

*Occupational Health Psychology Research  
from a Graduate Student Perspective*

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A research report prepared for the benefit of the  
Society for Occupational Health Psychology  
as it seeks to understand its growing member base

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## Abstract

The objective of the present study was to provide a descriptive snapshot of the state of the field of Occupational Health Psychology (OHP) from the perspective of its up-and-coming researchers and practitioners (i.e., graduate students in OHP-related study). The results of this study are relevant to graduate students and to those trying to understand current and emerging research interests within OHP. We present current major areas of research interest as well as student perceptions of and prognostications for the field of OHP.

## Purpose of Study

To summarize the current state of the occupational health psychology (OHP) field as it is viewed by students studying for advanced degrees in OHP-related fields. Data from the 2004 and 2005 surveys can serve as a baseline against which future student-member surveys performed by the Society for Occupational Health Psychology (SOHP) can be compared. These results were also intended to raise awareness of the issues that future OHP researchers and practitioners are currently emphasizing.

## Introduction

Interest in occupational health issues is growing rapidly. This is reflected in the number of graduate programs offering OHP concentrations, specialties, and/or research groups as well as in the number of graduate students demonstrating interest in OHP-related research. Reasons for this growth are many, and it is likely that one of the strongest factors is the inherently positive and prevention-focused nature of both OHP research and OHP practice. In both research and practice, OHP is inherently interdisciplinary, seeking to improve the health and well-being of workers. Such a goal requires attention to knowledge that crosses many intellectual boundaries. Unfortunately, cross-specialty collaborations have been hindered by a lack of knowledge of OHP among students not in clinical or industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology programs.

We believe that all students studying psychology or related subject areas have something to contribute as we increase our knowledge of worker and organization health and well-being. In truth, OHP is a perspective that can guide research and practice. There is a need within the OHP movement to consider multiple psychological perspectives, spanning I-O, social, clinical, counseling, educational, experimental, and evolutionary psychology domains as they apply to occupational health issues. There is also a need to incorporate expertise from outside the realm of psychology when attempting to address OHP issues (e.g., from fields such as epidemiology, public health, and industrial hygiene). Our central message is that graduate students interested in occupational health should consider getting involved by playing to their strengths and approaching their research interests with a more deliberate consideration of occupational health issues.

To illustrate this need, we will present data from two surveys completed by graduate students specializing in OHP. The first was administered in the summer of 2004. Responses were obtained from 48 students representing 20 universities and three different countries. The second survey was administered in the summer and early fall of 2005, and 37 students responded, again representing a large number of graduate programs. Both surveys were administered via the internet and consisted of a combination of open- and closed-ended questions asking students to share their perceptions of and interests in the field of OHP.

## Method

### *Participants*

Although very few demographic characteristics were collected on the participants in both studies, this information does suggest that a more representative sample of students involved with OHP could not have been identified. Both surveys were targeted at graduate students in primarily in psychology programs, but the distribution of these respondents by school and by year in program demonstrated healthy variability. All told, students from 19 different graduate programs responded in 2004 ( $N = 48$ ) and 13 graduate programs in 2005 ( $N = 34$ ). Among the 2004 respondents, approximately 54% were first and second year students, while the rest were third, fourth, and fifth year students. From the 2005 respondents the breakdown reflected that 38% were first and second year students, 41% were third and fourth year students, and 21% were fifth year or more in the program. All respondents were affiliated with psychology graduate studies, with the exception of two respondents in the 2005 survey (public/occupational health students).

### *Measures*

Items for both the 2004 and 2005 surveys were generated specifically for the purpose of summarizing graduate students' perspectives on the field of OHP. A balanced mixture of quantitative (i.e., closed-ended, scaled responses) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended, fill-in-the-blank responses) items were included to allow us to gather as much information as possible while minimizing the time demands imposed on participants (as compared with what would be demanded by a series of interviews or focus groups). All items are presented in Appendix A/B.

