Partners in Prevention

Missouri's higher education substance misuse prevention consortium

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Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to building and sustaining healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 28 public and private colleges and universities in the state. The campuses in PIP work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, cannabis, other drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and mental health concerns have on student health and well-being.

The following are findings from 1,132 graduate students across six of our 4-year member institutions in Missouri who participated in the 2026 MACHB survey:

Graduate Student Well-Being

Recent U.S. evidence has drawn increasing attention to graduate student mental health and well-being. For example, a study of graduate students across U.S. economics Ph.D. programs found that approximately one-quarter experienced moderate or severe symptoms of depression or anxiety, with concerns becoming more pronounced among students later in their programs (Bolotnyy et al., 2022). National data from the American College Health Association (ACHA) further demonstrates the importance of monitoring graduate and professional students' mental health, well-being, health behaviors, and access to support across U.S. institutions (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2024).

Well-being, however, extends beyond the absence of mental health concerns. Feeling connected, supported, and valued within the university community is also an important part of students' overall well-being. Recent research highlights sense of belonging as an important contributor to college student well-being and emphasizes the role institutions can play in creating environments that foster connection and support (Romeo et al., 2024).



Check out our Engage online introductory training focused on how community connectedness can contribute to the health and safety of your campus!

Visit mopip.org/engage

This brief uses statewide data to examine graduate students' well-being, including their mental health experiences, sense of belonging, awareness and use of available resources, and retention. The findings are intended to provide a clearer picture of graduate student well-being and inform efforts to create supportive environments in which graduate students can thrive academically, professionally, and personally.

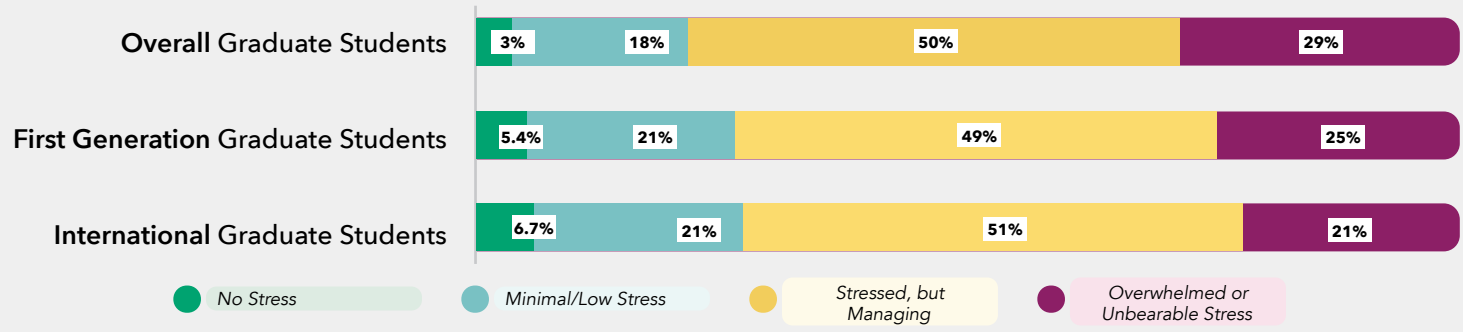
With nearly one-third of respondents identifying as the first-generation to attend college (32%) or international students (32%), this brief highlights their experiences to better understand how well-being and belonging may differ across graduate student populations.

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Stress & Well-Being

Nearly one-third of graduate students (29%) reported high levels of stress in the two weeks prior to the survey. Specifically, 25% described their stress as overwhelming, while 4.3% reported that their stress was unbearable. The top four areas that students reported being stressed about included academic stress (83%), financial concerns (50%), job (50%), and time management (44%).* See **Chart 1** for stress levels overall and among first-generation and international graduate students.

Chart 1. Level of Stress



When asked about their greatest support needs as graduate students, the most commonly reported concerns were academic distress (65%), followed by financial concerns (60%), anxiety (58%), stress (53%), depression (52%), and job-related stress (43%).

Students were also asked to report how many hours of sleep on average they get on a typical school night (Sunday-Thursday), with nearly two-thirds (65%) reporting seven or more hours of sleep per night.

To better understand experiences of food insecurity in the past 30 days, students are asked to report if they sometimes, very often or always: cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food (13%), the food that was bought just didn't last and they didn't have money to get more (9.6%), or being hungry but not eating because there wasn't enough money for food (7.0%). Student responses related to food insecurity are shown in **Chart 2**.

