



UKCGE 2026 | Annual Conference 2026
Postgraduate Cultures: Community, Collaboration and Connection

Preliminary Findings from an Instrument Examining
Postgraduate Students' Mental Health Experiences: A
Data-Driven Path to Take Postgraduate Students from
Surviving to Thriving



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Content Warning & Mental Health Resources



Engineering Education
Transformations Institute
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

We will be discussing mental health measures, their development and preliminary findings surrounding postgraduate students' mental health. *Everyone is free to stop listening and choose how they engage with the material.*

This talk cannot and does NOT constitute as medical advice in any shape or form.

This information and talk does NOT substitute for the knowledge, skill, and judgment of qualified psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians and health care professionals.

Shout Crisis Text Line: Text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential text-based support

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably): Call 0800 58 58 58 (5pm–midnight daily)

Online Resources

<https://hubofhope.co.uk/>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health>

<https://www.nami.org>

<https://helplinefaqs.nami.org/category/6-2-mental-health-treatment>



Who is here today?

- students?
- post-docs?
- researchers?
- medical professionals?
- administrators?
- others?

Agenda

- Introductions (done!)
- Overarching goal
- Guiding Methodological Framework
 - Module development and methods
- Preliminary findings
- Future work
 - (partnerships, you?!?!)



sneak peek of the
survey instrument

Overarching goal



My overarching goal was to **develop the tools** needed to drive necessary **systematic change** to promote positive mental health experiences and reduce or mitigate the impact of negative mental health experiences for **postgraduate students**.

Today, I will walk you through the instrument development and how I intend to leverage the data to support postgraduate student mental health



Why develop ***this*** survey?





Why develop ***this*** survey?

- mental health problems within academia are pervasive
- mental health problems are among top cited reasons for students' leaving their degree programs
- postgraduate students were found more likely to have or develop a mental health problem compared to same age, highly-educated peers
- these mental health problems result in decreased retention, decreased academic performance, and decreased satisfaction within academic environments



Why develop ***this*** survey?

- many survey instruments exist on mental health related outcomes
- most instruments, however,
 - omit postgraduate student specific experiences (e.g., research norms, degree milestones)
 - focus solely on negative experiences (e.g., stress)
 - hone in on specific postgraduate student contexts (e.g., teaching assistants)
 - omit discipline specific cultural norms (e.g., arts, humanities, literature, biomedical engineering, etc.)



Why develop **this** survey?

- For example, many were missing any aspects that could be positive mental health experiences
 - Harvard University's Graduate Student Mental Health Initiative [Barreira & Bolotnyy, 2024]
 - Graduate Student Experiences in the Research University [The SERU Consortium]
 - The Stressors for Doctoral Students Questionnaire - Engineering [Cromley, Jensen, & Mirabelli, 2023]
- Others were missing graduate student specific experiences (e.g., research, master's and doctoral students' experiences, etc.)
 - The Michigan Doctoral Experience Study [Rackham Graduate School]
 - The Healthy Minds Network, The Healthy Minds Study [HMN]



The Healthy Minds Network, the Healthy Minds Study



- annual, national data collection began 2007
- 675+ institutions with over 935k student responses since then



Content/images from the Healthy Minds Network website (<https://healthymindsnetwork.org/>) and 2025 symposium slides

Core Collaborators

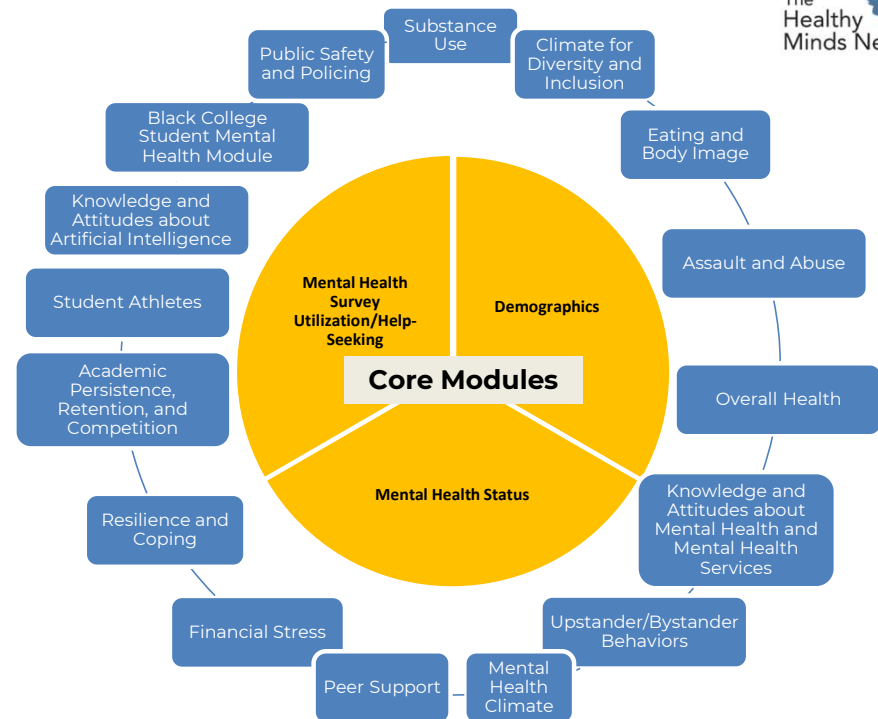
The Healthy Minds Network, the Healthy Minds Study



- survey had 3 core modules, with up to 16 additional elective modules
- worked with the HMN team to create a new graduate student specific module

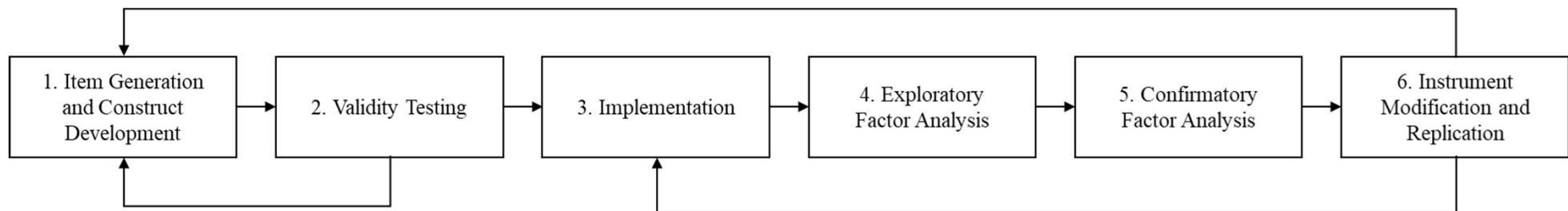


Healthy Minds Webpage





Leveraged an existing, iterative survey instrument development protocol.



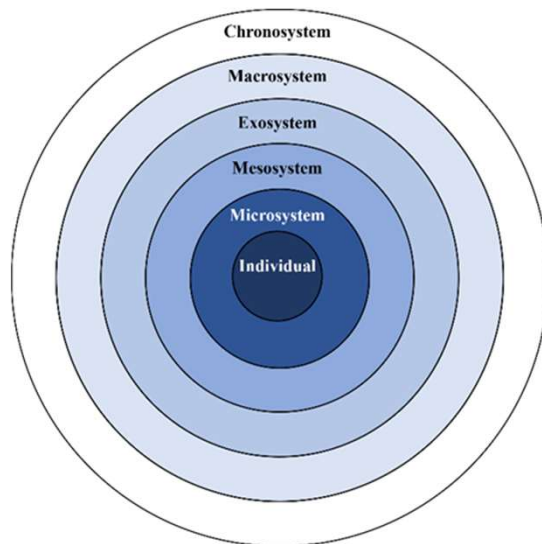
Stage 1. Item Generation & Construct Development



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We leveraged two theoretical frameworks in the design:

Bioecological
Systems Model
(Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 2005)

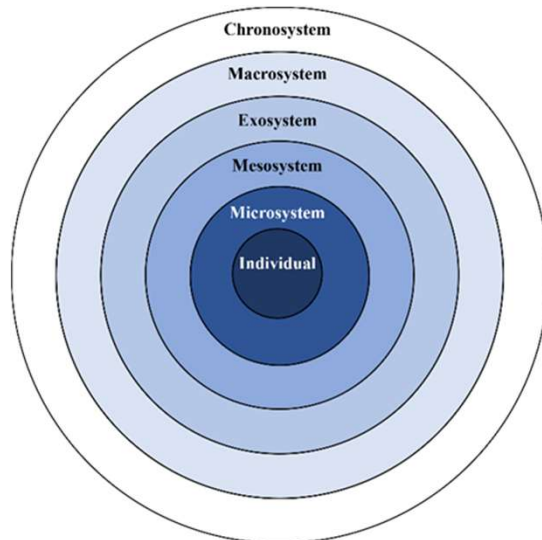


Culture of Engineering
Education Framework
(Godfrey & Parker, 2010)



We leveraged two theoretical frameworks in the design:

Bioecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 2005)