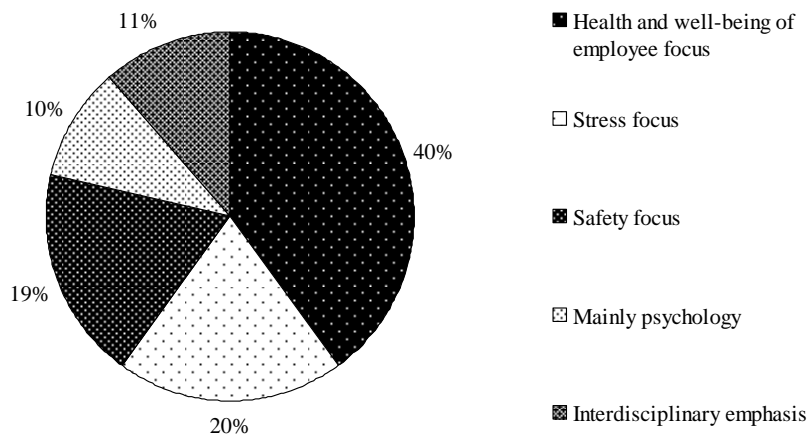
### *Analytical Approach*

Given the mixture of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as the general surveillance purposes of the present study, analyses consisted of descriptive statistics and frequency-based comparisons that allowed us to summarize the OHP field as it is currently perceived by its youngest members. All qualitative data were coded by the principal investigators. If and when coding discrepancies arose, these discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

## Results and Discussion

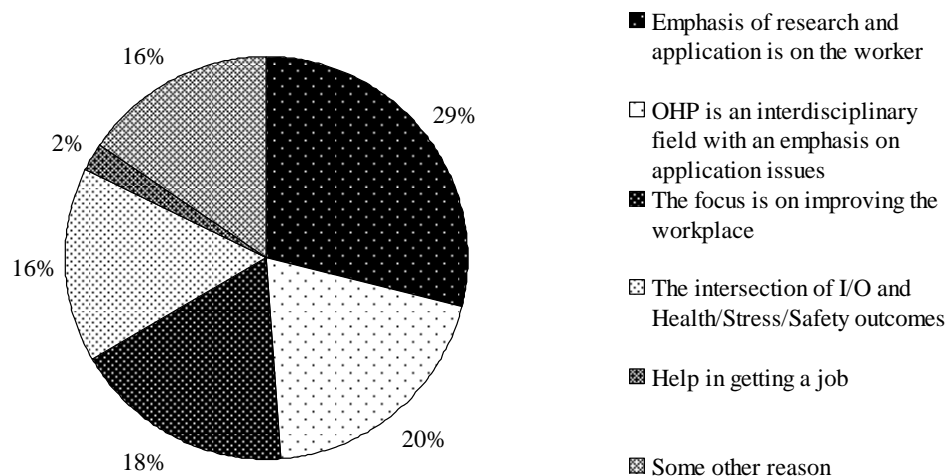
The results are summarized in order of the presentation of items on the surveys and the findings from the initial 2004 and the follow-up 2005 survey are integrated. Unless otherwise indicated, results are from the 2005 survey. More detailed breakdowns of the frequency of responses for each item (along with all items from the 2004 and 2005 surveys) are presented in Appendix A and B, respectively.

When someone asks you to explain what OHP is,  
how do you typically respond?



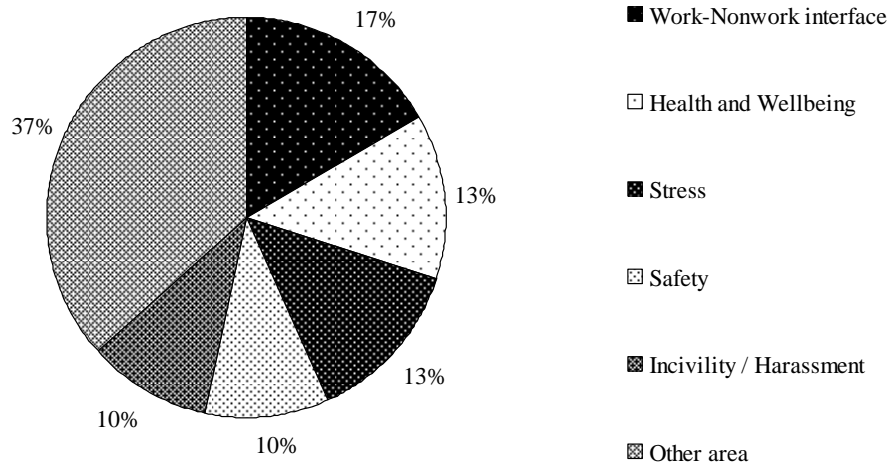
- Clearly the bulk of respondents most strongly identified OHP with a focus on employee health and well-being (40%), followed by an emphasis on stress-related issues (20%), and a decidedly interdisciplinary approach (19%). These responses suggest that students in OHP have “gotten the message” from the founders of the OHP discipline (e.g., Adkins, 1999; Barling & Griffiths, 2002; Sauter & Hurrell, 1999).

