Voices of the New Graduate Majority

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Voices of the New Graduate Majority

By Jolene J. Pohl
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Introduction

This creative project is the beginning of a broader conversation with women in graduate school about their daily lives. The current majority of students in graduate school in the United States are identified as female. The interviews collected for this project are an introduction to the new majority who are not yet fully represented in research about higher education.

Women on campus come from a diverse array of economic backgrounds, ethnicities, professions, and points of view. But, unlike their male counterparts these women face a barrage of societal complications after graduation including a stagnant wage gap, lack of family leave options, and rising reports of gender bias in growing fields such as STEM. Women today are more educated than previous generations yet have made little social progress.

While the needs of some women are met with new services, such as the Food Pantry and accessible lactation rooms, on the main campus of Wright State University, I wanted to expand the university’s understanding of what other women in graduate school were experiencing. These interviews focus on women’s daily lives as students as well as how this affects their personal lives.

The interviewees are speaking from personal perspectives about life at Wright State University during the spring semester of 2014. These are their stories about a moment in their lives that will play a significant part of who they are professionally as well as personally. With these few conversations the university can begin a dialogue with women on campus to enhance their programs, careers, and community involvement.

Although brief, these glimpses into student’s lives reveal a variety of life experiences. Hopefully each woman will be given a chance to wholly contribute to our community’s future in their field of study. Despite the differences of background and goals of each woman the commonalities of their experiences reflect the overall challenges faced by graduate students.

By focusing on the new majority on campus, the daunting task of idea building can begin and professional barriers confronted. Women and their thoughts, experiences, ideas, and personal battles can be understood when they are given a platform on which to openly discuss. This project is a basis for understanding and a beginning for growth.
Lily

Lily is the first in her family to go to college. Her family struggles with understanding the hours she puts into her program, which involves mostly lab work. “Mostly my mother, it puts a really big strain on her,” she explains about her relationship with her family.

Her mother has a “difficult” time accepting her career. “I think it’s a little stressful for her, maybe, but she also isn’t here. She never went to college so I don’t think she really understands, maybe,” she states.

Despite the lack of understanding, Lily “definitely” encourages women to go into her STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) field. She acknowledges her field is mostly dominated by men and the wage gap, that she will make less than her male counterparts, but believes it will change.

“It may seem kind of daunting because most of the people I work with are male. I think there is only one full-time female professor in our department, maybe? One or two,” she says. “It’s definitely male dominated but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t pursue an education anyway, because it’s gonna change.”

Outside activities are limited due to her lab schedule. Her thesis work takes up her “entire life.” A normal day begins around 7 a.m. until 4 or 5 p.m. and evenings are spent working on her thesis. On the weekends she has a part-time job with an 8 hour shift. She has one free day a week but she usually goes to the lab for a few hours. She’ll try to “hang out” with friends but wants to graduate on time.

On campus, Lily uses Career Services for help with her resume and has attended the recruiting day events. She says the experience was “very helpful” and put her in touch with
large companies in the area. She feels that the program and the lab work she completed have adequately prepared her to work on her own.

“The professors really want to make sure that you really understand what’s happening,” she says. “Because it’s going to make you a better candidate and you’re going to represent the university better once you leave and go out into the job market. It’s really helpful to us too.”

Lily encourages anyone who wants to complete higher education should do it, especially since she is the first in her family to finish college and move on to graduate school.

“I had people in my family laugh at me when I told them I wanted to go to college. Well, I went to undergrad, graduated and now I’m pursuing my master’s degree. So it’s something that is very do-able,” she states. “Even if you don’t have financial help from your family, you have to work to put yourself through college, there’s a ton of resources that Wright State has to make it possible. That’s one of the reasons I stayed here.”
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University Participation

Lily

“When I was an undergrad I was extremely active in campus events, like ‘Miss Do-It-All,’ I was in a ton of stuff, and once I hit grad school that completely went down to almost zero percent. If I chose a non-thesis then I may have more time, I regret it. I wish I had more time to be involved in all of the things happening at Wright State.”

“I have time for two organizations now. That’s basically it, that’s outside of the lab, which is kind of sad but it’s what you have to do. The organizations I support mostly have to do with what my interests are as a professional, not based on my identity.”

“I would like to have time to plan student events on campus for organizations. Although I don’t participate in many organizations I am the event planner for my group of friends.”

Rose

“No, during my undergrad I did. I don’t have time. I don’t have childcare and stuff to participate beyond going to class and doing homework.”

“(Identity) It probably would affect which ones I would join if I had extra time. I don’t know much about what organizations are going on now.”

“I organized art shows and venues. I held an office in a local creative collective a few years ago. That put on an event called the Sideshow.”

“Do you participate in campus organizations? Why or why not? Does your identity (race, sexual orientation, gender, age, and/or class) determine the organizations you support? Are there campus organizations, programs, or activities that you are more interested in than others? What leadership roles have you held officially/unofficially?”
Daisy

“I’m in Wright State NAACP, and about to be in the Graduate Student Assembly, and then I volunteer on the side. I’ve been in NAACP since I was an undergrad. It’s always been part of what I want to do, like social justice and stuff like that. I just volunteer because I like volunteering, giving back.”

