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MIT cases workload, offers support after recent suicides

Students, officials look to lighten the pressure

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Rachel Davis, a junior at MIT, writes a blog about campus life.

By Laura Krantz and Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 17, 2015

CAMBRIDGE — Maggie Delano never scored below a 90 on a high school exam. But her first semester at MIT, she said, she got a 27 on a physics test and finished the class with a D.

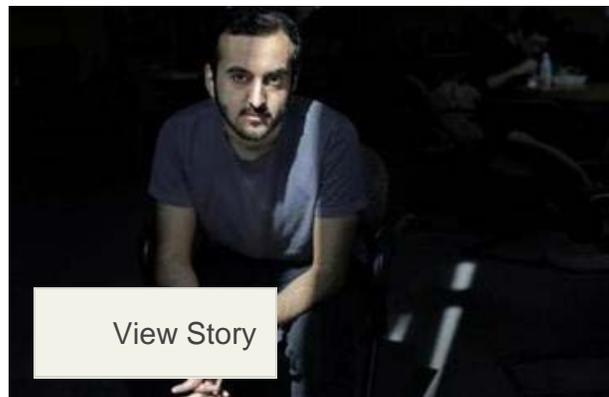
Delano pulled all-nighters every Wednesday of sophomore year, struggling under a weekly wave of problem sets and ending every Thursday exhausted.

“I was devastated because I had never failed at anything ever before,” said Delano, now a PhD student and mentor to undergrads who offers them one piece of advice: “Please, remember to sleep.”

Stress is a natural part of college life, but some students at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology say it can seem overwhelming at the elite school teeming with overachievers who are strangers to failure.

Now, the suicides of four students within the past year — including two this month — have prompted fresh soul-searching among students, administrators, and faculty about stress and how to tame it at a college that, statistics suggest, has an above-average rate of students taking their own lives.



MIT suicide rate higher than average

The increasing rate has been driven by the school's undergraduate population.

Among the efforts: MIT is encouraging students to talk about the psychological phenomenon called “impostor syndrome,” a frequent feeling of being a failure despite a record of accomplishment. Students’ battle against stress is reflected in a new Twitter hashtag circulating around campus: #peoplebeforePsets, or “people before problem sets.”

Delano and several other MIT students said in recent interviews the stress is largely self-imposed because they are naturally competitive. The students told of toiling until 3 a.m. on many nights, of academic “hell weeks” when two or more exams or large assignments are due, and of a hesitation to ask for help.

The problem can be compounded by pressure from home, and foreign students face unique challenges adjusting to American college culture.

Sometimes the stress is too much.

A student from New Jersey recalled foundering in her physics class her junior year but being too embarrassed to tell anyone.

That same student had aced high school and graduated as valedictorian, she said, but as academic pressure mounted at MIT, and after twice flunking a thermal fluids class, she took a leave from the school — just shy of a diploma.

“I reached a point where psychologically, I just can’t do this,” said the student, who did not want to be identified.

Rachel Davis, an MIT junior who writes a blog about student life, said her most popular post was one about anxiety three months ago.

She acknowledged the college’s academic load can be daunting and says she had to teach herself not to pile too many hard classes into one semester, even if others were doing it. She learned to adjust her expectations. Davis and her friends call their philosophy “being human.”

“No problem set is worth your tears,” said Davis, who is majoring in materials science and engineering. “You are going to cry over these assignments at some point, but it’s not worth it.”

Suicides often cannot be explained by one cause. But as the Cambridge university takes steps to further bolster its mental health care and support for students, it is seeking to better understand and deal with campus stress.

This semester, the institute began surveying undergraduates in its largest department — electrical engineering and computer science — to gauge their workloads.

Many students said they cope by making sure to exercise and see friends. Following the two suicides this month, Davis, the blogger, said she has seen more students begin to open up about their feelings. The school brought pizza and 10 therapy dogs to her dorm recently.

After MIT chancellor Cynthia Barnhart asked professors to lighten the load for students last week, professor George Verghese made homework optional and canceled an electrical engineering lecture. Instead, he invited students to the Harvard Art Museums.

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*‘I generally try to reason out why I am stressed and work my way to eliminate the stressor.’ --
Abdullah Alsaed, an MIT senior*

“Museums are what inspired me when I was at the lowest point of my doctoral studies,” Verghese wrote in a message to students that others posted on Facebook.

Other elite colleges have seen their own troubling suicides. Between fall 2013 and fall 2014, six University of Pennsylvania students took their own lives, according to media reports. During the 2009-2010 academic year, six Cornell students committed suicide.

At MIT, the suicide rate over the past decade was 10.2 per 100,000 students — undergraduates and graduates — according to a Globe review of public records and university and media reports. That was a slight decline from the previous decade but was higher than the national average among colleges of between 6.5 and 7.5 suicides per 100,000 students, according to three major studies that looked at both undergraduates and graduates from 1980 to 2009.

In an interview, Barnhart pointed out that MIT’s suicide rate among undergraduates has declined, particularly since the early 2000s. Between 1994 and 2005, the rate for undergraduates was 18.7, but it fell to 12.6 for that group over the past decade.

Still, Barnhart stressed that the numbers are concerning.

“We think about this as individuals,” she said. “These are our students, and every death by suicide is so sad and devastating to our community.”

She also said it was important to understand how students are stressed and to what levels but added: “Understanding and somehow controlling stress doesn’t solve the suicide problem.”

Students talk about a workload that leaves time for little else.

MIT estimates that students should spend 12 hours per week on a 12-credit course, including lecture, lab, and homework. But students say classes actually require much more time — students with four courses can easily toil 70 hours a week, Delano said.

Graduate Sila Sayan remembers how she and some classmates competed not only against themselves but also against some perfect notion of what an MIT scholar should be.

Freshman year, she said, she signed up for the hardest levels of physics, chemistry, and math to prove to herself that MIT hadn’t made a mistake admitting her. Lack of sleep became a status symbol.

Her group of friends hit a low their sophomore years, Sayan said, with some feeling scared and hopeless but confused about why.

Then during her junior year, she said, a switch flipped: Suddenly, she wanted to learn, not worry so much about grades. She found a niche within her major and classes in artificial intelligence that were fulfilling and exciting.

Sayan recalled a professor who patiently reminded her and her classmates that they mattered, that they were humans, that they were unique.

Slowly things started to fall into place,” she said. Other upperclassmen interviewed for this story shared similar “ah-hah” moments.

“I think a lot of us now welcome stumbling or failure,” Sayan said.

Sayan graduated in May with a master’s degree in electrical engineering and computer science, also from MIT. She now has a clearer perspective — and still a deep love for the school.

“An MIT education breaks you down and builds you back up,” said Sayan, who just started a job at a software company in Manhattan.

When his anxiety surged in the past, senior Abdullah Alsaeed says he first reached out to close friends and classmates.

“I generally try to reason out why I am stressed and work my way to eliminate the stressor,” he said.

Alsaeed, who is studying chemical engineering and mathematics, said he once visited the student services center and found it helpful. Stress comes not only from academics but from the cultural adjustment of moving from a small town in Saudi Arabia to the big city.

“For me, it comes mainly from conflicts between family, religion, and self,” he said.

Over about the past 15 years, the university said it has seen the number of visits for mental health services on campus double. MIT will soon launch a campuswide campaign called “We All Struggle Together,” aimed at making it more socially acceptable to acknowledge imperfections and to seek assistance.

“Struggling at some point is what happens to everyone, and it’s OK to struggle and it’s OK to reach out for help,” Barnhart said.

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