What is it about OHP that most appeals to you?



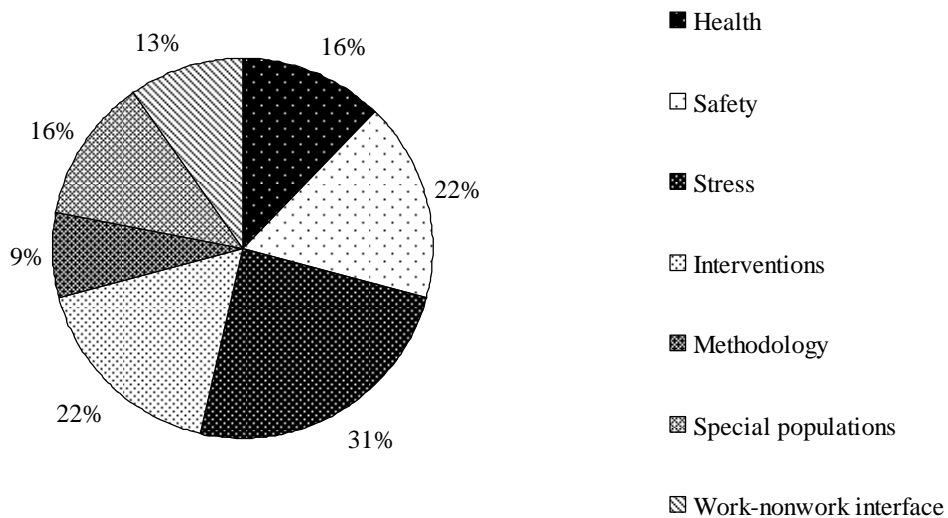
- Not surprisingly, responses to the question of OHP appeal reflect the beliefs students have about the focus and direction of OHP: worker-focused, interdisciplinary, improving the workplace.

**What other areas do you feel are most critical for OHP research to address?  
(2004 results)**



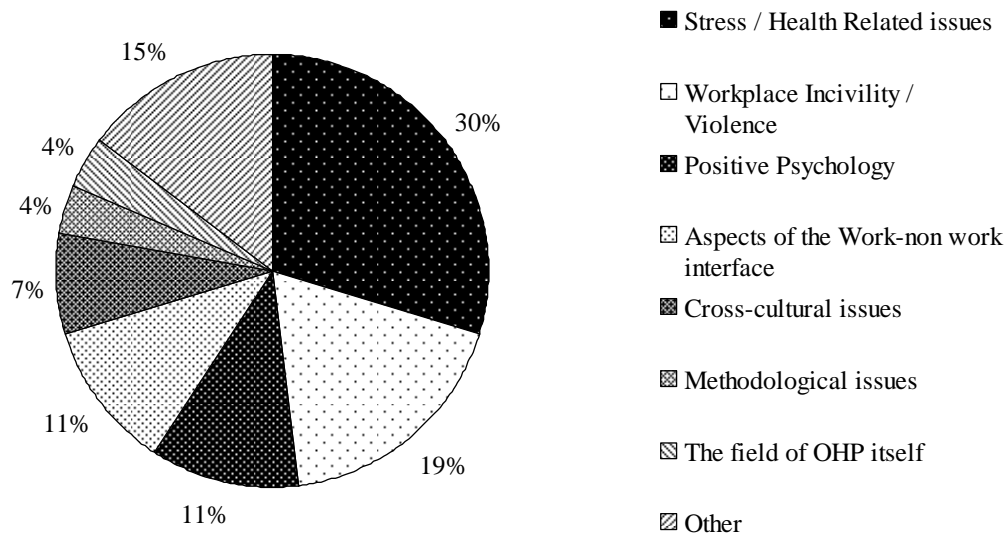
- In the 2004 survey, a fair number of respondents had very specialized interests that fell on the fringes of what is commonly referred to as “OHP research”. Nonetheless, there was a substantial focus on a variety of issues as illustrated here.