System Level	System Scope	Definition	Examples for Engineering Graduate Students
Individual	person of interest	demographics and identities	age, gender, race/ethnicity, citizenship, confidence they will complete their degree, academic satisfaction, perceived barriers degree completion, mental health measures (depression, anxiety, flourishing)
Microsystem	direct environment	activities, roles, interpersonal relationships	activities: milestones, workload, courses, research lab roles & interpersonal: researcher, instructor, student, caregiver, sense of belonging, advising relationship, non-advisor faculty relationship(s), community(ies), hobbies, student organizations
Mesosystem	connections across microsystems	crossover with two or more settings	shared content across research and courses; shared positive and negative experiences across courses, research, student orgs, non-academic roles/jobs, etc.
Exosystem	indirect environment	settings individuals are not actively a part of but are influenced by	know someone else in a graduate program; member of social support network's view of or experiences in graduate school
Macrosystem	social and cultural views existing in any lower order system	belief systems, norms, expectations, or attitudes influencing participation in other systems	expectations for graduate school, motivations for selecting institution, perceptions of the culture of engineering and/or mental health within engineering
Chronosystem	individuals or surrounding environments	transition periods for both the individual and surrounding environment	individual: transitioning into adulthood and/or grad school, relationships, developing into an independent researcher, milestones environment: coronavirus pandemic

Stage 1. Item Generation & Construct Development



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Dimension	Overview	Themes
An Engineering Way of Thinking	Unique ways of knowing or conceptualizing information as an engineer	- Math is infallible, innocent, and/or pure - Strong prevalence of visual communication - Problem solving and design "Best" not "right" answers - Objectiveness in math and science
An Engineering Way of Doing	Beliefs and/or assumptions on how teaching and learning occurs within engineering education	- Hardness - Take it - Approach problem solving using a toolkit - Professional development is only valued where needed - Cooperation and Competition - Education is used for credentials - Time is a resource to be managed
Being an Engineer	Common attributes and/or attitudes associated with being an engineer	- Can-do attitude - Think in bullet points - Stereotypes - All or nothing - Being one of the "guys" - Prideful in being an engineer
Acceptance of Difference	Considering the homogeneity and/or diversity of thoughts and/or values within engineering	- Homogeneity - Conditional Acceptance - Discrimination in relationships formed - Prove yourself
Relationships	What relationships exist and/or the appropriate ways relationships are established and maintained within engineering	- Collaborative - Mates - Student – faculty interactions
Relationship to Environment	Assumptions and beliefs held regarding engineering education's operation within several environments, including a campus environment, an institutional environment, the broader environment of higher education, engineering as a profession, and the cultural landscape of the geographic location (e.g., politics, economics, etc.)	- Situated within several ecosystems - Desire for autonomy and separation - Oversight

Culture of Engineering Education Framework (Godfrey & Parker, 2010)



Stage 1. Item Generation & Construct Development



Generated initial set of constructs and items

Draft construct	Scope of items within construct
Demographic add-ons	Background information on participants, analysis or findings grouped by these backgrounds and/or identities; add-ons to the existing demographic items
Background	Feelings on their program; motivations to complete their degree
Academic / Degree Milestones	Thoughts on overall and specific core aspects of graduate degree programs (e.g., coursework, research, etc.)
Research	Asking if research is a part of their degree program, and if so, questions about their advising format and perceptions on research related activities
Time Management	Aspects of work and time distribution of tasks
Support Systems	Ranking possible support systems and, if relevant, support they may get from their research environment
Advisor Relationship	Items related to a graduate student – advisor relationship
Mental Health	Reflecting on possible experiences and norms as a graduate student that are related to their mental health experiences
Post-Graduation	Post-graduation degree intentions



Bork & Jensen, 2025

Stage 2. Validity Testing



Sought feedback from various audiences:

- Initial internal team feedback
 - Thrive Lab
 - Cultivate Lab
- Faculty members
 - Group of faculty members within Engineering Education Research
- Postgraduate Students
 - individual cognitive interviews with n=7 engineering postgraduate students (one discipline, not disclosed)
- Mental Health and Survey expert feedback
 - HMN team (Erin Voichoski, Sasha Zhou, Sarah Lipson, and Daniel Eisenberg)
 - Joseph Mirabelli

Stage 3. Implementation



The first iteration of the Graduate Student Module* (GSM) was ready to administer, piloting Spring 2025.



the survey instrument

The final survey had four core sections:

- demographic(s) add-ons
- mental health norms
- academic stressors
- research related experiences

Let's walk through it now.

* Postgraduate = graduate in U.S.

Stage 3. Implementation



The final survey had four core sections:

DEMOGRAPHIC ITEMS (4 items)

1. *<if selected doctoral degree>* Have you advanced to candidacy in your doctoral program (i.e., completed your core course requirements and are moving to an emphasis on research (e.g., qualifying exam, candidacy, or equivalent))? Yes / No / Unsure
2. Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program? Yes / No / Unsure
3. *<if yes to international student>* Have you earned any degree in the U.S. prior to joining the program you are enrolled in now? Yes / No
4. Consider how you are funding your degree program and associated living expenses **this past year**. What sources are / have / will you use? Check all that apply.
 - External fellowship(s) / scholarship(s) (e.g., National Science Foundation, company sponsor, country sponsor, etc.)
 - Internal fellowship(s) / scholarship(s) (e.g., fellowship from your institution)
 - Family support and/or personal savings
 - Loan(s) and/or credit card(s)
 - Part-time job(s)
 - Research appointment(s)
 - Teaching appointment(s)
 - Other (please specify):

Stage 3. Implementation



The final survey had four core sections:

MENTAL HEALTH NORMS (17 items)

5. (13 items) Within the **past year**, rate how much you agree with the following statements. Reflect on **your experiences**, on average, as a graduate (grad) student [1 = strongly disagree to 8 = strongly agree, NA]
- I feel pressure to sacrifice my sleep to complete tasks as a grad student.
 - I have a life outside of grad school (for example, maintaining friendships and relationships, participating in hobbies, cooking, exercising, etc.)
 - I think grad school is unnecessarily difficult
 - Being the best is very important to me
 - If you think grad school is too hard, you aren't cut out for it
 - I would help a peer in my program even if there was no immediate or direct benefit for me
 - I feel like I am being made to compete with and/or being compared to my peers
 - I feel like I don't belong in my graduate school program
 - I conform to values, norms, and/or behaviors I don't believe in to "fit in" my program
 - I am more likely to try and stay connected with peers I feel are as smart or smarter than myself
 - Knowing what I know now, I would choose to pursue grad school again
 - I feel behind in life compared to peers my age (e.g., financially, lifestyle, etc.) because I chose to pursue a graduate degree
 - I worry about how I will pay for my degree and/or related living expenses while in grad school.

Stage 3. Implementation



The final survey had four core sections:

MENTAL HEALTH NORMS (17 items)

6. (4 items) Within the **past year**, rate how much you agree with the following statements about **graduate (grad) students you know**, on average. [1 = strongly disagree to 8 = strongly agree, NA]
- Grad students are relaxed
 - Most grad students I know are making good progress in their degree program
 - Most of my peers are high achievers
 - The successful grad students I know have a healthy work-life balance

Stage 3. Implementation



The final survey had four core sections:

ACADEMIC STRESSORS (7 items)

7. (7 items) The following question will ask you about possible **academic stressors**, or sources of stress, in your graduate (grad) program. Consider the stressors **you have experienced so far** during your graduate degree program.

Then, rate 1) type of emotional experience and 2) the frequency of the experience.

Scales:
mixed 1= significant negative experience ----
 ----- significant positive experience=8

Frequency: 1 = never
 2 = once a semester
 3 = once a month
 4 = once every other week
 5 = once a week
 6 = once every other day
 7 = daily
 8 = multiple times a day

- Degree coursework
- Securing a job post-graduation

<if international student>

- Maintaining my visa status as an international student

<if research is selected>

- Conducting my research study(ies) (e.g., planning, collecting data, analysis, etc.)
- Writing on my research (e.g., report, conference paper, journal manuscript, etc.)
- Presenting on my research (e.g., research group meetings, conference, talk, etc.)
- Receiving feedback on my research (e.g., advisor, peers, during a presentation, etc.)



Stage 3. Implementation



The final survey had four core sections:

RESEARCH RELATED EXPERIENCES <if research = yes> (7 items)

8. (7 items) The next question will ask you about your research advisor(s) and their respective research group(s).

If you have more than one main research advisor, are a part of more than one research group, and/or are between research groups now, select one recent research group advisor to be your main advisor. Focus your responses on that individual and their respective group.

