



# Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

G R A D U A T E S T U D E N T C O U N C I L

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## GRADUATE STUDENT FEEDBACK ON THE MANDATORY *ALCOHOL-WISE* TRAINING MODULE

The University of Virginia is committed to fostering an environment where students are aware of their choices and attitudes regarding personal drinking habits. Recently, the University required all enrolled students to complete an on-line training module, titled Alcohol-Wise, designed and administered by 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium Classrooms, a third-party company not affiliated with the University.

While feedback on this training was collected at the University level as part of the module, it is important to note that undergraduate students grossly outnumber graduate students, and undergraduate opinions may overshadow opinions held by the graduate student population. Because of the different roles that graduate students hold during their time at the University, in addition to their prior experiences in professional or undergraduate roles, graduate students often subscribe to significantly different (and important) views from the undergraduate population. **Consequently, graduate students require different training than undergraduate students for alcohol-related issues.** Therefore, at the request of University administrators, and to ensure representation and efficacy in training human resources, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Council (GSASC) solicited feedback on the Alcohol-Wise Education Module from the entire graduate student body. Respondents were asked to comment on their general impressions of the training module as well as its applicability to graduate students' circumstances.

**Of the graduate students surveyed, 92% voiced critical concerns about Alcohol-Wise training.** This overwhelming dissatisfaction demonstrates the need for fundamental change in the content of training provided to—and required of—graduate students. Based on this feedback, GSASC has identified the following key concerns regarding the Alcohol-Wise Training Module.

### Issue 1: Relevance

Over half of the respondents voiced concerns over the relevance of this training to graduate students. Feedback in this area included a number of submissions from graduate students well over the legal drinking age, including those who had families. In fact, nearly **38%** of respondents felt it important to volunteer their ages, underscoring how irrelevant the module is for persons of their age group. Examples include a 40-year old professor (James Madison University) with children, pursuing a third degree at UVa, and a 56-year old grandfather who characterized the module as "*preachy*." Such respondents were particularly bothered by material that was arguably more pertinent to their children than to themselves. Additionally, **28%** of respondents reported that the modules focused too much on underage drinking and living situations of little relevance to the majority of graduate students (e.g., dorm-room relations, Greek life, absence of parental supervision), for whom it would arguably be more appropriate to focus on the role of alcohol in the interaction between graduate student employees and their students, supervisors, and colleagues.

### Issue 2: Bias

Notably, many students disclosed the fact that they and their peers did not respond truthfully to the module's survey questions, casting doubt on the accuracy and utility of the data collected. In order to bypass many exercises and advance quickly through the training, many students admitted to lying about

their consumption habits, or, conversely, inflating their responses just to see how the module would respond. 28% of respondents expressed concern that statistics gathered by the modules would likely lead to inaccurate analysis because of false reporting by students whose primary objective was to decrease the time spent on the module rather than deliver accurate responses.

In addition, numerous respondents expressed professional and ethical concerns about the accuracy of the data collected and its usefulness to the University and beyond. A chief problem identified by graduate students was the module's tendency toward oversimplified responses ("yes" or "no") to broad questions rather than accommodating for the nuance and complexity ("yes, but...") inherent in real-life. For instance, while deciding how to respond to the question "*Do you think alcohol use affects academic performance?*" one respondent acknowledges that alcohol has the potential to affect academic performance, but also cautions that responsible or occasional drinking does not, as evidenced by the use of alcohol at departmental and professional functions. In other examples, several questions offered multiple-choice responses that were color-coded from green to red to indicate which answers were "good" and which were "bad".

Furthermore, graduate students objected to the skewed portrayal of certain facts and statistics in the training module, which were interpreted as being used for dramatic effect. Referring to statistical profile charts in the module, respondents specifically objected to how these drew inappropriate comparisons between their own drinking habits and those of dissimilar age groups (including those too old or too young to drink), rather than with a peer demographic. Medical statements made by the module were seen as similarly exaggerated: as one respondent stated, "*I was told that drinking 4 drinks in 3 hours...would [make] someone of my sex and weight (woman, 100 lbs)...super drunk, embarrass myself, and likely vomit,*" which the respondent pointed out was not only inaccurate, but exaggerated to such a dramatic extent that it was "*just too extreme to be taken seriously.*"

Additionally, some graduate students took exception or felt uncomfortable by the module's inherent economic and gender biases. Some argued that the training's use of income-based comparisons targets participants from lower income backgrounds because of the way it uses language and visual aids that discourage drinking on financial grounds. As put by one respondent, questions about alcohol expenses were "*strictly a shaming tactic.*" Finally, graduate students expressed disappointment for the gendered tone of the module and its surveys. Transgender and gender-nonconforming participants were concerned that the module continually used language in accordance with their biological gender regardless of the gender with which they identified. This gender bias of the module was particularly troubling, as many felt that it endangered the notion of the University as a Safe Space.

### **Issue 3: Trust**

Many participants in the survey perceived the training module as violating the University's Community of Trust within an HR context. For instance, **one quarter** of respondents expressed concern for the employee-employer relationship, citing that the module requires participants—as graduate student employees—to disclose personal information regarding medical prescriptions, religious activities, and family income, among other private details not required from faculty, staff, and administrators for HR training. Many respondents also suggested that the training was not formatted to improve graduate student use of alcohol, but was merely an attempt by the University to protect itself from legal wrongdoing.

Secondly, numerous respondents expressed a distrust surrounding the confidentiality of personal information submitted through the module and necessarily linked through NetBadge, citing recent security breaches and cyber-attacks on NetBadge and its associated databases.

## Recommendations

Although graduate students generally feel that training in alcohol consumption is useful for undergraduate students (22% indicated so in their feedback), a number of changes should be implemented if this module—or a separate version of it—is to be relevant and useful to graduate students of the University. The Graduate Student Council suggests the following recommendations for increasing the efficacy of this training for graduate students:

- 1) Remove the portion of the module that addresses undergraduate drinking.
- 2) Integrate training on how TAs should respond in cases where an undergraduate student's academic performance may be suffering as a result of irresponsible drinking.
- 3) Minimize the time required to complete this training and the amount of personal data collected from graduate students to be consistent with data collected from other University employees.
- 4) Remove bias from the module where possible. This should include the removal of: 1) color coded questions; 2) questions that attempt to shame participants on the basis of financial status, gender, or culture; and 3) questions that present irrelevant statistics or medical information solely intended to shock participants.
- 5) Identify an alternative to the use of biological gender in the module to make it more accessible to transgender and gender-nonconforming members of the community.
- 6) Increase transparency regarding the usage of the data collected in the module. Students should be informed prior to starting the training of how data obtained will be used in the future, especially because answers appear to be linked to NetBadge. If there are no plans to use data this should be made explicit. However, if there are plans to use data in the future, consent should be obtained by following similar procedures to those utilized in IRB protocols for obtaining consent for participation in social science research.