**From your perspective, what are the most critical research needs in OHP  
at present (please list)?**



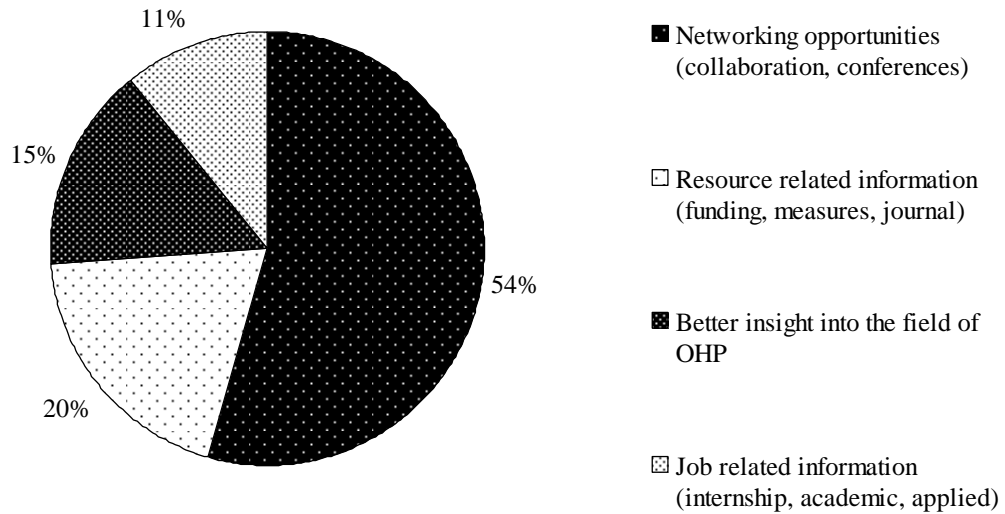
- In the 2005 survey, stress maintains its central place, but it is interesting to us that the breakdown of the field is so varied on this question, considering that OHP really began with a focus on environmentally induced stress within the workplace – it is interesting, refreshing, and exciting (while at the same time a bit frightening) to see how broad the OHP field is in the minds of current graduate students.

**From your perspective, please list any new or 'emerging' areas of OHP research that you find especially interesting.**



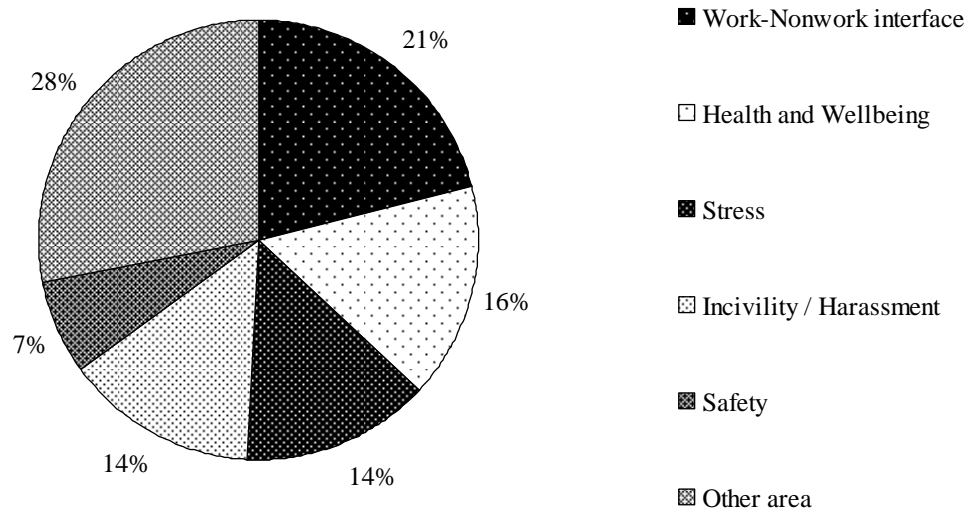
- It is interesting that stress and health related issues are considered as new/emerging areas given their historical centrality in the OHP field. Regardless, it is clear that incivility/violence, positive psychology, cross-cultural issues, and other concerns are on students' minds – we interpret this as a positive sign indicating the vitality of the field of OHP.
- In a separate question, students were asked if they intended to become members of the newly forming Society for Occupational Health Psychology. Of the respondents, 85% indicated “Yes”. Among those who indicated “No”, responses to a follow-up question suggested several possible reasons including: (a) lack of personal relevance, (b) financial limitations, and (c) lack of professional benefit. These are issues that SOHP may want to address as it works to recruit future student members.

