. Student responses indicate that half of the sample would recommend the program to other graduate students. Students commented that other activities or incentives would be more effective, such as more community building, door prizes, and other items specific to their needs. Several cited challenges of commitments during graduate school as barriers.

Opportunities. Student emotional and cognitive engagement, ideas and support, and stakeholder engagement suggests that there are more opportunities for continued wellbeing efforts. Of note, UAA's mission and values are in alignment with supporting student success and wellbeing.

Threats. Continued threats to wellbeing programming was identified well by students and seen through engagement. Specifically, time for activities and other responsibilities are a significant barrier to behavioral engagement. In addition, lack of continued funding and structural support to support wellbeing will be a challenge to continue this work.

Recommendations. Based on our FIF project, we make the following recommendations for a graduate student wellbeing program in the future:

1. Continue to expand efforts to support graduate student wellbeing, including continuing to support current efforts. This could be accomplished by identifying a dedicated staff working with wellbeing as a focus for students. This individual would be able to contribute to the long term sustainability of a wellbeing program and assist with administrative tasks and building relationships with stakeholders. We would recommend this for long-term sustainability. We were not able to continue seeking

- funding on this project, but this could support future efforts.
2. Look at wellbeing outside of the individual student, such as working with their support networks, faculty, and staff. Due to the barriers impacting students' engagement, wellbeing efforts can be brought to students through integration into courses and training of faculty and staff. Faculty and staff are essential supports to graduate students, and are well situated to enhance the wellbeing of our graduate students.
 3. Create more flexible options like asynchronous offerings or through offering a graduate student wellbeing seminar elective course or intensive where students could receive credit for attendance. Development and implementation of wellbeing resources into existing structures like blackboard shells would reach more individuals, such as an asynchronous wellbeing module.
 4. Continue building stakeholder relationships to bring together those who support students. This project engaged with key stakeholders who had high levels of engagement.
 5. Continue to work with students to develop and offer wellbeing efforts as the key stakeholders. This will allow for more individualized efforts to better meet our students' unique needs and is supported in literature (Sepede et al., 2021). This project started to summarize graduate student engagement patterns (Trowler, 2010). Continue to explore what our students would find reinforcing incentives; This project feedback suggests that door prizes, asynchronous offerings, and community building would be useful.

Discussion and Reflective Narrative

Insights and Lessons Learned. We learned several lessons about wellbeing for graduate students at UAA. GradThrive was focused on individual levels of wellbeing. Due to the unique challenges graduate students experience, future wellbeing programs should look at the system around the graduate student, including their support system, advisors, and faculty. These more global efforts could seek to change the way we conceptualize and bring wellbeing to the student rather than having the student come to the wellbeing program, due to the significant barriers faced by students. We also learned that this program was challenging to complete, with the PIs being full-time faculty members with other duties. If we were to do another project, we would design a wellbeing module, that could be a hybrid of pre- and post- meetings, with asynchronous content during the semester that could be added to blackboard or other existing structures and integrated with our stakeholders.

Value and Contribution to UAA's Mission. We believe that this project supported UAA's aspiration to put students first and UAA's Mission and Values to positively impact our community and a focus on workforce development. We also believe that this added to the extremely valuable work of those already involved in supporting students at UAA, including SHCC, health promotion team, and UAA Graduate School (not exhaustive list). We believe this project supported students and provided valuable insights for future efforts.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to conduct this project. We thank UAA staff and faculty who contributed and volunteered their time on this project. Lastly, thank you to the students who participated and shared their time and feedback.

References

Dickinson, J., Griffiths, T. L., & Bredice, A. (2020). 'It's just another thing to think about': encouraging students' engagement in extracurricular activities. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(6), 744–757. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1813263>

Sepede, J. C., Petrides, J., Collins, P. B., Jones, M. C., Cantor, N. and Boyd, L. "The role of extracurricular activities and lectures in mitigating medical student burnout" *Journal of Osteopathic Medicine*, vol. 121, no. 7, 2021, pp. 617-623.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/jom-2020-0311>

Trowler, V. 2010. Student engagement literature review. *The Higher Education Academy*.

Appendix

Image 1: Development of GradThrive

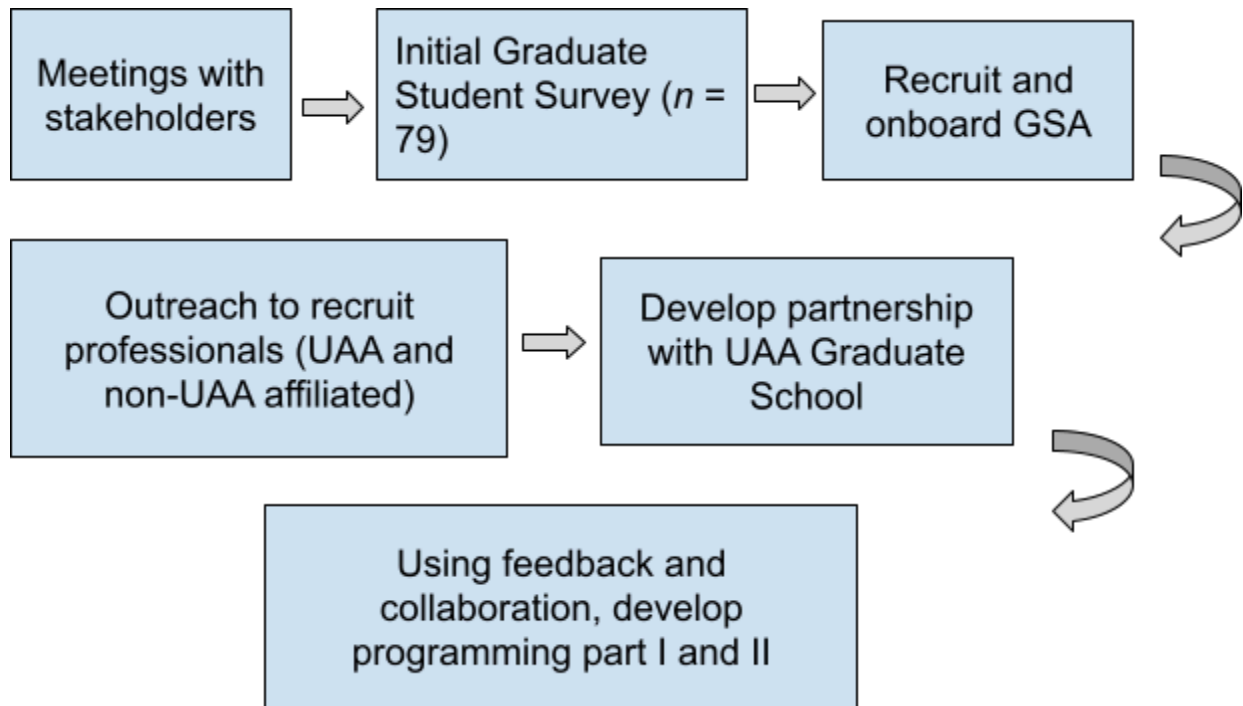


Image 2: Implementation of GradThrive