“In a way, race because the NAACP is an important organization for people of my ethnicity. Other than that….as far as class, I’ve been fortunate enough to be able to give back and help people who are less fortunate than me.”

“More stuff that’s grounded in community service, things that are focused on helping people and rights, are my main interest in organizations”

“Here I haven’t held any (roles) but in undergrad I was in a whole lotta of stuff. Just mainly community outreach.”

Freesia

“No, I don’t know much about campus organizations. I was active in my home country as an undergraduate. In India, I planned programs and helped plan special events and occasions. Here, I haven’t done anything except study to be frank”

Violet

“Prior to this semester it was hard for me to schedule time. Now I participate in clubs and organizations since I am only taking two courses.”

“I am in a women’s apprenticeship organization in Dayton, outside of campus.”

“Campus organizations that interest me most are RSVP. That’s an organization for researchers and Optimist Club meetings.”

“I lead students in my program during projects. In this project I can help with the student in gaining communication skills and initiative. It’s really important for them to have learned this so that others will follow their path.”
Rose

The opportunity to stay close to home was the reason Rose chose to attend Wright State University. She plans to graduate in three and a half years from her program in Art. “It’s been one year in and I’m still getting the hang of it,” she says enthusiastically about her first year of graduate school as a part-time student.

Her week consists of a part-time babysitting job and as a caretaker for two nephews and her daughter.

“I take care of my daughter full-time and part-time for everybody else,” she states.

Financially, Rose has taken student loans to complete graduate school and lives on a minimal budget for healthcare since she relies on food stamps for her and her daughter.

Rose hopes her program prepares her to get a job in her field. She did not think her undergraduate education adequately prepared her but she knows people who have completed the WSU graduate program who were successful. She “most likely” will stay in Dayton to find work but would be open to a “financial opportunity to live and work out of the country”.

Her response to whether or not she would recommend graduate school to other women was hesitant at first.

“It depends on their situation,” she says with a pause. “Yeah, I would. My sister, I’m trying to get her to go back into graduate school. My program is not right for her. She’s a business major and wants to go to school for science.” She reiterated that she would recommend graduate school for any woman.
Do you have recommendations for campus leaders (of organizations)? Are there any changes you would make to your program?

**Violet**

“I would like campus leaders to promote more internship opportunities to students. They should encourage students for internships and practical learning. Opportunities should be created for all students to participate outside their regular studying because it is not possible for all students to get internships. So that their future can be secure and they can gain some experience. Because many people just graduate and they just don’t know what to do. Ultimately, it will affect the university’s reputation.”

“I thought a lot about changing my program and courses but I’m happy with my choices. I’m stable and want to go with the program and the courses I am in. I am very satisfied.”

**Daisy**

“Do more personal outreach to students. You can stand out at the student union and get people to try to join but maybe really owning up and be more personable with people that might make them more likely to join. I think doing more community service and things like that. Maybe even doing stuff for the school because it gets the students more wanting to participate.”

“It’s a really good program. It’s right on track with where I was in my undergrad. It’s relative to what I need to do in my life.”
Lily

“I’d like more flexible options for graduate students in programs like mine, where I only may be available for a few hours a day, for more opportunities to meet graduate students outside of my program.”

“I would like a better departmental standard for theses. I’ve noticed as I’ve started to write, my friend who is doing literature, the way she’s writing it, she can’t really follow those guidelines very well. My science based thesis… it’s very fluid, I can do whatever I want…follow the department specific guidelines, but the department doesn’t have any. They say just follow Grad School, so you get theses that are 100 pages and some that are 20 pages, with the same degree.”

Freesia

“My professor does not have funding for financial assistance for me while I attend. There are no sufficient funds in our department right now. It is expected that thesis students would receive funding but I found out that there is no money for students in my program. Offering financial aid would help students work on their thesis.”

Rose

“I enjoy school a lot. I’m still getting into it. I’m not sure about the second required class, I really enjoy this class but it’s really not affiliated with my major. So, classes that aren’t related to your major, I could do without those classes. It doesn’t help build my portfolio and work towards my thesis.”
Daisy

Graduate school is something Daisy says she “always wanted” to attend. She was accepted at Wright State University as a full-time student although it was not her first choice as a graduate school. She recommends graduate school to other women as an option.

In her program for Criminal Justice and Sociology, if she needs follow up after class, she seeks professors during office hours outside of class. She considers her program director as her only mentor.

“She’s the one who helps me out with everything, like figuring out everything. Plus, she’s also one of my professors. So it actually works out that she’s the director because she is in a good position to really help me with everything,” Rose says about her mentor.

Currently, she works part-time and her commute to campus using her own transportation takes five minutes each day. Her daily routine outside of school averages approximately eight hours a day and she is not a caregiver for anyone. She does not seek out assistance from university programs for career guidance, financial aid, health care, although she does receive financial aid for tuition.