**If you see yourself joining SOHP, what do you hope to gain from your membership as graduate student (i.e., what do you hope SOHP can do for you)?**



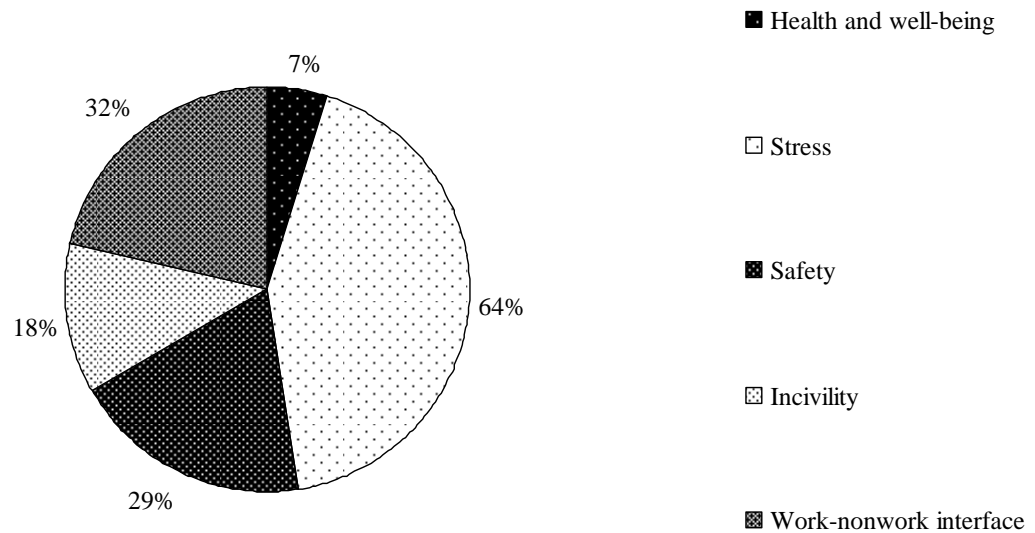
- Among those desiring SOHP member status, the most important desired benefit was clearly the opportunity to network and collaborate with others with similar interests. A desire for improved access to resources was also very important.

**What is your primary area of research? (2004 results)**



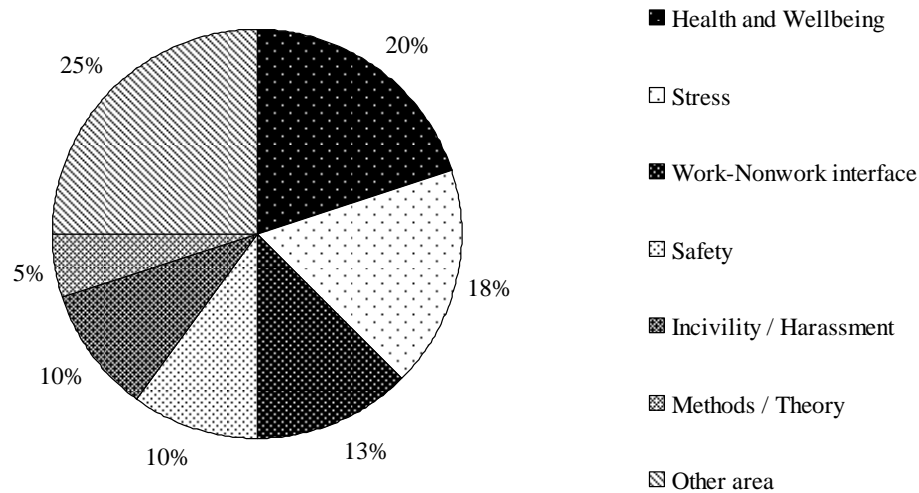
- Among the 2004 respondents, areas of primary research spanned the full gamut of common OHP topics.

