Institutional Pride at the University of Toronto

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary
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Introduction

University of Toronto (U of T)'s Trademark Licensing Department would like to understand the ways in which a sense of school pride can be fostered in the lives of students. During a previous partnership with the Innovation Hub in Summer 2018, themes such as "survival" and "fragmentation" emerged to describe students' perception of their university experience. To build on this data, this project will investigate touchpoints of student engagement to find where, when and how students experience these themes, and how these themes shape feelings of pride towards the university. Insights will inform Trademark Licensing's future strategies and highlight opportunities for the university to foster increased student connectedness across intersecting areas of campus life.

This report addresses the question: **"What are the ways that pride in the University can manifest in students' lives?"** The answers come from a series of long-form, empathy-based interviews with students over the course of Fall 2018/Winter 2019. Our team analyzed this data to uncover recurring themes and insights, which can be categorized into four spheres of student experience: Academics, Social, Wellbeing, and Future.

Each sphere is summarized in a specific theme that describes trends in the student data; these themes are key to defining a student's experience at U of T and driving their sense of institutional pride.

Academics: Students often feel isolated and alone in their struggles.

Social: Students value meaningful and reliable connections over shallow acquaintanceships, and such relationships are valuable for personal growth and resilience.

Wellbeing: Students struggle to balance their schooling with healthy lifestyle practices such as hobbies, physical activities, and spending time with friends and family.

Future: Students often feel it is impossible to consolidate personal fulfillment (e.g., majoring in a subject they love) with realistic future goals.

The spheres and themes described in this report were deeply interconnected, with positive or negative experiences in one effectively creating ripples of impact within all the other spheres. Based on this finding, we argue that, if students feel that they belong in their academic and social spheres, they will enjoy a greater sense of wellbeing, feel more secure regarding their future, and be more likely to feel a sense of institutional pride.

Theme One: "I Must be the Only One"

Sphere: Academics

While each student may define "failure" differently, it is inevitable that students will at some point fail to live up to their expectations of themselves as they adjust to university expectations. This is especially concerning if the student does not feel they are a good fit for the university or their academic program. Students—especially those who are uncertain about belonging in an academic setting—begin to interpret grades as an indicator of self- worth. There is a stigma attached to failure, which contributes to students feeling unable to ask for help, to access resources, or to make drastic changes to their academic choices. Students are usually unaware that others are struggling in similar ways. Rather than understanding that academic setbacks are inevitable, they perceive failure as unthinkable and are not prepared to face it or talk about it.

Insights

1) "If I Could Redo It, I'd Major In…"

After choosing an academic concentration, students often find it does not match their initial expectations and they desire to change some aspects of their degree. This sometimes happens by chance: students may stumble upon other subject matter that they would like to pursue in depth. In this case, students appreciate the freedom to mix and match majors and minors that cover their various interests. Unfortunately, these discoveries sometimes occur too late, when structural and psychological barriers make it difficult to change their minds.

Supporting Data Points

"But it's like a 90-person waitlist, I feel really…like how am I gonna finish my degree in time? And they don't give us room to…kind of umm…make that decision, or if I change my mind halfway through second year about my programs, I don't have that room to make…fall behind or be delayed."

"…I sort of lost my love for English. And also, I…just by chance took a cinema studies course last year and found that I just loved it so much, and I looked forward to lecture and…I just had this feeling like this is what I'm supposed to be studying, not something that I dread going to. Um, so that—that course changed my pathway for sure. … Yeah, I'm happy with it. If I could redo it, I'd major in Cinema Studies. But I, I didn't start my Cinema minor until third year, so that wasn't a possibility."

"So I had these thoughts from first year, that I should change, maybe for the second year I should just be a MIE…. If you don't complete it for two years, you have to take an extended time, let's say one year. Which they said would cost me $8000…. I didn't find anything online saying that if you take an extended year, it's gonna cost the same as the $23,000. And if you don't complete in two years, they said it would be $8000. So I thought okay, $8000 is not that bad, as bad as $23,000. So I went on with the idea of the…completing aerospace. But yeah, my mental health did not support.

And I, uhh, yeah. I couldn't complete it. I couldn't complete it, and I made the decision to switch. And when I go to them in April, they say that—no, it's not $8000, who told you that, it's $23,000. I'm like, I don't have the money, I don't know where to get it from. So…I don't know."