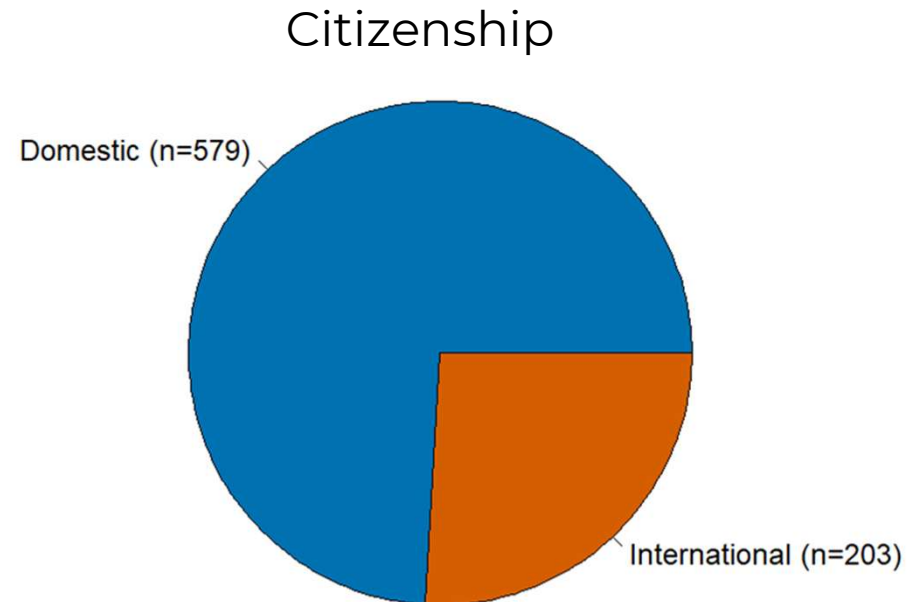
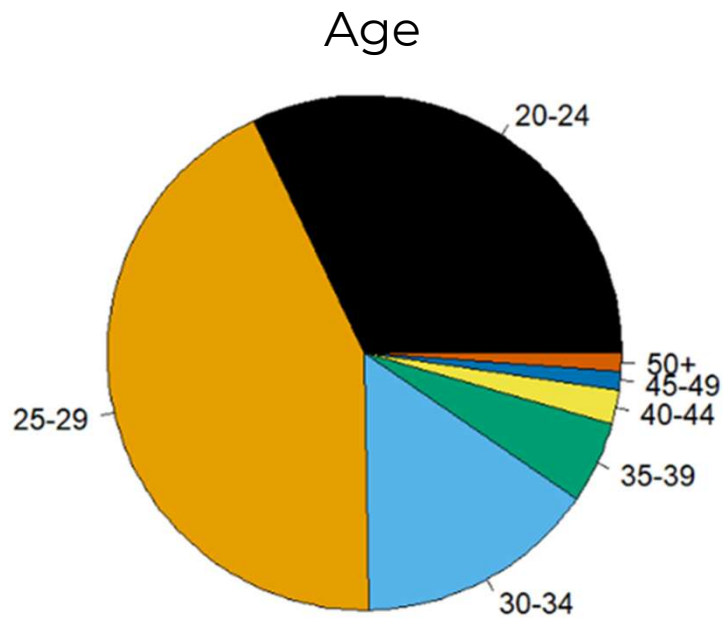
Within the past year, how much do you agree with the following statements, on average, regarding your primary research advisor? [1 = strongly disagree to 8 = strongly agree, NA]

- Knowing what I know now, I would choose to work with my advisor again
- I share core identities and/or values with my advisor
- My advisor is available and accessible to me most of the time
- My advisor is receptive and responsive to my feedback
- My advisor prioritizes their students' needs, health, and well-being over their research interests
- Knowing what I know now, I would choose to work with my research group again
- I feel supported by my research group

Stage 3. Implementation



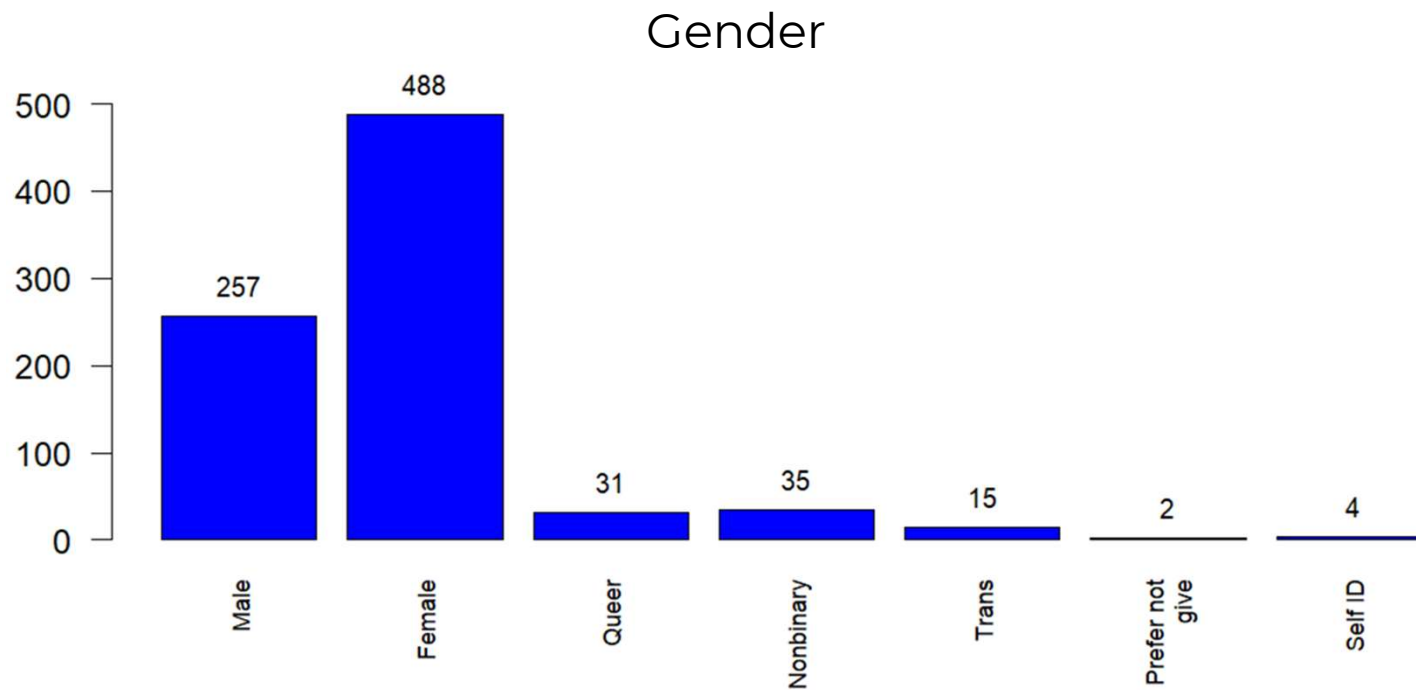
Demographics of Respondents (n=792)



Stage 3. Implementation



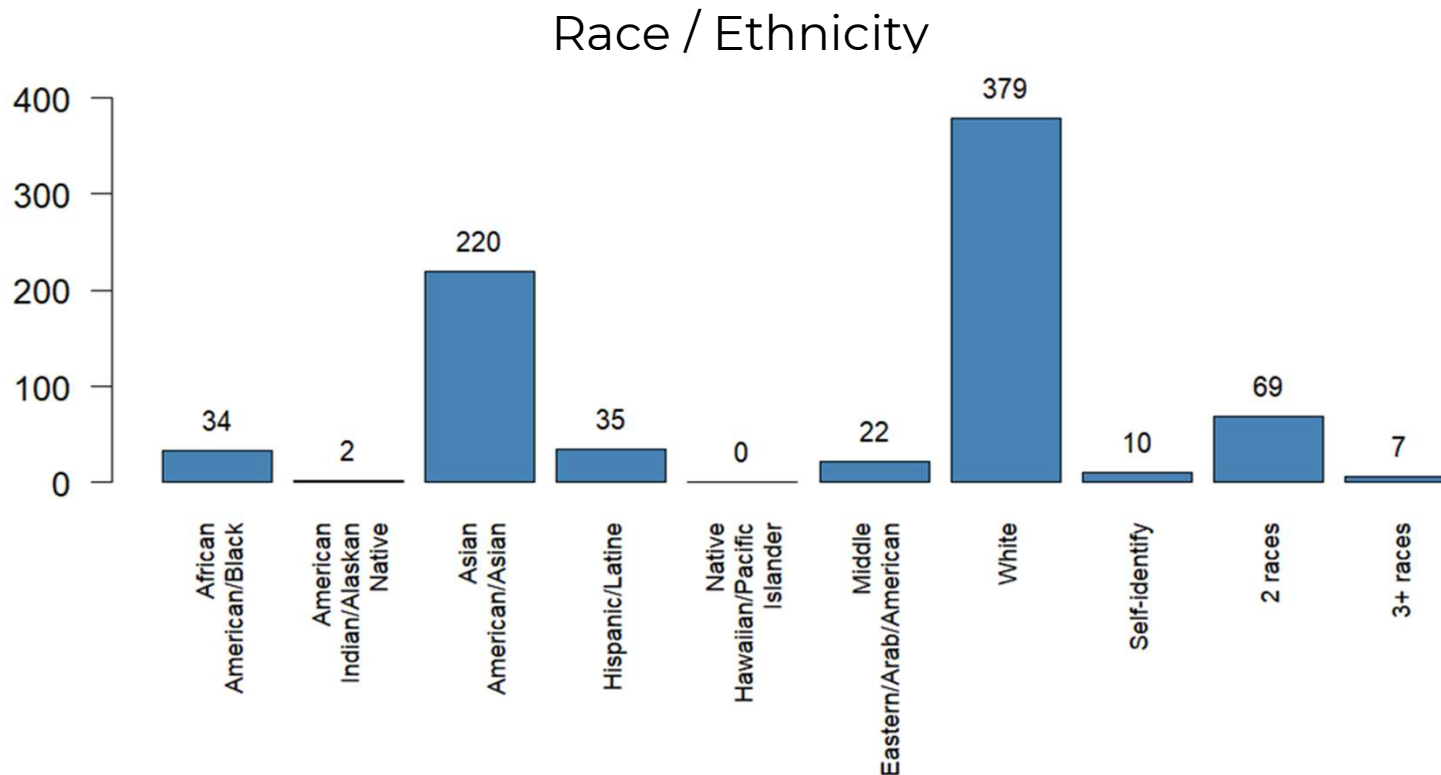
Demographics of Respondents (n=792)