Rose “definitely” believes that she is adequately prepared to work in her field after she graduates. She does not plan on living in Ohio when she graduates. She says, “I don’t know where I want to go. Probably to the south but I plan on leaving the state.”
Life Style Questions

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Lily
“I tried to begin a workout routine at least twice a week. I try to do it more but, that doesn’t happen, I’ll be honest with you.”

Rose
“At the beginning of the semester a couple hours a day between working out, rushing around and making food. At this time in the semester, this semester and last semester, I’ve given up on working out and making a lot of food. So, it’s down to about a half an hour making food and no working out.”

“I’m on food stamps right now. Not much but I do spend some, on vitamins and supplements and stuff like that. Maybe five percent”

Daisy
“Probably like five hours a day.”

“Probably majority of (income), like sixty percent goes to personal care.”

Freesia
“One to two hours a day. I spend a very small amount, mostly on food. It’s all living expenses. When it is needed, for medicine.”

Violet
“Ha! I’m a really lazy person and don’t exercise at all.”

“I’m like a tomboy I don’t spend much time on personal care.”

How much time do you spend on personal care (ex: health care, exercise, food)? What percentage of your income do you spend on personal care?
Freesia

While researching her field in her home country of India, Freesia decided to apply to Wright State University to work with professors doing pharmacology research that interested her. She plans to attend graduate school for two years and has started working in the lab with her professor on a regular basis as a thesis student. As a full-time student most of her time is spent in the lab working on her thesis with her professor who has become her mentor.

Her future goals include staying in Dayton to work as part of her program department at WSU.

“I am happy with my program,” she says, adding she would like to work in her department and the same subjects she is studying for her thesis.

Rose’s daily life consists of lab, work, and classes as a full-time student. She works on campus as part of the work-study program and has not missed any days of class. Each day she walks to campus, a commute which takes her an average of 20 to 25 minutes per day to work and school.

She strongly suggests graduate school or continuing education for women, in particular.

“It’s really important (for women) to explore things and to learn more ways of doing more things,” she states and recommends that women go further in their education. She is very satisfied with her program and her experiences with her professors, which is part of the reason she would encourage other women to apply to graduate school.
Have your personal relationships been affected by your school schedule either negatively or positively?

**Lily**

“I would say time strains are definitely a problem,” she explains. “I’ve had to really learn time management.”

“I have a romantic relationship and it is difficult to schedule things. We made plans for Saturday, on Monday of this week, so I know what I’m doing so I can plan my experiments ahead of time. It was a negative at first but she has learned how to deal with it.”

**Rose**

“Yeah, I’m going through a separation. But it’s not because of my schedule, he just doesn’t think I should be going to graduate school so, I chose school. It sucks but it will be for the best.”

**Freesia**

“No. Not negatively but positively I’m learning things at the school. Like what is happening and what the situation might be.”

**Violet**

“No. I speak to my family through phone and Skype once a month.”

**Daisy**

“No, not at all.”
Violet

Wright State University’s reputation was the reason Violet decided to attend graduate school in Dayton as an option to study abroad from India. She explored many opportunities for meeting new people and cultures. She received admission to four other universities but decided WSU was the best option based on value. She plans on graduating in the spring of 2015.

Her interaction with professors has increased as she advances in her program.

“They are just so patient and they answer every question that I ask,” she states about her experience with her professors.

She usually is in the lab during the week, with one day dedicated to her courses, lab work and homework.

“I don’t study much. I believe in real work, education and diversity in the classroom,” she says. She explains she is “much more practical in learning” than to learn through studying so she spends less time in the classroom.

Although she does not receive financial aid, her family assists her with funding. “Actually one of my uncle’s is sponsoring my education,” she says.

She will base her decision whether or not to stay in Dayton on the company or job she is offered after graduation. She is open to working anywhere, whether Washington or New York.

“But if I have a better opportunity in Dayton, definitely I will stay here,” she says.

Women should attend graduate school according to Violet, but depending on their finances, they may have to delay applying. She says if circumstances make it too difficult financially she would tell them to wait until an opportunity was available for her to return to school, possibly by gaining more employment experience.
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Future Plans

Do you anticipate applying to a Ph. D program?

Lily

“I don’t really want to do a Ph. D after. Ph. D work, in the science level you’re teaching all the time, writing grants all the time, at your desk all the time. You’re not really doing the science anymore. I just wouldn’t really like that. I know it’s a lot more money but not really worth the money for me, extra stress.”

Daisy

“I plan to go on to get my Ph. D. However long that takes probably another four or five years.”

Freesia

“Yes. I haven’t put in applications or anything for a Ph. D at Wright State. I’m just learning.”

Rose

“I don’t think I will. I’m focusing on Art so there’s not really any Ph. D’s in Art.”

Violet

“No, I’m not interested in applying for a Ph. D because I’m a very impatient person.”
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Works Cited