"I was like really sure what I wanted to [do] when I graduated high school. Very sure. So that was the program I went into and then that wasn't what I wanted! You know, you spend a lot of time feeling like you're trapped in something you don't wanna study, and like, you're not being authentic to yourself and what your interests are. And to live life like that for, like, long periods of time is, like, really…it's not fun. So I could have just transferred out of my program…. Yeah! I needed…I needed to come to U of T and, like, the fact that you could do a major and two minors or, you know, a major and another major…and you didn't have to fully commit to one field and that left you open to really discover what you're passionate about and what you're interested in."

2) "I Strive for Excellence"

Students feel proud when they achieve high grades due to a personal sense of achievement and feeling valued as "whole people" for their contributions to the academic conversation. Meanwhile, getting a bad grade has a negative impact on their perceived self-worth. But, overall, students tend to appreciate the sentiment behind receiving personalized feedback on their work, because it is an indicator of its importance and its ability to start a conversation among peers, professors, and mentors.

Supporting Data Points

"I was taking some creative writing classes and, um, just being a little bit gutsier in my literature essays and not getting very good marks on them…. I've always been a perfectionist and…I tend to base my self-worth on my marks, which I know is not a good thing, but it's just how I've always been. I strive for excellence, I want teachers to like me, and um, that has worked I guess in my benefit in that I do get high marks, but also it's detrimental in that when teachers don't like my work, it feels like a personal attack sometimes."

"… getting feedback from professors and peers has been, it was a very good experience…. I appreciate it, I think somebody whose work is valued and recognized as contributing to not only to the discipline […] appreciated in that my work brings value to the wider U of T community. I think that's something that…that I appreciate."

"For someone to come up and provide useful feedback and engage in that conversation means I'm doing something, and at least one thing, right, that prompts other people to provide their opinion. I think I might do something at a very mediocre level, then I think the responses to get won't be as constructive because there's nothing to just sort of provide feedback on."

3) "If You Don't Work Hard, You Will Fail"

Rather than seeing a bad grade as a minor setback, students see their first academic struggle as an indication that they are not good enough. Each student defines "failure" differently, depending on their priorities and goals for the future. This failure can manifest itself as grades that are drastically different from high school, grades that will unlikely be high enough to get into grad school, or not meeting the cut-off to get into a subject POSt. Or it can mean literal failure: getting an F on one's transcript. It is inevitable that, at some point, students will fail to live up to

the expectations they place on themselves. While individual expectations may vary, students were usually not exaggerating when they expressed the precarious reality of living with the threat of "failure" that they will not be able to recover from. Some students cope with this by reducing their personal expectations in some classes, while others push themselves to achieve perfect academic success to avoid narrowing future opportunities.

Supporting Data Points

"Like, if I'm not responsible for what I do, if I procrastinate, I will mess up my whole life [laughs] and no one else will care […] It's hard to graduate, like, if you don't work hard, you will fail."

"I don't really pay attention to my grade point average I guess, because also for first year, like, I don't really have that great of an average, and sometimes when I tell my friends like, 'I really have to study, I'm going to fail this course,' I really mean I really have to study, I'm going to fail this course. Cause for them it's like, oh you're—you've got an 80, you just want a 90. No, like I've got a 40, I want a 50. And—so sometimes they don't understand that […] I wanted to work on overcoming failure, because now every midterm or exam I go into, I'm like, 'Am I going to fail this?' Like, it's happened before, it can happen again […] Like I told my friends, like I cried like three times because I was worried about failing...."

"I want to be around people who challenge me to better myself, rather than just do the minimum. You know? […] Especially I think in my life science courses, all you try to do is pass. [laughs] It's…it's difficult."

4) "You Can't Handle It"

When struggling academically, students panic as they compare themselves to the school's reputation and to their peers, whom they have implicitly categorized by perceived levels of intelligence. Students perceive failure to understand a topic quickly as an indication that they are not "smart"[1] and must spend more time than average studying. Some students also reflected that "smart"er students seem to have been given more preparation from their previous school, which hints that on some level they are aware that "smart"ness is not entirely intrinsic. Also, it is worth noting that "smart"ness does not entirely determine a student's outcomes; a student's dedication to getting high grades is another factor.