Mental Health

Missouri graduate students self-reported experiencing issues related to mental health in the past 12 months, the most common being anxiety (50%), depression (39%), chronic sleep issues (22%), and other mental health concerns like OCD, ADHD, or ADD (15%).* About two-thirds of graduate students (67%) reported experiencing

Chart 2. Food Insecurity

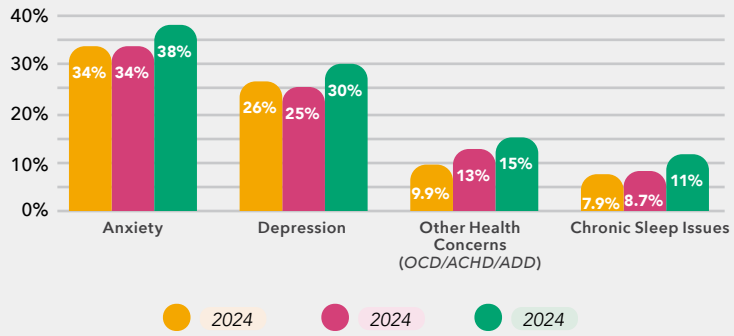


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at least one mental health concern in the past year. The prevalence was similar among first-generation graduate students (64%) and lower among international graduate students (55%).

Students are also asked to report if their mental health concern has been diagnosed by a mental health or medical professional. 38% report being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, 30% being diagnosed with major depression, and 15% being diagnosed with other mental health concerns (i.e., OCD, ADHD, or ADD).* Across a three-year period, reported diagnoses generally increased, with all four mental health concern categories reaching their highest levels in 2026. See **Chart 3** for the three-year trend in the most commonly diagnosed mental health concerns.

Chart 3. Past Year Mental Health Concern Diagnosis Trend



Among graduate students who experienced at least one mental health concern in the past 12 months, 19% did not seek assistance, including 18% of first-generation students and 25% of international students. Among those who sought assistance, the most commonly reported sources were an off-campus medical doctor or mental health provider (38%), family or friends (33%), and a campus counseling center (17%). Additionally, 10% reported managing their concerns through self-care or other strategies on their own rather than seeking assistance.*

On-campus mental health resources appear to be particularly important for international graduate students. International graduate students were more likely to report seeking assistance from a campus health center (23%) or campus counseling center (22%), while only 10% reported using an off-campus medical or mental health provider. International graduate students were also more likely to report managing concerns through self-care (18%). These findings highlight the important role that accessible and visible on-campus resources may play in supporting international graduate students.

Suicide

Among Missouri graduate students, 39% reported suicidal thoughts at some point in their lifetime, including 32% of first-generation students and 24% of international students. In the past 12 months, 15% reported suicidal thoughts (12% of first-generation; 10% of international), while 0.5% reported a suicide attempt (0.3% of first-generation; 1.0% of international students). For those who had thoughts in the past 12 months, 39% sought assistance. The most common places students primarily sought assistance were off-campus mental health center/medical doctor (67%), family/friends (46%), or the campus counseling center (26%).* Additionally, 23% of Missouri graduate students have been concerned about a friend having suicidal thoughts or exhibiting suicidal behaviors in the past 12 months. Most graduate students (73%) reported that they had not heard of Ask. Listen. Refer (ALR), an online suicide prevention program designed to help faculty, staff, and students recognize and respond to suicide risk. Lack of awareness was even higher among first-generation (76%) and international graduate students (85%), highlighting an opportunity to increase the visibility and reach of suicide prevention resources among graduate student populations.



Interested in learning more about our suicide prevention training?
Visit asklistenrefer.org

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Sense of Belonging

In general, 62% of graduate students agreed or strongly agreed that they belong to the campus community. Eighty-four percent (84%) of them also believed that they have the responsibility to contribute to the safety and well-being of other students at their school. Among graduate students, 64% of first-generation students reported a high sense of belonging, compared to 60% of non-first-generation students. International graduate students reported even higher levels of belonging (72%), compared to 57% of domestic students. Overall, first-generation and international graduate students reported positive levels of connection to their campus communities.

Retention

One in ten graduate students (9.9%) have thought about transferring from their current school while almost one in five students (20%) said they have thought of discontinuing higher education in the past year. Students reported that the top three reasons contributing to their decision to either transfer or discontinue their education were their own mental health concerns (54%), financial concerns/better financial opportunities at another college/university (42%), or difficulties keeping up with academic expectations (30%).

*** Question is select all that apply**

Summary

Partners in Prevention continues to monitor the health and well-being of graduate students across Missouri. Supporting graduate student well-being requires attention not only to mental health concerns, but also to the campus environments, resources, and relationships that help students feel connected and supported. The 2026 MACHB findings highlight opportunities for institutions to strengthen graduate student support through accessible mental health services, greater visibility of available resources, suicide prevention efforts, financial and academic support, and initiatives that foster a strong sense of belonging. Particular attention to the experiences of first-generation and international graduate students can help institutions ensure that resources are responsive to the needs of diverse graduate student populations. For more information about Partners in Prevention and to explore our research, visit **www.mopip.org/pip/research/**.

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Resources

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