**In your OHP research, what is your primary area of interest (i.e., stress, safety, aging, work-family conflict)?**



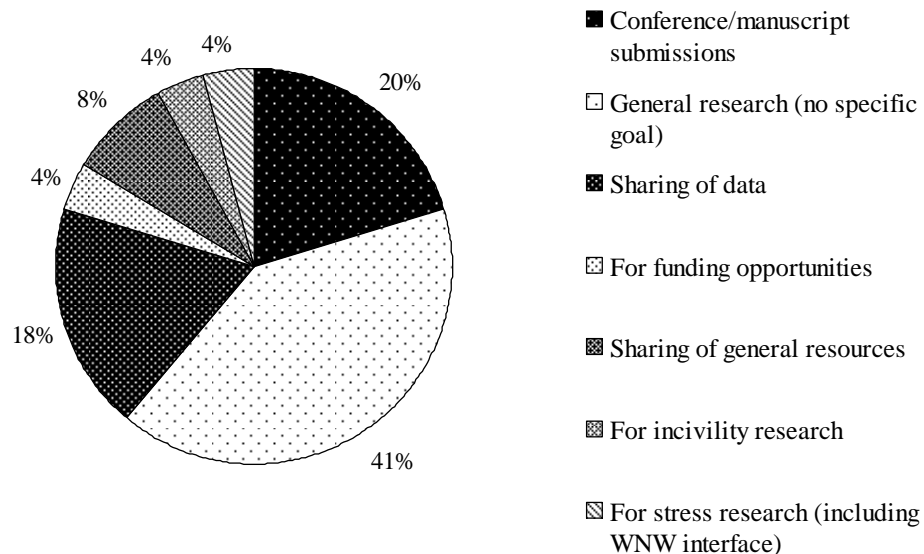
- Findings were similar in 2005, except that a larger proportion of respondents indicated stress-related research as a primary area of focus. We would expect to see shifts like this over time, but hope that homogenization of research interests will not occur, especially among students, who will eventually set future research agendas.

**In your OHP research, what other research interests do you have and/or currently pursue (again, please provide detail where possible)?**



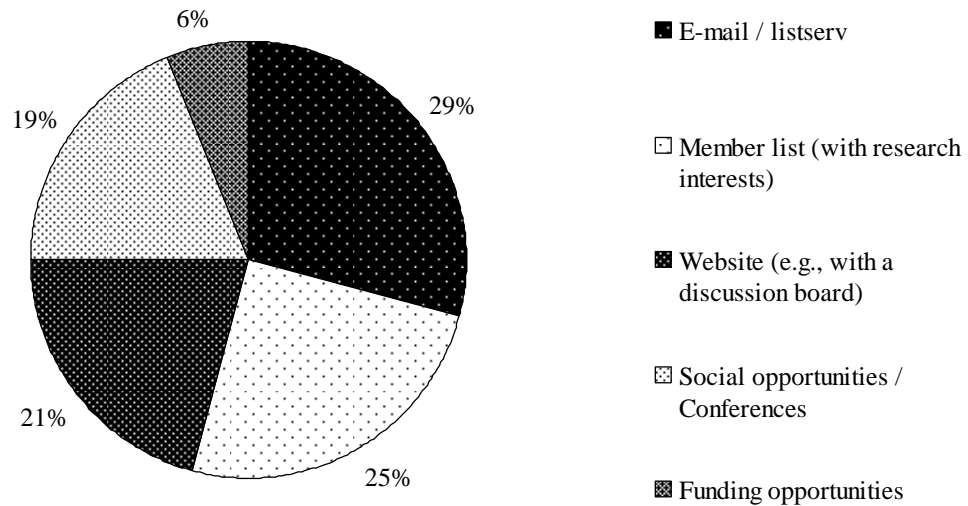
- Clearly there is a mix of student interest in multiple OHP-related topics. In addition, it should be noted that a full 39% of respondents indicated OHP being a secondary interest, which suggests that OHP is doing well in not becoming an “exclusive” science.

**If you answered Yes to the previous question, what forms of collaboration do you seek (again please provide detail where possible)?**



- Students were asked if they would want to collaborate with others who have similar interests. A majority (79%) indicated yes and these results are from a follow-up question aimed at giving more detail.

**What could SOHP do, in your mind, to facilitate collaborative research among students like yourself and more established OHP professionals?**



- Responses to this question suggest that SOHP has a variety of options that it can use in attracting and maintaining a youthful base of graduate student members.

### Limitations, Future Research, and Implications

It should be noted that the results of both the 2004 and 2005 graduate student surveys, were based on a very limited sample size of graduate students. However, the field of OHP itself is still relatively small, not permitting the identification of a large sample for such study. Also, it should be noted that the respondents to the 2004 and 2005 surveys were predominately from psychology departments. Additional efforts should be made in future surveys to reach graduate students in OHP-related disciplines that may not be directly linked to psychology departments.

