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Campus Observer-Addressing the Stressing

Will Cooper III, a sophomore biomechanical engineering major and member of Duke Student Government (DSG), was the picture of relaxation one balmy evening in early December, which, by the curricular calendar, was no time to be relaxing.

It was exam week, and, in typical fashion, all extraneous doings had come to a halt: no practices, no classes, no parties. Across West Campus, traffic had thinned, the quads had quieted, and the library, like the lone hotel in a blizzard, was filled to capacity.

Rather than snow, it was stress that descended on the campus, spreading like an odorless toxin, sapping energy and slowing strides and muffling the sounds of student life in an atmosphere of collective pressure.

There was, however, one space that remained untouched, one pocket of peace and tranquility. And Cooper was sitting in it. Munching on a powdered-sugar brownie, he pondered aloud trivia from a board game in Meeting Room B of the Bryan Center, site of the first DSG-sponsored "Stress Free Zone":

"The leaded nozzle has to be thicker than the unleaded. Right? 'Cause leaded gas is really bad for your car."

"Henry VIII beheaded how many of his wives? Anybody?... Two. Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard."

The Stress Free Zone, according to Cooper, who was in charge of maintaining its state of calm, was conceived as a refuge for the exam-weary, an enclave of effortlessness and entertainment for the overanxious and under-rested. Outside the Zone were expectations and an endless supply of caffeine to meet them. Inside were decks of cards, Chevy Chase movies, lemon bars, Swiss Miss, and two graduates of "Physical Education 119: Massage Therapy," who provided their services free of charge. "We just wanted to make an atmosphere where people could come in and decompress for awhile," said Cooper. "The intensity in the reading rooms [in Perkins Library] is just ridiculous right now. If you breathe too loudly, people get upset."

Others in the Zone agreed. It was too much. They'd been shushed, given the fish-eye, asked to leave. "This guy totally chewed me out for whispering. Just whispering!" said Katherine Robinson, a senior, as she slurped a bowl of mandarin soup. And they'd escaped to the Stress Free Zone to rest their brains and replenish their energy, they said, before heading out to brave a long night in the stacks or a research paper in the computer cluster.

"I've got one day to write twenty pages on zebra fish regeneration," said Maureen Murphy-Ryan, a sophomore biology major, as she watched Christmas Vacation on a tinsel-covered TV. Would she finish in time? "You'd be amazed what you can do in twenty-four hours." Still, Murphy-Ryan was being careful to budget her time for enough sleep. "There was a girl in my dorm freshman year who was so stressed out," she recalled. "She pulled an all-nighter for an exam at 9:00 the next morning. But she tried to take a little nap and woke up at 10:00. She was hys-ter-i-cal. She ran across campus, ran into the classroom, and vomited! In front of everyone! I felt so bad for her."

Stories of all-night cram sessions and test-taking catastrophe are hardly new to the college landscape. But over the last decade, as colleges have become more mindful of the mental-health issues affecting a new generation of students, the old stories have gained a new relevance. In the hopes of averting such disasters, a number of colleges have begun extending a therapeutic hand to those students enduring what have long been considered the ordinary strains of academic life. Now available during finals at many schools, public and private, are free massages, soothing music, sweets and tea--even canines to cuddle.

As Kevin Kruger, associate executive director for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, told The New York Times last April, "This movement is an indication of colleges trying to be more proactive, rather than waiting for students to flunk out, have a breakdown, or whatever the outcome is going to be." Duke is no exception. "We've been paying more attention to this lately," says Ryan Lombardi, assistant dean of students. "Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that students are arriving on campus with increasingly complex mental health issues. So there are pre-existing medications and conditions to be aware of."

"Academic stress is probably the most common reason students come in to see us," says John Barrow, assistant director of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at Duke and an assistant clinical professor in the division of medical psychology. Barrow says students do not tend to identify grades as the source of their stress, but that anxiety lurks under the surface, hidden among other stressors--typically relationships--and compounding them. In the weeks leading up to exams, says Barrow, "we prescribe mostly short-range tactics for stress management. This isn't the time when they're going to start making the fundamental changes, the behavioral changes, and the values assessments that could reduce stress in their lives. But we encourage them to be realistic about how much they can do in a day and to recognize that they'll need to rest at times, to let the biological system come down from peak intensity." A stress-free zone? "That's great," he says. "It sends the message that taking a break is okay; it's institutionally sanctioned."

Back in the Stress Free Zone, Cooper reinforced that message: "There's no stressing in here," he announced to the room. "That's the only rule." A line had formed for free massages. Old School played on the TV. And Cooper quizzed the crowd with questions of no significance to an academic record: "What kind of nut is used in marzipan?" he asked. "What is marzipan?"

--Patrick Adams

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