Supporting Data Points

"I thought it could be difficult, to like…sort of…swim here.... So when I first…I first saw University of Toronto's Aerospace Department. And they kinda mentioned in Google that they helped umm…Apollo land safely. They could have been dead, but these professors solved the pressure lock problem in like 11 minutes. That story kinda made me like, 'Wow, this sounds kinda tough and challenging.' I don't know if I can survive.... I found aerospace program tougher than the mechanical, because I didn't have the background maybe?"

"Some people are here just to get a degree, and some people are here to get a degree but also achieve really high. So I think, in terms of the environment, [it] is very different. Because as an individual, you choose which group you want to be part of. And I think, now that I'm here, you realize that you're just competing against yourself, because you can have really smart friends who

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[1] To learn more about the concept of "smart"ness as it pertains to university students, please refer to Appendix B.

do very average, and they're happy with that, or you have very smart friends who do really well, but they're always still like, upset at themselves for doing so…at such a level."

"…Not everyone is like super smart. If you are just, like, really humble and, like, hard- working, you will be comfortable. You won't be, like, in Ivy League schools, where everyone is, like, super smart [and] they won't even need to study, they go to clubs everyday and they can get grades higher than you. No, it's not like that. Because a lot of people here, they are just really…they study as hard as you do."

"Everyone around me in physics and math [was] really smart and getting it quicker than I could […] Like, when you're in the harder courses and the smarter kids are around, 'smarter' in quotes, but it's like, you feel more scared to ask questions because they'd probably be like, 'You don't know that?' […] I started out in the most hardest courses in…for the math and the chemistry and the physics but then, after that, I just realized most of the students who were in those fields either came from IB programs or A-levels, and I just didn't feel like I had the same preparation they did, so they were making all the connections faster and…I guess it was kind of also…most of my friends that were on my floor that I made were all in math and physics and computer science, and so I guess it was kind of like a stigma: 'Oh, if you dropped to a lower course,' it'd be like, 'Oh, you can't handle it.' … I decided to stop it halfway and start with the easier math in the next semester, and that just helped me get a better foundation in math, cause I wasn't enjoying the course anymore and I wasn't doing well."

5) "Cracking the Code"

When students are struggling academically, their first instinct is to attempt to help themselves rather than seek assistance. Students express that they have gradually acquired the intangible attributes necessary to succeed in a variety of university-level courses. Each student figures out how to stay focused and motivated by deciding how to structure their time, which study strategies to use, how often to take breaks, and more. This "code" is usually a product of self-reliance, but may also stem from informative resources and services offered through the university.

Supporting Data Points

"If I was going into these courses without any experience with university-level courses, I don't know how well I would fare. [laughs and sighs] But because, like, you know, because I had that experience and how to set myself up in courses […] I've found out how to be good. […] Now, I'm getting great marks, and I'm studying what I really wanna study, and I know exactly what my strengths are. I know exactly how to set myself up so I don't end up feeling depressed or overwhelmed or isolated. So, just making sure you go to all of your lectures and rereading the slides…. It's, like, the stuff that, like, they drill into your head but that you never do. [laughs] You know, staying on top of your work…staying on top of your readings."

"I think that [it's] only possible to get a 4.0 if every single quiz that you have…. If you do well on a quiz, you're going to do well on a final, so sometimes you might bomb your quizzes, and that's just—one, you're going to get lower in those grades and also at the final—you don't know your stuff […] And so, I'd rewrite my notes, and then I didn't do any of the assigned problems because from the notes the—anything that the lecturer said was basically what they wanted us to know, so anything extra was just like…. As long as you knew the bare bones of it, you could do anything."

"But then, being here also made me realize...I've written my thesis before I came here. So I'm quite...I've studied a lot. This is my fifth year of studies. I know what I'm good at and [...] being in the stressful environment has made me like, more confident in my abilities, like academically and also social[ly]. Yeah."

Theme Two: Reliable Connections

Sphere: Social

Students need to feel solidarity with their peers throughout the ups and downs of campus life. When students (especially commuters) are new to the university, they make it a priority to meet new people by attending social events and joining small groups. Not all of these connections will become long-term friends, but students still appreciate the feeling of recognizing people around them. Students feel that having a few close, reliable relationships is effective in deterring feelings of isolation, and that such relationships help them develop and become more resilient.

