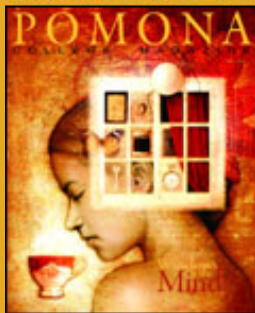


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PCM | Feature

Stressed

In a national study, 62 percent of college students admitted problems with anxiety and stress. Pomona students are not immune.

By Stephen K. Wagner

When Kara Toles '07 arrived on campus, she was already at an emotional disadvantage. The Texan, now a junior, was unfamiliar with the community, felt less prepared than her classmates and was haunted by family crises back home. The neuroscience major struggled through early prerequisites—especially chemistry, a building block for her major. “I felt lost, alone, and broken,” she said. “I’m sure that I would have transferred if it were not for the support that I got through my sponsors and other peers in my sponsor group.”

She found her year, to say the least, stressful. In that, she wasn’t alone.

In a 2003 study of 13,000 college students by researchers at Kansas State University, the percentage of students with stress and anxiety problems nationwide rose from 36 percent to 62 percent over 13 years.



The American College Health Association in a 2004 National College Health Assessment reported 19 percent of the nation’s students had suffered with depression during the previous school year, 12 percent exhibited anxiety disorder, 3.7 percent had substance abuse problems, and 2.3 percent struggled with bulimia. More than 15 percent said their depression affected them academically.

Against that national backdrop, it is no surprise that Pomona students also seem to be living more stressful lives than ever before.

“What I see are students who are very busy, very scheduled—tons of activities,” said Richard Lewis, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience and coordinator of the College’s Neuroscience Program. Lewis and Nicole Weekes, an assistant professor of psychology, are conducting a study investigating the relationship between stress and memory under a National Science Foundation grant. “I assume it starts very early as kids grow up in that kind of environment with parents who are successful,” said Lewis. “It seems to lead to a more stressful lifestyle.”

In addition to a typically heavy academic workload, many Pomona students pour themselves into concurrent activities: athletics, jobs, internships, volunteer work, student committees and social events. Without blinking an eye, students can fill most hours of the day and evening. “I’m seeing things along the lines of what people have labeled the MTV generation,” Lewis said. “During the academic year, scheduling time with students becomes horrendously difficult because of their schedules.”

It’s a lifestyle made even more frenetic by the instantaneous connections of the Information Age. From dorm rooms to classrooms, students are talking and text messaging on cell phones, e-mailing and instant messaging on computers. Students can utilize their time more thoroughly and completely than during any other period in history. A byproduct of this 21st-century phenomenon is increased stress.

“College students are under different stresses and more stresses” than students of 10 or 20 years ago, said Weekes. “As we become more technologically advanced, the technologies that were supposed to give us more free time are actually diminishing our free time.” Suzanne C. Thompson, a professor of psychology, has assessed the rise in student stress levels during her 23 years at the school. For the past 10 years, she has asked students to complete a stress self-assessment, and the results have surprised her.

“I always have five or six students who score really high—it makes me aware there are a lot of very stressful things going on in their lives that we don’t necessarily hear about in the classroom,” she said. “It does seem that students are under a lot more pressure.”

At a college like Pomona, of course, much of that pressure is self-inflicted, and may well be a natural result of the type of highly motivated students who make up its student body.

According to Bruce Poch, vice president and dean of admissions, the typical freshman enters Pomona with a combined SAT score of about 1,470. A straight-A average is typical, and more than 85 percent of incoming freshmen are ranked in the top 10 percent scholastically at their high schools.

“Since I came here in 1985 the SAT requirements have gone up and up and up—now, we’re about as high as you can get,” Lewis said. “As a result, I’ve seen differences in students versus the natural change you might expect to see over decades. Personally, I don’t think all of those changes are good ones.”

Poch traces the heightened levels of stress back to high school, where the growing competition to secure spots at elite colleges is causing students to ratchet up their résumé of activities.

“I’m a little worried about how admissions offices in general have struck such fear into kids that they are trying to cover every base simultaneously,” Poch said. “As a result, they try to present extra-special attributes: they have to be a three-sport athlete, play four obscure instruments, have won the science fair, etc.”

The proliferation of families with two parents who are professionals puts added stress on offspring to follow in their footsteps. Even high-achieving students are feeling added pressure to work harder and harder.

And today, thanks to technology, the campus no longer provides an escape from parental pressures. Many Pomona students now remain in constant contact with their parents, though not necessarily by choice.

“We’ve had students using computers in class, and up pops an instant message from mom and dad,” Poch said. “Even if it’s only to say ‘Hi,’ the inference may be, ‘What are you doing, are you studying, why aren’t you studying?’ That bothers me, and I’m sure it puts stress on the student as well.”

“Dealing with students who feel stressed is a big part of what we do all the time,” noted Dean of Students Ann Quinley. “Not every student swims like a fish when they arrive on campus. We talk to them to understand their issues and help them sort out their concerns on an individual basis.”

Help may come from fellow students or from a member of the staff. Faculty also weigh in frequently. Weekes urges her students to get regular exercise and to consider giving up quantity for quality in their drive to rack up college activities.

“It depends on what the student is stressed about,” Quinley said. “Resident advisers and sponsors are trained to recognize sources of stress in students and are the first-year students’ initial advisers. If a student is anxious because of course load or an academic reason, the faculty adviser or dean’s office is there for them. If a student’s parents are getting a divorce or a student is experiencing homesickness or has an eating disorder or has free-floating anxiety, the principal place for counseling is Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services.”

According to Rebecca Kornbluh, Monsour's director, an average of 22 percent of Pomona College students receive some kind of assistance from the center each year for problems ranging from procrastination, panic attacks and alcohol use to stimulant abuse, sleep problems and depression. Of The Claremont Colleges, only Scripps College has a higher percentage of students who visit the center.

"We see the full range of problems—everything from relationship break-ups to suicidal major depression," Kornbluh said. "There is no 'typical' student. Generally across the country, there is a trend toward increasing severity in mental health problems on campus."

For Toles, the solution was the development of a support structure, with assistance from Peer Mentoring and other social programs. Others, however, continue to struggle.

Imani Brown '04 discovered the key to managing the stress she faced during her school years as she participated in numerous campus activities. As a senior, Brown, who recently entered the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C., worked as a resident adviser, was active in the Women's Union, and participated in a range of activist efforts, all the while balancing a challenging academic workload.

Balance, Brown said, is essential.

"Deciding what your priorities will be, spending time with friends, and taking time for yourself just to find some peace is important," she said. "Otherwise, you can snap very easily."

Given that one clear marker of a student's ability to handle stress is academic success, Weekes believes the vast majority of Pomona students are finding successful ways to cope with their stress.

Poch agrees, estimating the dropout rate among the college's 1,500 students at well below one percent. "People work hard here, but I don't think they're exploding," said Poch. "I know there are kids who at various points need to talk with (a counselor), or who feel the pressure of an exam or paper, but I think that's different from something that's chronic. While some students seem to have that chronic anxiety, I don't think the school's the source, and I don't think it's a hugely aggravating factor."

On the plus side, he added, busyness and the learned ability to manage stress and juggle tasks can be good preparation for managing high-stress careers and ultimately succeeding once a student leaves Pomona.

"Our students take harder classes, heavier loads, have leadership roles, do internships, and study abroad in more interesting places," Quinley said.

"By and large they do well. These are terribly successful kids."

Stephen K. Wagner is a freelance writer living in Claremont, California.



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