

Innovative Educators

Supporting Academic & Professional Growth In Higher Ed

GRADUATE STUDENTS IN DISTRESS: HOW TO RECOGNIZE WARNING SIGNS & AVOID VIOLENT RESULTS OF STRESS, STRAIN & STRIFE

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Introduction...

Graduate Students in Crisis

- *Colleges Struggle to Respond to Graduate Students in Distress (August, Chronicle)*
- Almost 750 graduate students sought help from the 24-hour National Graduate Student Crisis Line (1-800-GRAD-HLP) between January and June
- Anxiety, suicide, stress, managing work and school

Graduate Students in Crisis

- *Graduate students struggle with being overworked by overzealous faculty*
- *They struggle with their future career and worry about investment*
- *They have difficulty balancing TA responsibilities with their own studies*
- *They feel stuck between student and professional roles*

Graduate Students in Crisis

Today we will look at ways to identify, manage and refer at-risk students

Four case studies

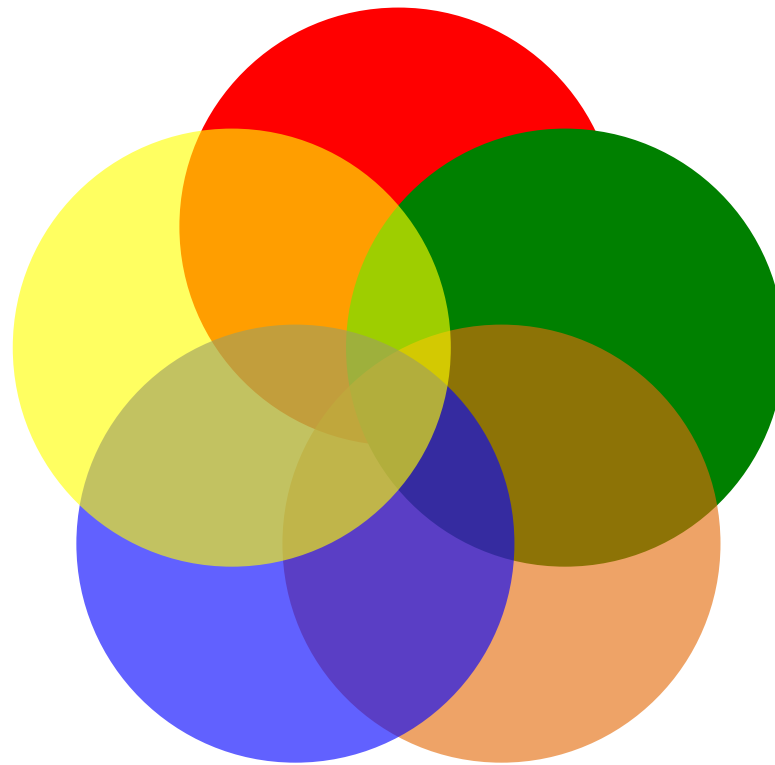
Financial

Emotional

Academic

**In-
Between**

Social



Graduate Students in Crisis

- **Financial:** money being tight, struggles with FAFSA forms, working vs. school
- **Academic:** juggling various classes, TA duties
- **Social:** mixing time with friends and academics, family and work
- **In-Between:** struggling between student status and professional one
- **Emotional:** managing stress and worry about assignments and future

Warning Signs

- Overwhelmed, hopeless and lost
- Hardened or irrational thoughts
- Lack of motivation or sadness
- Isolation from others
- Flying into a rage for little reason
- Rapid change in emotions
- Evaporating social supports



1. Grace

Case #1

Grace struggles with trying to balance her difficult course load this semester. She feels trapped and is taking courses that are harder than she expected. She is tearful and shaky around her friends and finds herself anxious most of the time. Other students are concerned about Grace and wonder if she should even be in the program.

Case #1

Grace worries that she needs to get at least C's in all of her classes to maintain status in her graduate program and that her job working in the lab does not give her as much study time as she was promised. She doesn't think she can talk to the lab manager since he is also her advisor in her academic program.

Poll #1: What Concerns You Most?