Insights

1) "Mostly, I Have My Meals Alone"

Students perceive that unless they make an immediate and consistent effort to make and keep friends and to incorporate them into their schedule, they will, by default, spend most of their daily life alone. Even students who are fairly well-connected can easily find themselves alone during and between each activity on campus.

Supporting Data Points

"Well, like, you walk to school by yourself; you sit in class by yourself; you walk home by yourself; you.... You know, you go to the library by yourself.... It's, like, it's very isolating. […] It's, like, okay, I have friends.... One that lives in Markham, one that lives in Mississauga, one that lives like all the way.... It's not like everyone is, like, living around campus. Your classes are huge. They're all over the place. There's no.... You just don't know anybody."

"... The weather got colder and I felt more lonely, [laugh] because sometimes I go to the café, and no one would go with me, and I would find nowhere to sit, and I would just sit alone. Because I think it is because…umm…. First, because U of T is a very, very big campus, so if you don't go out and make friends, no one would, like, notice you. […] After class, I'll just come back to [residence], and umm…do my work again and umm…video call with my boyfriend for a few hours [laughs] and go to class. Umm...yeah I think mostly I have my meals alone, but I go to class with my friends, and sometimes…like very occasionally, we go to the library […] And also I live alone so umm…most of my friends are not in this building, so it's not very easy to find them."

"This last bit, like, period of time finishing up my dissertation, it was more lonely, just because that's the nature of writing sometimes, just to sit and focus. I would just go to Robarts, right, going [to] just like focus [and] shut myself off from everything. Yeah. Studying, engaging with my colleagues, and departmental events from time to time, but not with the same rigour or passion or desire as I would have in my Master's here. For example, like attending all the events, now if I attend […] one or two a semester, it is an accomplishment."

2) "I Totally Get You!"

In addition to the desire to connect with others on a daily basis, students value an intangible feeling of togetherness. Particularly when dealing with adversity, students like to know that their peers and mentors feel or have felt the same way. When a group of students perceive they share a struggle in common, even if they are not personally connected, they may find it encouraging to collectively imagine a connection.

Supporting Data Points

"My friend group is very small, and I have a hard time talking about mental health, uh, so I didn't reach out to friends for that.... There's a [Health and Wellness] group that I know—all of these people are anxious. [laughs] It's...it's comforting that I can say, 'Hey! This is what I'm feeling!' and they can say, 'I totally get you! I feel the same way!' There's...I don't know—it's—it opens that opportunity to speak about it with someone."

"... Being on campus and, and being immersed in that. Um, especially actually during exam period. Because...studying at home, alone, when no one else is, like...has that same experience as you, it's, like isolating, and it's hard to focus on that. But when you're downtown, on campus, surrounded by other people who are in the same position, it's much easier, I've found."

"Organizing group studies is really effective.... You know, I...I...got help from the Health and Wellness Centre; I did group sessions there, where everyone sort of talked about their academic experiences and how they deal with, like, the stresses of—of life. And that was really helpful."

3) "Everyone Can Say 'Hi'"

Events such as Orientation Week are helpful for finding connections, because they are large enough that many people share the same experience and casual enough that one can reasonably introduce oneself to a stranger. This type of informal connection can also be found by living on residence or sometimes by participating in a small class or group, because one encounters the same people consistently. Even if not all of these situations lead to deep friendships, students acquire large networks of acquaintances and appreciate simply being able to recognize familiar faces at U of T.

Supporting Data Points

"Like, a lot of people didn't do orientation, or they did it and they didn't really enjoy it, but I found it pretty nice, because it's that point where everyone can just say 'hi' to everyone, it's not really that awkward."

"So that was a lot of fun. And the small class size, there were 25 people only, so we had a Facebook group chat obviously after the first week, [laugh] and we kept in touch ever since [...] first year ended. And it's nice to have these familiar faces, like around campus walking, even though I was in life science, and majority of them were in social science, I still felt...knowing that I had people to, like, um....hang out with, kind of like, once in a while."

