

Student Stress:

Details from the National College Health Assessment-II

Center for the Study of Student Life

October 2011

INTRODUCTION

College students struggle with a number of pressures, both academic and personal. Deadlines and exams can be constant stressors throughout the academic year and oftentimes may be just one aspect of a student’s overall stress. Student Life offers a variety of programs and services designed to help students manage their stress through departments such as Counseling and Consultation Service, Career Connection, Student Wellness Center, Student Health Services, and Recreational Sports, among others. The information gathered through surveys such as the National College Health Assessment-II (NCHA-II) help to guide current and future services and practices within the division.

The American College Health Association’s NCHA-II was administered to 10,000 students at The Ohio State University Columbus campus in spring of 2009, and had a 21.4% response rate. This was a voluntary, web-based survey. It assessed topics of general health, health-related impediments on academic performance, relationships, alcohol and other drug use, sexual behavior, nutrition, exercise, mental health, and sleep. After the survey data were analyzed, researchers used the survey data as guidance for focus groups in order to gain a deeper understanding of how stress affects academic performance for students, as well as to define other stressors that influence lives of students at Ohio State.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **53.9%** of respondents reported having *more than average or tremendous* stress over the last 12 months.
- A higher percentage of graduate or professional students experienced high levels of stress than did upperclassmen or first-year students.
- Correlations found significant relationships between stress and sleep.
- **51.8%** of respondents reported feeling overwhelmed in the past 2 weeks and an additional **17.1%** reported these feelings in the last month.
- **27.5%** of students reported that their academics were negatively affected because of stress.
- LGBTQ students were more likely to have their academic performance affected by their stress than their heterosexual peers.

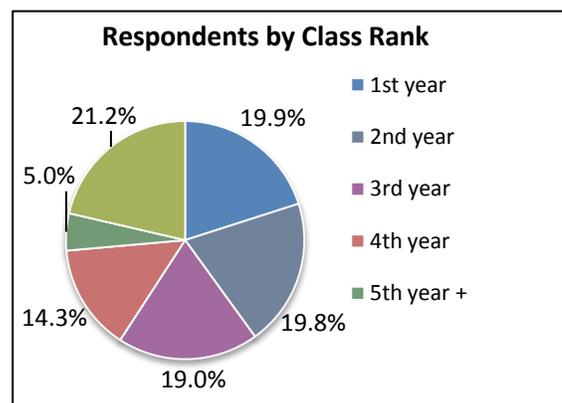
DEMOGRAPHICS

The average age of the respondents was 22 years old. Approximately 60% identified as female and 40% identified as male. This survey had an overrepresentation of females; females accounted for only 48.9% of students on campus during the spring 2009 quarter. Almost all (94%) of the respondents were full time students. Around 10% belonged to a sorority or fraternity.

Ethnicity	%
Black, non Hispanic	5.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	9.5
White	80.2
Hispanic/Latino(a)	2.5
Multiracial or Biracial	2.9
Other	2.6

Labels for students’ ethnicities in this brief are the shortened terms

from the ACHA survey. While 80.2% of the survey respondents were White, only 74.6% of the overall Ohio State student population was White at the time of the survey. The survey had a smaller Black student representation (5.6%) than the population’s total (6.3%), and



an overrepresentation of Asian students (9.5%) when compared with the university's total (5.2%) that quarter. Most student participants (93.4%) identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual, while 6.6% identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning/Queer (LGBTQ).

FINDINGS

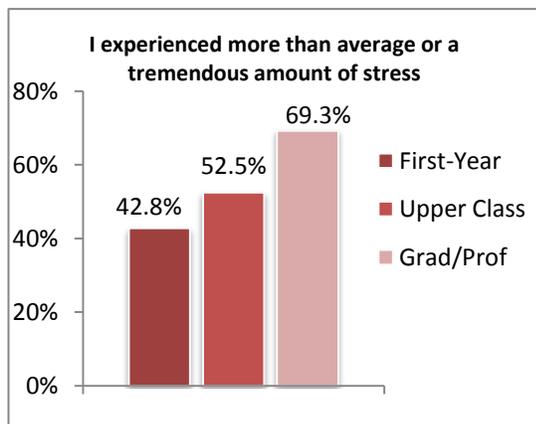
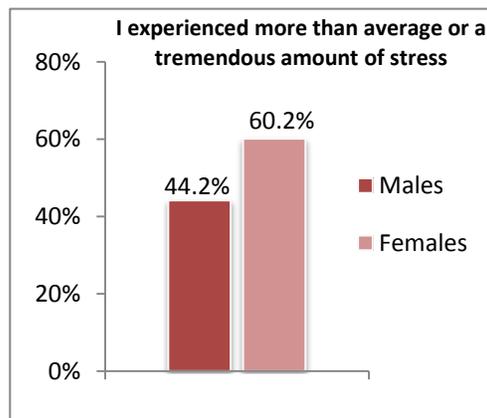
OVERALL LEVEL OF STRESS, LAST 12 MONTHS

Over half (53.9%) of respondents reported having *more than average* or *tremendous* stress over the last 12 months. A higher percentage of females than males reported having *more than average* or *tremendous* amounts of stress (graph, right). Only 9.6% of students reported feeling *no stress* or *less than an average* amount of stress in the past year.

Among LGBTQ students, 65.0% reported feeling more than average or tremendous stress in the past year, as compared to 53.2% of heterosexual students.

Being involved in an intramural or club sport may have played a role in decreasing students' levels of stress.

Not quite half (45.7%) of students who participated in intramural or club sports felt *more than average* or *tremendous* stress, compared with 56.0% of students who were not involved in these sports activities. However, there were no significant differences in stress levels based on how many days per week students exercised.