Stage 3. Implementation

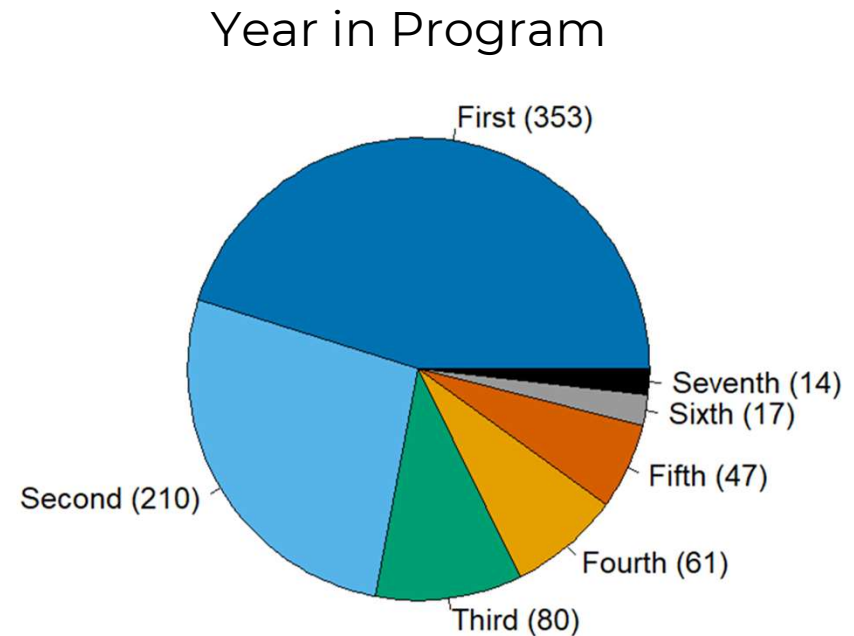
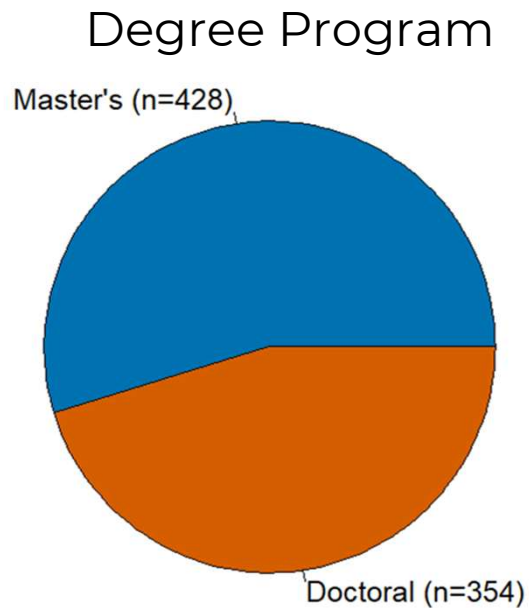


Demographics of Respondents (n=792)



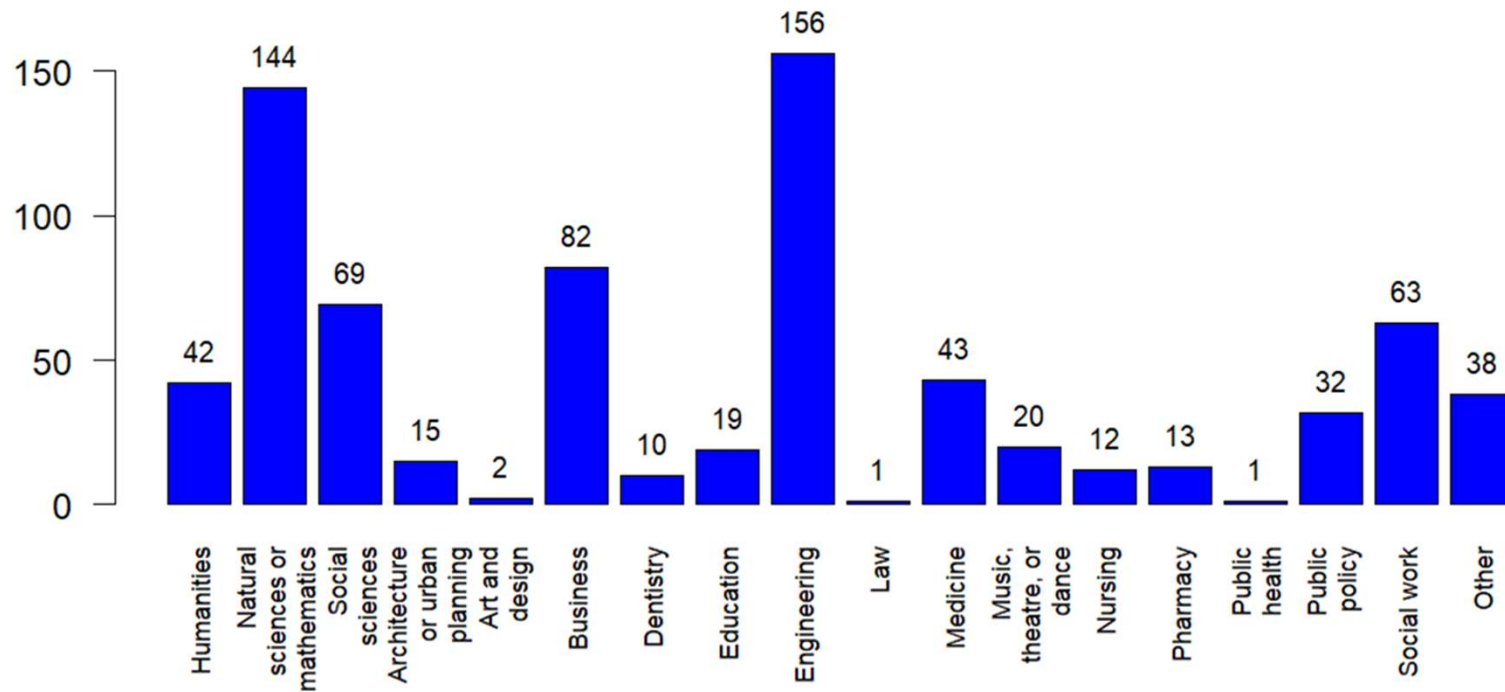
Stage 3. Implementation

Demographics of Respondents (n=792)



Stage 3. Implementation

Disciplines of Respondents (n=792*)



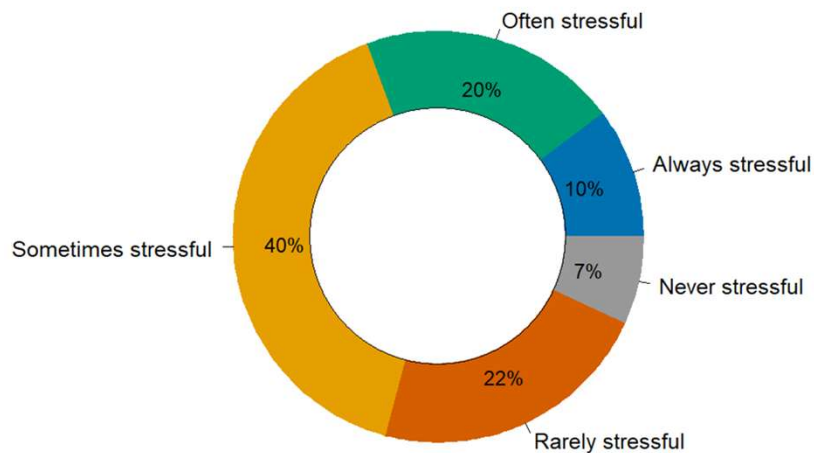
*Note: response option was select all that apply, not exhaustive columns

👤 SJ Bork (PhD) & Joe Mirabelli (PhD)

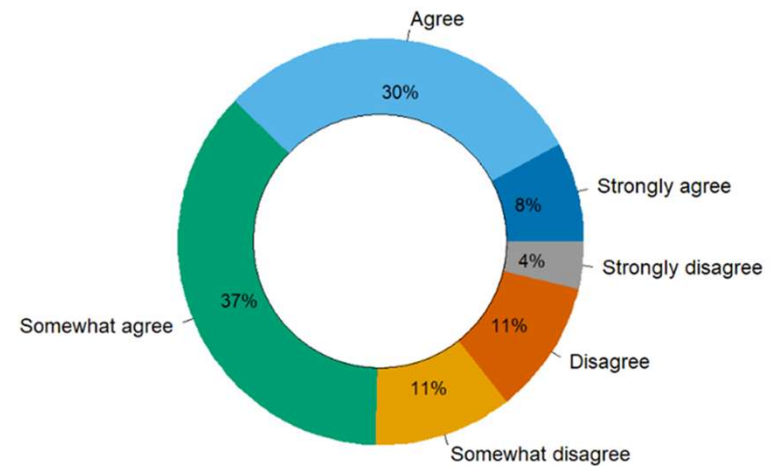
Stage 3. Implementation

Highlighted Responses (n=792)

How would you describe your financial situation right now?