1. Her fragile nature and anxiety
2. That things seem bad and getting worse
3. Her academic course load when she is already stressed
4. The effect of her problems on other students
5. Not sure how you can help



Anxiety

- Low frustration tolerance
- Difficulty processing and managing new stress/information
- Uncontrollably worry every day about trivial things
- Panic attacks
- Inability to balance work, school, social & family life

How to Help

- Help students overcome obstacles to obtain the support they need
- **Explore resources via the campus website**
- Call various departments and learn about the services that are offered
- **Look for potential obstacles that may prevent students from accessing care**
- Offer guidance in your syllabus; invite departments to give brief intros during class time

2. Maggie

Case #2

Maggie comes in to talk to an academic tutor. She says, "I'm failing my statistics class. I feel behind all the time and lost. I'm 56 years old and came back to school to be a therapist, not a math professor. I don't know why I need to take this class...how is correlation or knowing how to use SPSS going to help me be a therapist? Maybe I just should forget all this."

Poll #2: What Concerns You Most?

1. The school admits Maggie without fully explaining the statistics requirement
2. Being asked to fix a student's problems outside of normal tutoring duties
3. Maggie feeling overwhelmed and dropping all of this on you to fix
4. The instructor not helping her to better figure out the skills she needs to be successful
5. Maggie's lack of initiative to solve this problem on her own

Who are Non-Traditional Students

A student is “non-traditional” when he/she:

- Attends a program part-time
- Works full-time while enrolled
- Is financially independent from parents
- Has dependants other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others)
- Is a single parent

Difficulty Juggling

- Sometimes graduate students feel out of place, like “they should have done this already in their life.”
- They have difficulty balancing home responsibilities with school, childcare and work schedules.
- They struggle with the financial burdens of graduate school.
- They struggle with understanding the technology needed to be successful.



Graduate Student: Stress

- Stress is all around us. Understanding the nature of the environmental stress non-traditional students face is key.
- **Stress is cumulative. As it builds, students worry they won't be able to catch up.**
- Balance the fine line between helping the student progress without holding them to an abstract standard. Require hard work, but build flexibility into your approach that allows for an understanding of context.

3. Simone

Case #3

Simone has been dating her boyfriend for the past two years. Recently, he broke up with her and she is moody and tearful. She cries easily and has trouble focusing on her thesis and TA job. She worries her advisor by saying, "I don't want to be here, I don't know what I will do without him. I can't think anymore."

Case #3



Simone teaches an undergraduate class in geography during the week. She recently has been unprepared for class, reads lectures off the PowerPoint slides and seems distracted and disengaged to her students. Some notice cuts on her arms and worry she may do something dangerous.

Poll #3: What Concerns You Most?

1. Simone's problem seems to be getting worse
2. The unpredictability of her emotional state
3. How her behavior affects and bothers the students in her class
4. Not being sure what to do to help her
5. The vague, potentially suicidal statements and cutting

Signs of Suicide

Direct Verbal Clues

"I've decided to kill myself."

"I wish I were dead."

"I'm going to commit suicide."



Indirect Verbal Clues

"I'm tired of life, I just can't go on."

"I won't be around much longer."

"Pretty soon you won't have to worry about me."

Signs of Suicide

Situational / Environmental Clues

Any previous suicide attempt

Acquiring a gun or stockpiling pills

Putting personal affairs in order

Giving away prized possessions

Substance abuse/relapse after a period
of recovery

How to Help

- How to ask the question
- Persuade student to get help
- Connect student to help



4. Carter

Managing Threat

Carter concerns other people on campus. He talks about random things, goes on rants about the government and his student loans and gets into arguments with his professors, support staff and administrators around campus. He talks about the world ending in 2012 and that "I'm preparing for the apocalypse. You better be ready." His talk and behavior worry other students.