Regarding our choice of methodology, we feel that the combined quantitative and qualitative approach we took in these studies represents the most appropriate technique for gathering information from this highly internet-connected population of students facing heavy graduate work demands. We acknowledge however, that future studies along these lines might benefit from additional information gathering techniques such as conference-based focus groups or interviews.

We suggest that it would be beneficial for SOHP to continue regular surveillance of member population of students and also professionals, with the goal of comparing each group's perspectives on the developing OHP field. Doing this should help SOHP to identify gaps that need to be addressed either with targeted recruitment or with changing incentives to continue emphasizing high need areas (e.g., currently "popular" topics such as incivility may be superseded by newly identified priority areas in the future, for example a need to focus more directly on psychosocial factors associated with musculoskeletal strain).

In conclusion, the results of these two surveys paint a picture of a vibrant population of students involved in OHP during their graduate training. This information can be useful in educating those not familiar with OHP as to the wide variety of options they have for getting involved. In addition, these results should be useful to SOHP as it attempts to effectively identify and recruit new members, especially from student populations in order to build a sustainable membership base for the future.

References
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Barling, J., & Griffiths, A. (2002). A history of Occupational Health Psychology. In J. C. Q. L. E. Tetrick (Ed.), *Handbook of Occupational Health Psychology* (pp. 19-33). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Appendix A. 2004 Survey Items and Response Summaries
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**1) What type of program are you enrolled in for graduate studies?**

*All respondents were from psychology departments.*

**2) What year are you in your program?**

*Summarized in text.*

**3) What is your primary research area?**

Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Work-Nonwork interface	12	21%
Health and Wellbeing	9	16%
Stress	8	14%
Incivility / Harassment	8	14%
Safety	4	7%
Other area	16	28%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 57 responses.

**4) What do you view as the most critical research areas in OHP?**

Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Work-Nonwork interface	5	17%
Health and Wellbeing	4	13%
Stress	4	13%
Safety	3	10%
Incivility / Harassment	3	10%
Other area	11	37%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 30 responses.

**5) Would you be interested in collaborating with others in OHP?**

Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	43	90%
No	5	10%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 48 responses.

Appendix B. 2005 Survey Items and Response Summaries
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*Please note that for most items respondents could choose more than one response. Given the purposes of this survey, each response was considered a separate response in the calculation of the following summary data. Therefore, "Valid Percent" refers to the frequency of a response compared to the total number of responses to a given item (which varies by item).*

**1) When someone asks you to explain what OHP is, how do you typically respond?**

Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Health and well-being of employee focus	28	40%
Stress focus	14	20%
Safety focus	13	19%
Mainly psychology	7	10%
Interdisciplinary emphasis	8	11%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 70 responses.

**2) What is it about OHP that most appeals to you?**

Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Emphasis of research and application is on the worker	13	29%
OHP is an interdisciplinary field with an emphasis on application issues	9	20%
The focus is on improving the workplace	8	18%
The intersection of I/O and Health/Stress/Safety outcomes	7	16%
Help in getting a job	1	2%
Some other reason	7	16%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 45 responses.

**3) From your perspective, what are the most critical research needs in OHP at present (please list)?**

Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Health	5	16%
Safety	7	22%
Stress	10	31%
Interventions	7	22%
Methodology	3	9%
Special populations	5	16%
Work-nonwork interface	4	13%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 41 responses.

- 4) From your perspective, please list any new or 'emerging' areas of OHP research that you find especially interesting.

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Stress / Health Related issues	8	30%
Workplace Incivility / Violence	5	19%
Positive Psychology	3	11%
Aspects of the Work-non work interface	3	11%
Cross-cultural issues	2	7%
Methodological issues	1	4%
The field of OHP itself	1	4%
Other	4	15%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 27 responses.

- 5) As the Society for Occupational Health Psychology (SOHP) begins to establish itself, do you see yourself becoming a member?

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Yes	29	85%
No	5	15%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 34 responses.

- 6) If you don't see yourself joining SOHP, why don't you think you will join (if you do think you'll join, please skip to the next question)?