I see myself as a part of the campus community.

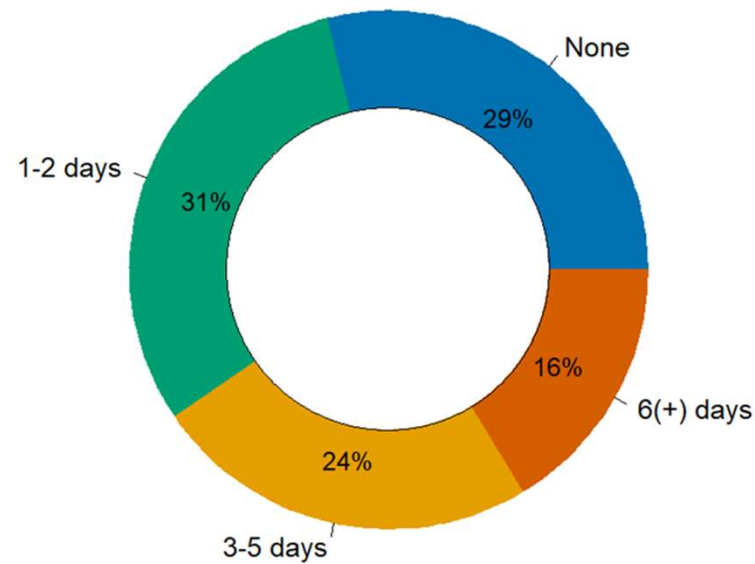


Stage 3. Implementation



Highlighted Responses (n=792)

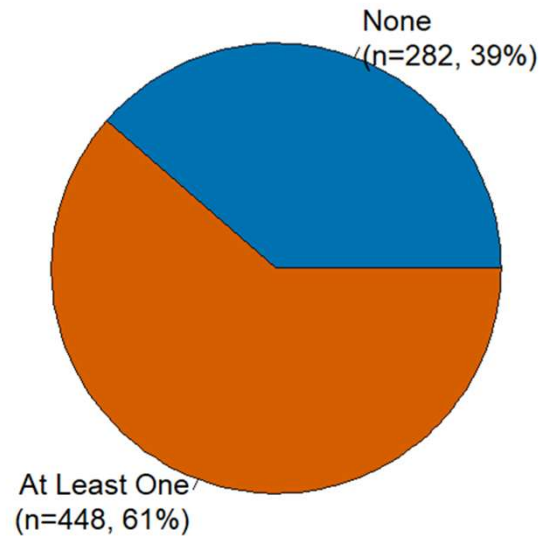
In the past 4 weeks, how many days have you felt that emotional or mental difficulties have hurt your academic performance?



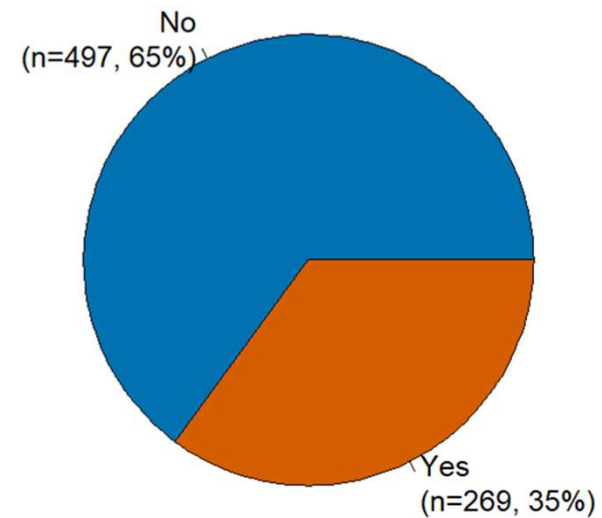
Stage 3. Implementation

Highlighted Responses

Any MH Problem*



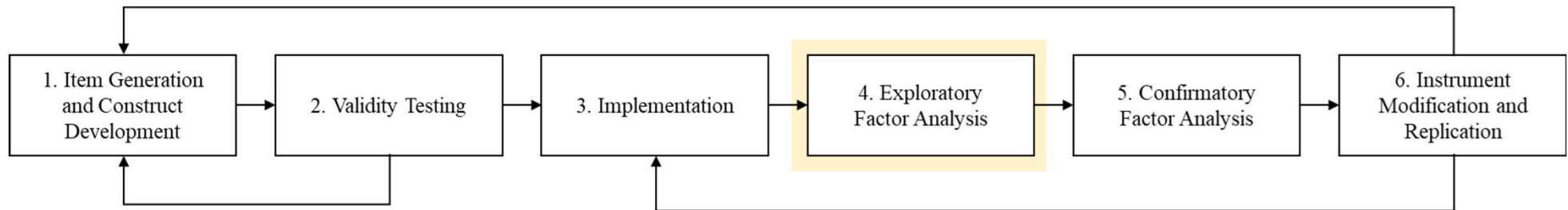
Positive Mental Health^



*n=730 ; ^n=766

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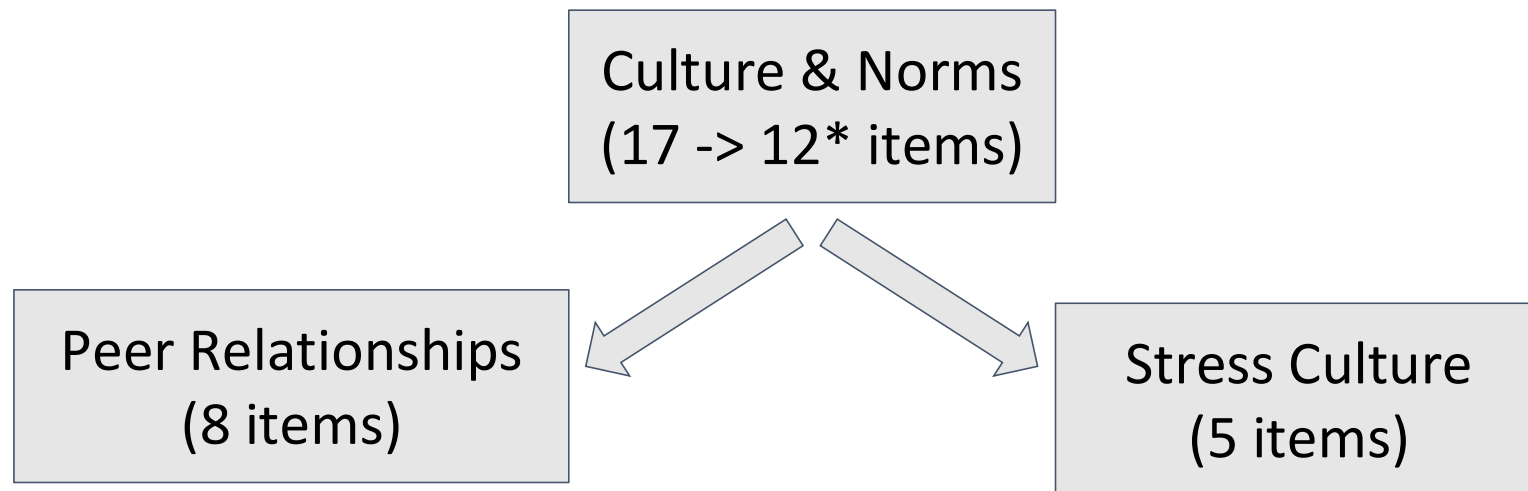
Stage 3. Implementation



Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Using pilot data, we performed an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to better understand the **culture and norms** items (17 items)

EFA procedures suggested retaining 12 items for a **two-factor structure nested inside a general factor**:



* One cross-loaded

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



Culture and Norms EFA Results

Using oblimin rotation and
OLS estimator

Factor loading cutoff:
>0.32 (>0.30 cross-loads)

Eigenvalue cutoff:
>1

Table 1. GSM Mental Health Norm EFA Results

Factor Number (and eigenvalue)	Item Text	Loading
Factor 1 ($\lambda = 1.968$)	I have a life outside of grad school (for example, maintaining friendships and relationships, participating in hobbies, cooking, exercising, etc.)	0.32
	If you think grad school is too hard, you aren't cut out for it	0.38
	I feel like I am being made to compete with and/or being compared to my peers	0.49
	I feel like I don't belong in my graduate school program	0.66
	I conform to values, norms, and/or behaviors I don't believe in to "fit in" my program	0.62
	I feel behind in life compared to peers my age (e.g., financially, lifestyle, etc.) because I chose to pursue a graduate degree	0.41
	Knowing what I know now, I would choose to pursue grad school again	0.42
	Most grad students I know are making good progress in their degree program	0.32
Factor 2 ($\lambda = 1.372$)	I feel pressure to sacrifice my sleep to complete tasks as a grad student	0.33
	I think grad school is unnecessarily difficult	0.51
	If you think grad school is too hard, you aren't cut out for it	0.30
	Grad students are relaxed	0.65
	The successful grad students I know have a healthy work-life balance	0.57

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Culture and Norms Reliability Estimates

These suggest the **items perform better combined to a general factor**, but have internal structure comprising two “themes”.