Stress increased as students entered higher class ranks, as is shown in the graph.

A higher percentage (14.1%) of students who reported being *very much* spiritually active reported their level of stress was below an average amount than did students (8.4%) who were *not at all* spiritually active. Students who did not pray or meditate had the same levels of stress as students who prayed or meditated a moderate amount or who meditated frequently.

Both the NCHA-II and post-survey focus groups noted a stress-related effect on academic performance. Data collected from the focus groups also indicated other

aspects such as finances, work, involvement and sleep difficulties as stressors in their daily lives. The majority of students in the focus groups who stated that stress affected their academic performance worked 1-19 hours per week.

STRESS AND SLEEP

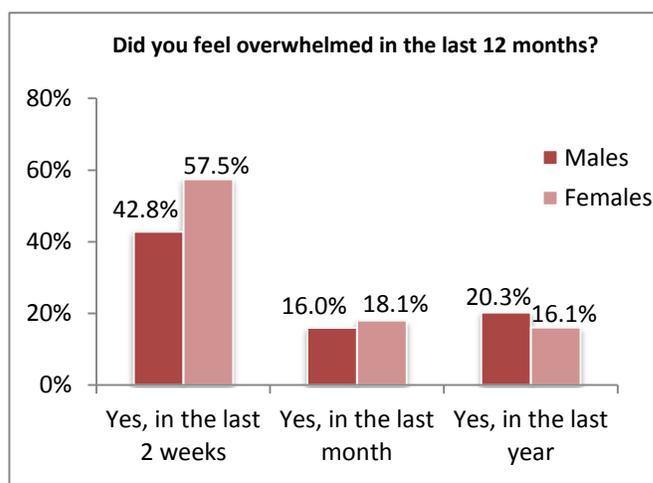
Seven students from the focus groups reported that work and sleep difficulties affected their academic performance when they worked 1-19 hours. The researchers examined possible connections between stress and sleep by running correlations between level of reported stress and multiple sleep factors addressed on the NCHA-II survey.

Level of stress correlated with the following:	%
I have a problem with sleepiness during daytime activities (past 7 days)	.331
I often feel tired, dragged out, or sleepy during the day (past 7 days)	.367
I get enough sleep to feel rested in the morning (past 7 days)	-.267
Sleep difficulties have been traumatic or very difficult to handle (past 12 months)	.323
My academic performance is affected by sleep difficulties (past 12 months)	.286

The correlations show significant relationships between stress and sleep. Those who felt tired during the day were also the most stressed out, although which factor produces the other cannot be interpreted from the correlation data. Those who got enough sleep to feel rested in the morning felt lower levels of stress.

FEELING OVERWHELMED

The survey asked students if they *felt overwhelmed by all they had to do*. Approximately 13% of all students reported that they did not feel overwhelmed in the last year. The graph shows the frequencies of feeling overwhelmed among the remaining 87% of respondents. Females reported feeling overwhelmed in the last two weeks and in the last month at a higher rate than did males. Both males and females were more likely to report feeling overwhelmed at some time in the past year than they reported feeling high amounts of stress.



Lower percentages of Asian students and Black students (44.6%) felt overwhelmed in the last two weeks (45.3% and 43.4%, respectively) than did White or Hispanic students (52.8% and 55.3%, respectively). A lower percentage of international students (44.1%) felt overwhelmed in the past two weeks than the percentage of domestic students (52.6%).

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND STRESS, LAST 12 MONTHS

A higher percentage of females (31.5%) reported that their academics were *affected by stress* than did males (21.2%). Effect on academic performance was defined as: a lower grade on an exam or important project; a lower grade in the course; an incomplete or dropped course; or a significant disruption in thesis, dissertation, research, or practicum work.

A higher percentage of LGBTQ students (41.5%) experienced a negative effect on their academics because of the amount of stress as compared to heterosexual students (25.5%).

Upperclassmen experienced more negative effects on their academics (30.3%) than did first-year (27.0%) or graduate/professional students (20.4%). Domestic students reported that their academics were negatively affected at a higher percentage (28.1%) than did international students (23.6%).

DISCUSSION

Stress is an issue that affects our students, both on personal and academic levels. Focus group analysis showed that students reported feeling stress and pressure during midterms, a time when their workloads essentially double with the responsibility of exams and regular class work. Students also tend to feel especially stressed when working a part-time job outside of school, regardless of the number of hours worked. Even social involvement can cause stress for some students as their calendars fill over the course of a quarter. These are among the areas of interest for future research on the topic of stress.

Another area for further exploration is the relationship between the amount of physical activity and levels of stress that students experience. Focus group responses indicated a number of unfavorable physiological and psychological stress responses, which include trouble sleeping, an increase in heart rate, and feelings of being overwhelmed and/or frustrated. Physical activity may be one way to help decrease stress, although more research is needed to identify how physical activity helps college students relieve the stress that they experience, and to what extent it helps. Data showed that recreational involvement may play a role in decreasing stress. Those students who reported being involved in intramural sports also reported lower levels of stress, although whether this was because the physical activity, the social aspect of the sport, or other factors, cannot be ascertained without further study.

Regardless of the stressor, students seemed interested in finding ways to cope. Students were familiar with the stress, as they clearly dealt with it to a moderate extent. They were interested in how to reduce the amount of stress they felt. Some students mentioned “surfing” the internet, working out, or using prayer and meditation as activities they used to reduce their stress. Many Student Life departments offer a number of effective strategies to combat stress. It could benefit our students to let them know of the many available options for learning stress reduction strategies.