*Due to the small number of responses, answers to this item are summarized in the text.*

- 7) If you do see yourself joining SOHP, what do you hope to gain from your membership as graduate student (i.e., what do you hope SOHP can do for you)?

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Networking opportunities (collaboration, conferences)	25	54%
Resource related information (funding, measures, journal)	9	20%
Better insight into the field of OHP	7	15%
Job related information (internship, academic, applied)	5	11%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 46 responses.

**8) Is OHP related research your primary area of research, or a secondary line of research for you? (1 = Primary, 2 = Secondary)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Primary	20	61%
Secondary	13	39%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 33 responses.

**9) In your OHP research, what is your primary area of interest (i.e., stress, safety, aging, work-family conflict) (please provide detail where possible)?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Health and well-being	2	7%
Stress	18	64%
Safety	8	29%
Incivility	5	18%
Work-nonwork interface	9	32%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 42 responses.

**10) Again, in your OHP research, what other research interests do you have and/or currently pursue (again, please provide detail where possible)?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Health and Wellbeing	8	20%
Stress	7	18%
Work-Nonwork interface	5	13%
Safety	4	10%
Incivility / Harassment	4	10%
Methods / Theory	2	5%
Other area	10	25%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 40 responses.

**11) Are you interested in participating in collaborative research projects with graduate students at other universities? (1 = Yes, 2 = No)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Yes	27	79%
No	7	21%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 34 responses.

**12) If you answered Yes to the previous question, what forms of collaboration do you seek (again please provide detail where possible)?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Conference/manuscript submissions	10	20%
General research (no specific goal)	20	41%
Sharing of data	9	18%
For funding opportunities	2	4%
Sharing of general resources	4	8%
For incivility research	2	4%
For stress research (including WNW interface)	2	4%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 49 responses.

**13) What could SOHP do, in your mind, to facilitate collaborative research among students like yourself and more established OHP professionals?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
E-mail / listserv	14	29%
Member list (with research interests)	12	25%
Website (e.g., with a discussion board)	10	21%
Social opportunities / Conferences	9	19%
Funding opportunities	3	6%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 48 responses.

**14) Which of the following conferences do you plan on attending in 2006 (check all that apply)?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
American Psychological Association (APA)	3	6%
Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology	28	52%
Academy of Management	10	18%
Society for Human Resource Management	2	4%
APA-National Instit. of Occup. Safety and Health	11	20%
European Assoc. of Work and Organizational Psych.	0	0%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 54 responses.

**15) Will you be involved in any OHP related research being presented at any of these conferences? If so, please check those conferences**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
American Psychological Association (APA)	2	%
Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology	15	%
Academy of Management		%
Society for Human Resource Management		%
APA-National Instit. of Occup. Safety and Health		%
European Assoc. of Work and Organizational Psych.		%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 54 responses.

**16) Are there any other conferences you are planning to attend other than those listed here that you will be presenting OHP related research?**

*Open-ended responses could not be clearly distinguished from responses to Questions 14 and 15.*

**17) What is your university/school?**

*Thirteen different programs were represented by 2005 survey respondents*

**18) Are you a member of the APA-OHP listserv? (1 = Yes, 2 = No)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Yes	13	39%
No	20	61%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 33 responses.

**19) Please select the program that best describes your current field of study? (1 = Psychology, 2 = Public/occupational health, 3 = Organizational studies, 4 = Human factors or Ergonomics, 5 = Allied fields)**

*The vast majority of respondents were associated with psychology programs (91%) with the rest associated with public/occupational health.*

**20) What type of degree are you pursuing? (1 = Master's, 2 = PhD, 3 = Other)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Master's	4	12%
Ph.D.	29	88%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 33 responses.

**21) What year are you in your program? (, 0 = Undergraduate, 1 = 1st year grad, 2 = 2nd year grad, 3 = 3rd year grad, 4 = 4th year grad, 5 = 5th+ year grad)**

*Summarized in text.*

**22) Do you desire a more research-oriented or application-focused career in the long-run? (1 = research-oriented, 2 = application-focused)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Research-oriented	16	48%
Application-focused	17	52%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 33 responses.

**23) Which setting do you see yourself most likely working in once you are done with your schooling? (1 = College or University, 2 = Consulting organization, 3 = Governmental)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
College or university	13	39%
Consulting organization	18	55%
Governmental work	2	6%

*Note.* Percentages calculated out of 33 responses.