Table 2. Reliability of the GSM Mental Health Norms Scale and Subscales

Measure	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω_{total}
Graduate Engineering Stress Culture	0.70	0.75
Graduate Peer Relationships	0.57	0.65
Entire GSM Mental Health Norms (12 items)	0.75	0.79

Note: Items may also be analyzed individually instead of factors

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



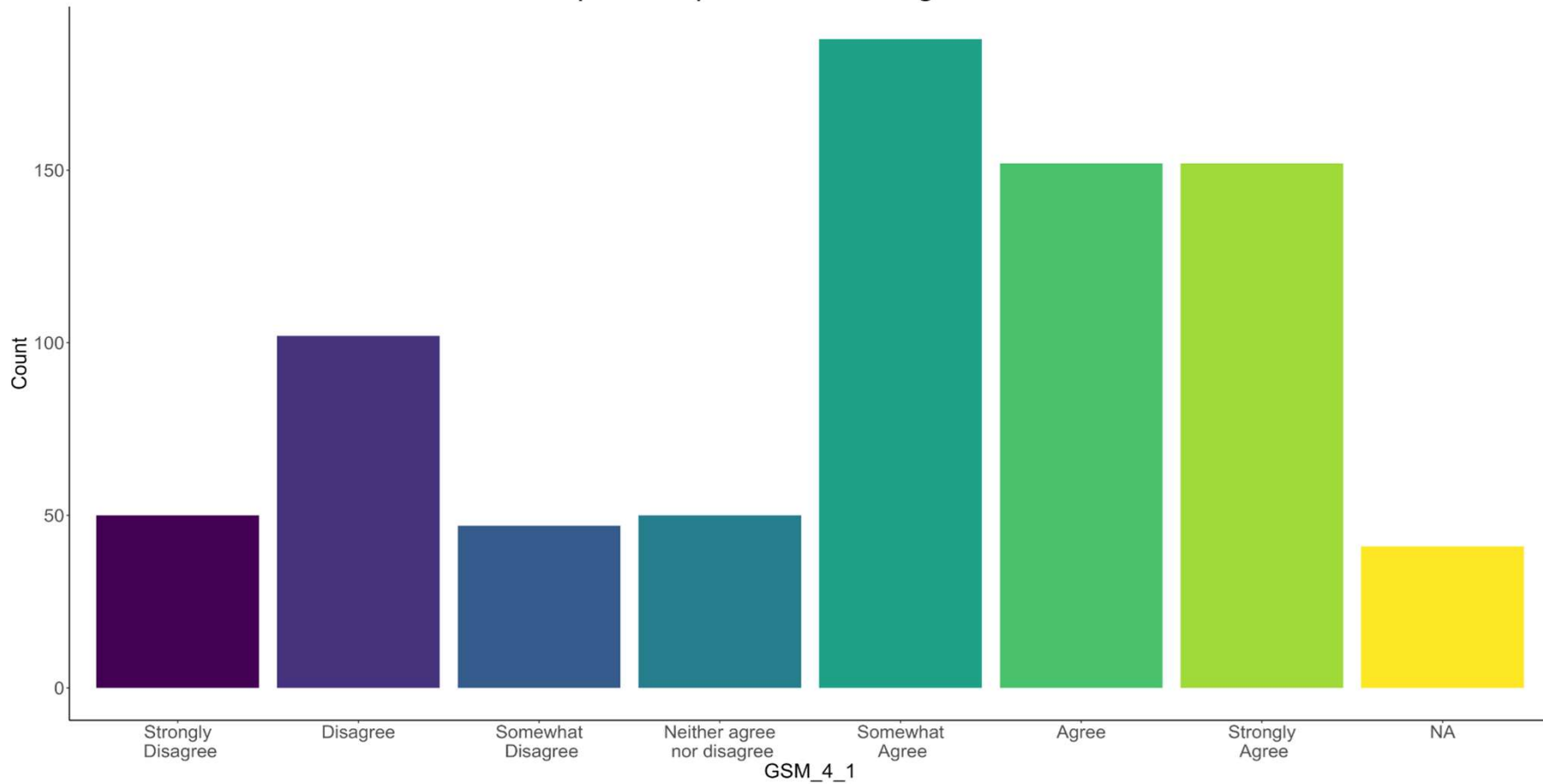
Culture and Norms Items - Notable Trends

Item Key	Item Text	Mean	SD	Item Key	Item Text	Mean	SD
GSM4-1	I feel pressure to sacrifice my sleep to complete tasks as a grad student.	4.74	1.90	GSM4-10	I am more likely to try and stay connected with peers I feel are as smart or smarter than myself	4.27	1.54
GSM4-2	I have a life outside of grad school (for example, maintaining friendships and relationships, participating in hobbies, cooking, exercising, etc.)	4.32	1.63	GSM4-11	Knowing what I know now, I would choose to pursue grad school again	4.30	1.58
GSM4-3	I think grad school is unnecessarily difficult	3.75	1.67	GSM4-12	I feel behind in life compared to peers my age (e.g., financially, lifestyle, etc.) because I chose to pursue a graduate degree	4.39	1.97
GSM4-4	Being the best is very important to me	5.16	1.54	GSM4-13	I worry about how I will pay for my degree and/or related living expenses while in grad school.	4.15	2.16
GSM4-5	If you think grad school is too hard, you aren't cut out for it	3.16	1.69	GSM5-1	Grad students are relaxed	1.47	1.37
GSM4-6	I would help a peer in my program even if there was no immediate or direct benefit for me	5.33	0.83	GSM5-2	GSM_5_2 Most grad students I know are making good progress in their degree program	4.28	1.23
GSM4-7	I feel like I am being made to compete with and/or being compared to my peers	3.15	1.86	GSM5-3	Most of my peers are high achievers	4.77	1.15
GSM4-8	I feel like I don't belong in my graduate school program	3.27	1.80	GSM5-4	The successful grad students I know have a healthy work-life balance	3.21	1.69
GSM4-9	I conform to values, norms, and/or behaviors I don't believe in to "fit in" my program	3.08	1.76				

