

MEMORANDUM

TO: Faculty Supervisors and Students in the College of Medicine
FROM: Dr. David Cooper, Assistant Dean Graduate Studies
DATE: June 30th, 2020
RE: **Student Mental Health and Summer Holidays**

The Office of the Vice-Dean Research (OVDR) strives to be a strong advocate for the mental health and wellness of students and fellows in the College of Medicine. This past year, addressing a growing need among graduate students in particular, we prioritized a number of mental health and wellbeing initiatives such as counselling services and outreach programs. Indeed, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it was clear there was a mental health crisis in academia. A 2018 study in *Nature Biotechnology* reported that rates of anxiety and depression in graduate students were more than six times greater than that of the general population. It is an understatement to say that the global pandemic has ramped up the pressures faced by graduate students and fellows. For graduate students, loss of income, increased time in program (including additional tuition) and even greater uncertainty about future employment all combine to impact their mental wellness. This past May, the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology surveyed the impact of COVID-19 on their graduate students and found the majority (55%) experienced a moderate or major mental health impact due to the pandemic. This is sobering news from a department that has, by all accounts, provided timely and robust support to their students from the very beginning of the COVID-19 ordeal. Postdoctoral fellows face term positions that are running out while their progress at a critical point in their careers is being delayed.

The past four months have been hard on everyone and the recent relaxing of restrictions and the beginning of the return to campus are certainly grounds for celebration. This said, we face a long road to return to full operations and normalcy. As we optimistically enter the next phase of the pandemic response, our graduate students and fellows continue to need our support and empathy. They are not returning to work after a four month vacation. Some have continued to work in essential research, others have strived to write papers and to complete courses and exams under stressing and unusual circumstances. Furthermore, all of us have faced a unique set of stressors which may be hard for others to fully appreciate. Thus, while there may be a desire to “make up lost time” this must be tempered by the recognition that we are not operating under normal conditions and likely will not be for some time.

Please make mental health and wellness a priority for yourselves and your personnel. Nothing is more important than an individual’s personal, mental and emotional health, and it is our belief that undue pressure to perform at “normal” levels may actually be counter productive and hinder progress in the coming months. A key area where supervisors can act is encouraging and enabling the taking of vacation time during our short summer months. Please do your utmost to foster open communication with your trainees about vacation time. If any students or supervisors would like assistance with facilitating a dialogue **please email ovdr.grad@usask.ca**.

After the pandemic has passed and we reflect back on this time in future years I doubt we will be the most proud of sustained productivity. Research is an important and, I believe, inherently noble pursuit. Papers and grants are obviously an important part of what we do and the pandemic hasn’t changed this. Rather, what the pandemic has created is an unprecedented opportunity for us to pull together and rise to our collective duty to aid our colleagues and colleagues-in-training as best we can. I sincerely believe that meeting this challenge will be our greatest source of pride and sustained success in future years.

Happy Summer Everyone,



David Cooper

Assistant Dean Graduate Studies
Office of the Vice Dean Research
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Reference Cited:

Evans, T., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. et al. Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. Nat Biotechnol 36, 282–284 (2018).