Managing Threat

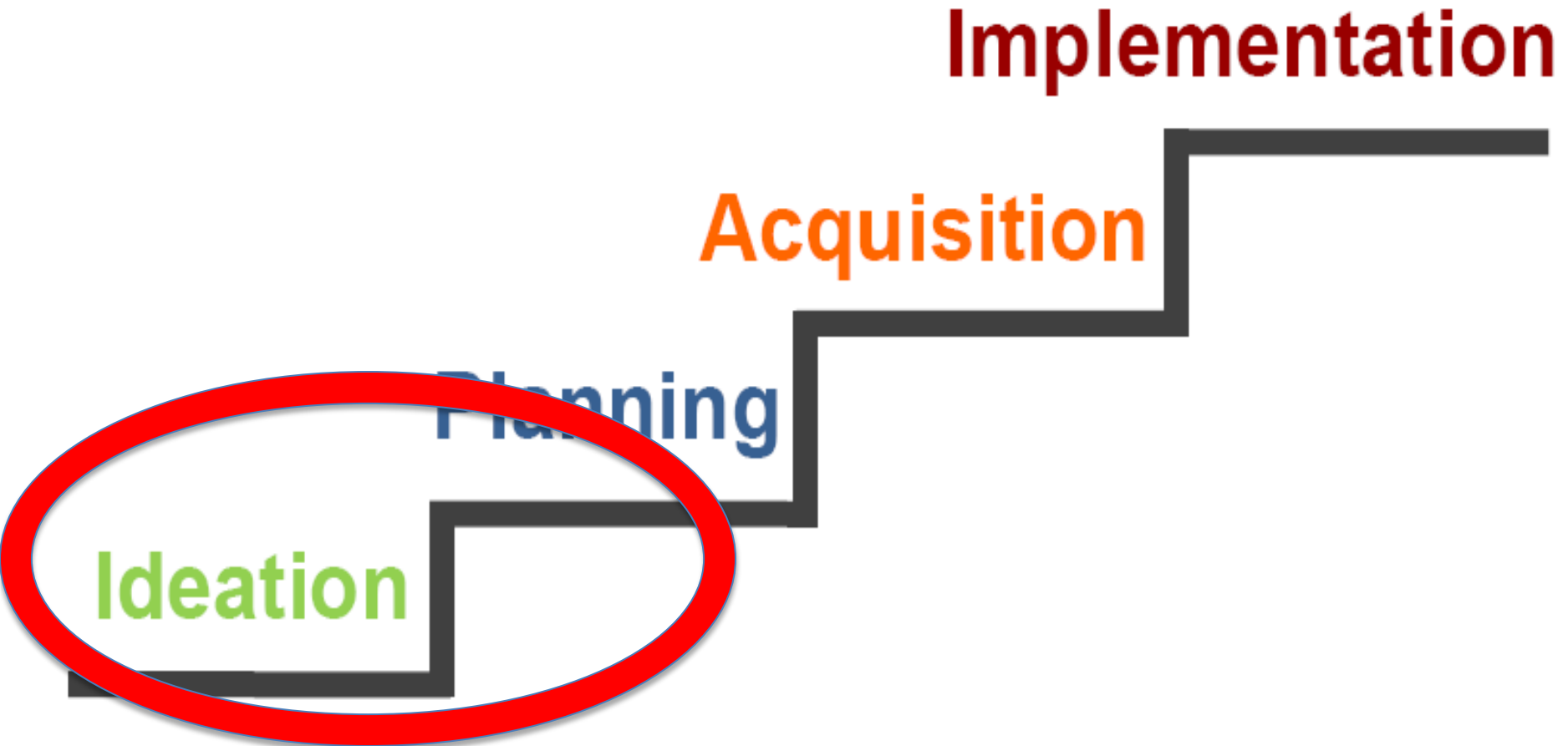
Carter recently received an estimated bill in the mail that outlined his student loan repayment plan. He carries this bill around with him and talks to people about the government and yells, “money isn’t real and numbers themselves are just representations of constructs.” He calls the school ‘evil’ for participating in the government’s plan to collect money from him.



Poll #4: What Concerns You Most?

1. The odd nature of his behavior
2. The distracting nature of his speech on other students
3. Lack of support services for students like this on campus (counseling)
4. The vague threat about the end of the world
5. Not being sure what steps to take
6. Concern that this might be one of those students who kills people

Pathway to Violence



Managing Threat

- Respond quickly to potential threat
- Build connection, establish rapport
- Assess nature of threat
- Develop next step plan to mitigate risk
 - Counseling (access problem)
 - Parent contact/involvement
 - Conduct meeting/probation
- Avoid knee-jerk, one-size-fits-all approach

Managing Threat

- Leakage related to plan
- Work conflicts with supervisors
- Romantic relationship problems
- Manifesto and larger societal message
- Isolation and pain from bullying
- Feeling trapped and hopeless
- Mental health
- Obsessional hate toward others
- Sociopathic; taking pleasure in harm
- Reaction to conduct action

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Check out:

www.studentaffairsenews.com



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