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



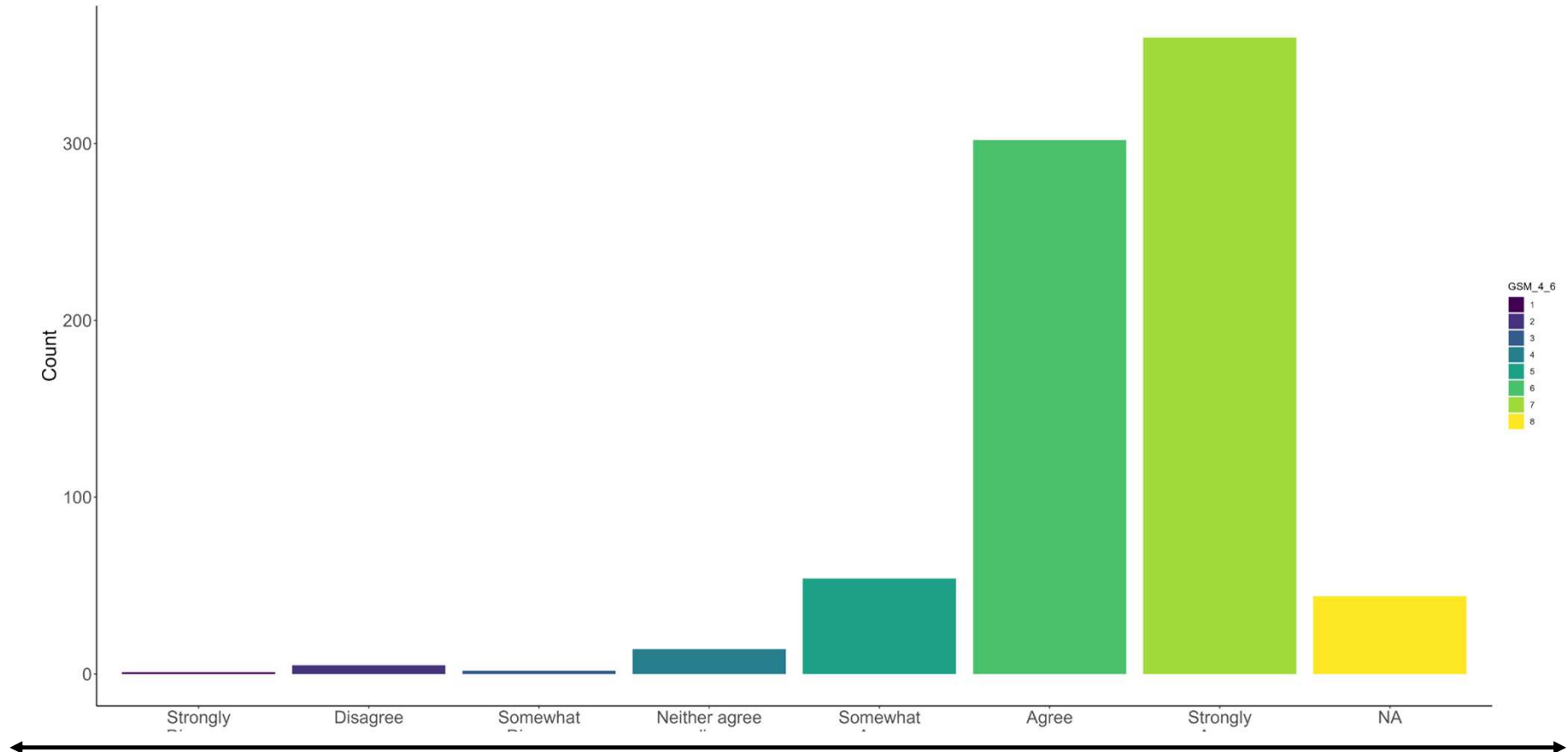
GSM4-1: "I feel pressure to sacrifice my sleep to complete tasks as a grad student."



Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



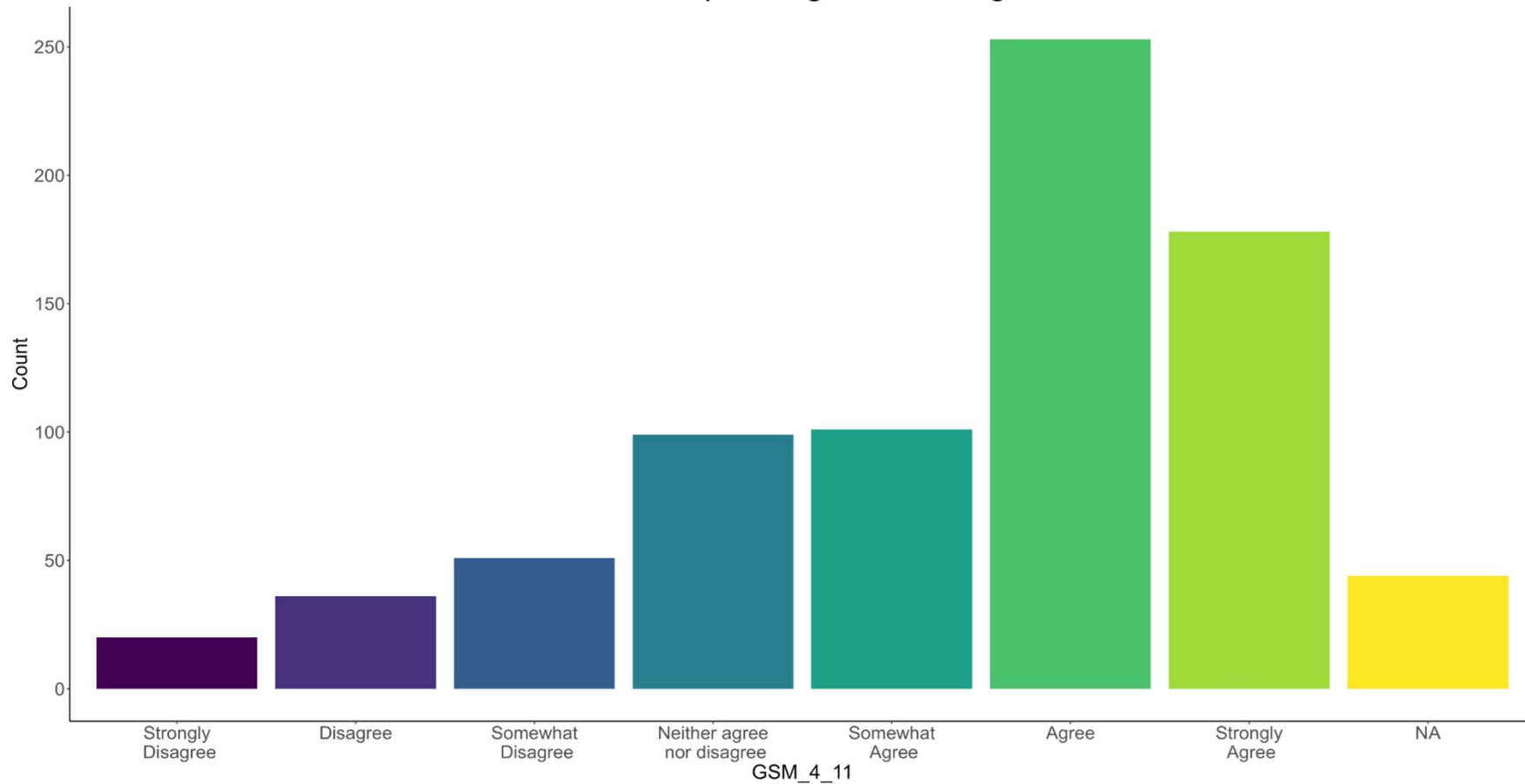
GSM4-6: "I would help a peer in my program
even if there was no immediate or direct benefit for me"



Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



GSM4-11: "Knowing what I know now, I would
choose to pursue grad school again"

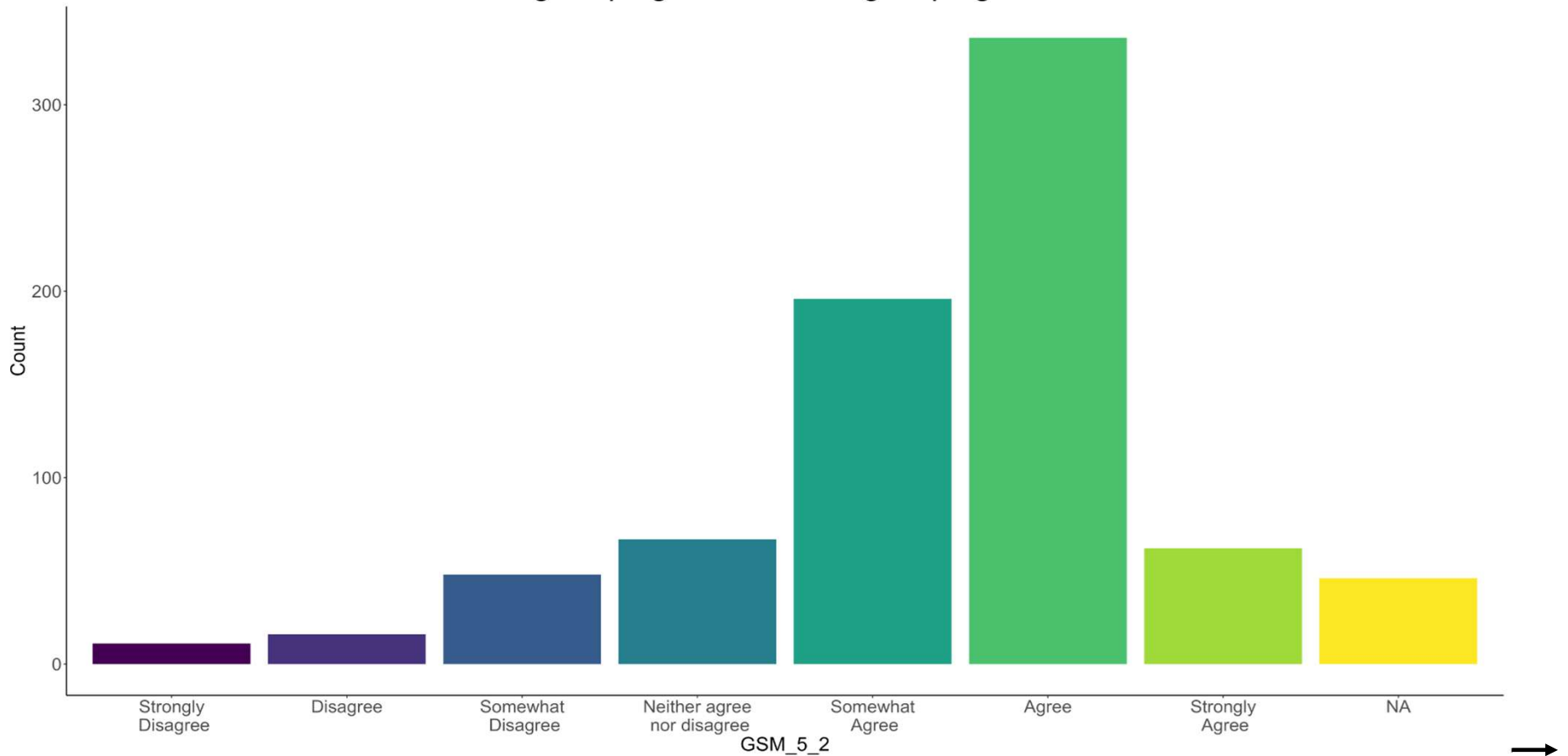


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Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



GSM5-2: "Most grad students I know are making good progress in their degree program"



Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



Reliability of **Stressor Experiences** Items

These items were **only displayed when relevant to students** (e.g., non-researching MS students did not receive questions related to research)

Stressor experiences items were asked **twice**,

- once for the **severity** of stressors, and
- once for the **frequency** they occurred

=> These are not suitable for factor analyses

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Reliability of **Stressor Experiences** Items

We tested for the reliability and validity of the stressor experiences items in two ways:

- Internal consistency of the items (reliability)
- Correlations between the severity and frequency scores for each item (face validity, reliability)

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Internal Consistency of **Stressor Experiences** Measures

Severity (GSM6) items:

- Cronbach's α : 0.78
- McDonald's ω_{total} : 0.86

Frequency (GSM7) items:

- Cronbach's α : 0.84
- McDonald's ω_{total} : 0.91

Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



Stressor Experiences Items Descriptives

Item Key	Item Text (Instructions: Please rate the type of emotional experience each of the following have been for you during your graduate program, on average, from significantly negative to significantly positive.)	Severity Mean	Severity SD	Frequency Mean	Frequency SD	Correlation (Frequency & Severity)
GSM6-1 (severity) GSM7-1 (frequency)	Degree coursework	4.44	1.59	4.59	1.73	0.48
GSM6-2 (severity) GSM7-2 (frequency)	Securing a job post-graduation	3.07	1.66	3.79	2.08	0.30
GSM6-3 (severity) GSM7-3 (frequency)	Maintaining my visa status as an international student [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Are you an international student?"]	3.17	1.84	3.79	2.13	0.31
GSM6-4 (severity) GSM7-4 (frequency)	Conducting my research study/studies (e.g., planning, collecting data, analysis, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.71	1.59	5.07	1.72	0.53
GSM6-5 (severity) GSM7-5 (frequency)	Writing on my research (e.g., report, conference paper, journal manuscript, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.40	1.56	4.71	1.79	0.45
GSM6-6 (severity) GSM7-6 (frequency)	Presenting on my research (e.g., research group meetings, conference, talk, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.94	1.47	4.62	1.72	0.42
GSM6-7 (severity) GSM7-7 (frequency)	Receiving feedback on my research (e.g., advisor, peers, during a presentation, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.85	1.56	4.80	1.65	0.48

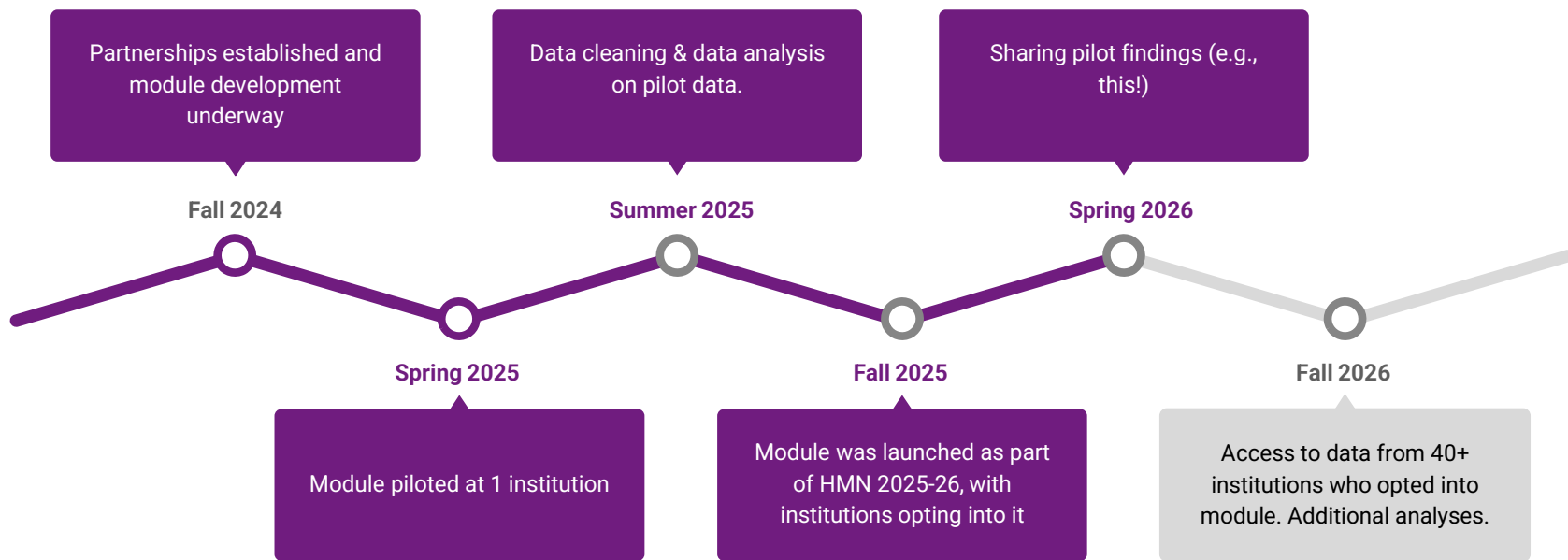
Stage 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis



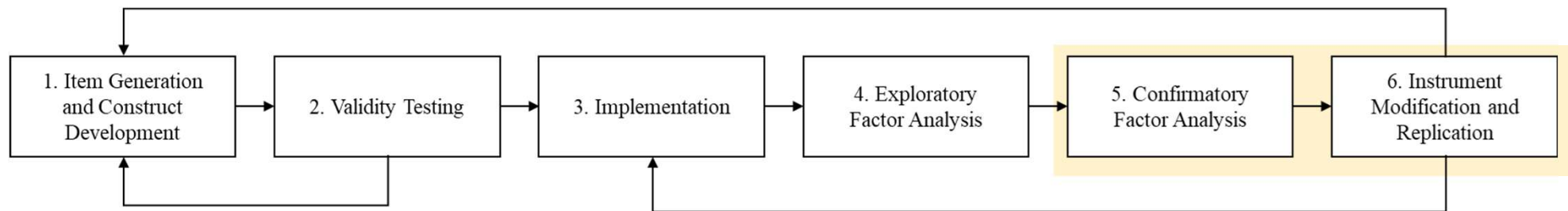
Stressor Experiences Items Descriptives

Item Key	Item Text (Instructions: Please rate the type of emotional experience each of the following have been for you during your graduate program, on average, from significantly negative to significantly positive.)	Severity Mean	Severity SD	Frequency Mean	Frequency SD	Correlation (Frequency & Severity)
GSM6-1 (severity) GSM7-1 (frequency)	Degree coursework	4.44	1.59	4.59	1.73	0.48
GSM6-2 (severity) GSM7-2 (frequency)	Securing a job post-graduation	3.07	1.66	3.79	2.08	0.30
GSM6-3 (severity) GSM7-3 (frequency)	Maintaining my visa status as an international student [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Are you an international student?"]	3.17	1.84	3.79	2.13	0.31
GSM6-4 (severity) GSM7-4 (frequency)	Conducting my research study/studies (e.g., planning, collecting data, analysis, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.71	1.59	5.07	1.72	0.53
GSM6-5 (severity) GSM7-5 (frequency)	Writing on my research (e.g., report, conference paper, journal manuscript, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.40	1.56	4.71	1.79	0.45
GSM6-6 (severity) GSM7-6 (frequency)	Presenting on my research (e.g., research group meetings, conference, talk, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.94	1.47	4.62	1.72	0.42
GSM6-7 (severity) GSM7-7 (frequency)	Receiving feedback on my research (e.g., advisor, peers, during a presentation, etc.) [Only displayed if "Yes" is selected for "Have you done (or are you doing) research as part of your graduate degree program?"]	4.85	1.56	4.80	1.65	0.48

Recap



Future Work: Stages 5 & 6



- additional data (40+ institutions and going!)
- continued analysis and data examination
- ongoing work reviewing mental health surveys for STEM graduate students, using those instruments to continue to generate items / revise

So, what am I doing now that I have the data? How can this be leveraged?

1. Intentional data-exploration examining systemic factors
2. Partnerships with institutional leadership to move to action-oriented research outcomes
3. Iteration of survey for action-oriented outcomes (a.k.a., data that can lead to change)

Expanding work to other disciplines and cultures (you?).

Team & Partners



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Interested in learning more? Reach out!



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Questions?



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