"I would urge any first year definitely to be in residence, because I know a lot of my friends who found their friends through their floormates. That just was not the experience for me, unfortunately."

"So, during my first, um, week I was um…. It was a good decision for me to go to frosh week, because I was able to meet some people, and they're [in] the same program as me. It was good. And then, I also joined the first-year learning community. And then, because um, and then, all the students and that group have the same classes at the same time too. So it was good to meet people that way."

"And once we were here, there was…there were, I'd say, there was one, like, social event [where] we met people, and that's where I met, like some of my closest friends that have come now. But I would, in future, hope that they organized more, like, social…social gatherings as well…. Maybe organize one or two more social events where people get to meet people, because you don't…I don't feel like you meet people in class here that much. [There are] only social gatherings at the beginning, not throughout."

4) "No One Else Is There"

Because commuter students are so geographically dispersed, social events are often planned around a purpose and are sometimes poorly attended. Students are more likely to attribute "fun" to activities that occur spontaneously throughout prolonged interactions between community members.

Supporting Data Points

"And then, at [previous university attended], it's like, you know, walk to classes, and then on your way to class, you would see people who are in your class and you would chat and then you'd go into your class, and then…you would know everybody in that class, and you'd know everybody by name. And then, you know, after class, you'd go and you'd hang out with them or you'd get a coffee with them, and then you'd maybe walk back to their place and study with them. And then that night you would go to some other friend's house and have a party with them, and then…and then you'd go home."

"… On residence, they have houses, but they also try to make houses for commuters…. I plan on going to these events, but I usually go there too early, and no one else is there and, like, I end up leaving [laughs]."

"Yeah, so, um, so my school was really small. So everyone knew each other, but U of T is so big. It's hard to make fun. […] So that area is actually intended for commuters. And there's, umm, a commuter space. But I feel that people [who] were […] in that space…they also live, like, off campus, but […] close. So it's not really commuting. So they don't really know. And they're very like cliquey, they have their own groups. And it just seems that they are happy with themselves. They're not very welcoming and inviting."

5) "It Was Fun at First"

Students especially value opportunities to socialize informally when they are new to university so they can find friends who share their priorities. Eventually, they feel less of an urgent need to attend events and extracurricular activities. This may be because they already have an established group of friends and because their focus has shifted towards priorities such as finishing degree requirements and getting work experience.

"I think, in first year, it was an important part to get involved and get integrated in the community to gain a lot of friends and mak[e] the right friends too. Making the right kind of friends that also get involved in extra-curriculars and these were the sort of people I was interested in hanging out with. But I think, by fourth year, [after] I started progressing in university, I started dropping back on the sort of voluntary committees. I no longer was part of the social committee, and I didn't want to be the orientation coordinator and any sort of positions anymore. Mainly just because, I sort of gained enough friends and networks in first year and I didn't sort of see it as valuable as I progressed through upper year.... [I] think I shied away from extra-curricular work and started getting involved more in Work-Study positions and have like a part-time job and putting more work...."

"I feel like I've outgrown a lot of the extra-curricular stuff on campus. Like, it was fun in first and second year...and then...I tried going in third year, and...it was just like...I couldn't connect with it anymore? And so I stopped going.... The courses get a little bit tougher in upper years because...the class sizes get smaller and you're expected to participate more in lecture, so that was definitely a motivating factor."

6) "You Can Call Me Anytime"

If refining study strategies is not enough, some students adapt by choosing to collaborate with peers, speak to a professor, or access relevant resources. Students value being surrounded by high-achieving peers and especially cherish the time some professors devote to answering questions and mentoring.

"Umm, I know to ask for help. I know to go for office hours. [...] Organizing group studies is really effective. I find that that...at [university], I used to try to just memorize, you know, five courses worth of textbooks, and it's like...that's...it's impossible! So, if you can find a way of relating what you're learning to what, like, experiences...then it's great!"

"I've met different profs. Some profs don't even, like, encourage you in class. Like, they won't answer your questions. But some profs go as far as giving [you] their own number, and they'll be like, 'Oh, just call me anytime.' [...] Like a friend [...] Everything is personally emailed. Everything. He was super friendly."

"...At home, a lot of professors don't know your name, who you are, what you're doing. And here professors, like, to a certain degree, try to get to know you. They are more interested in you achieving or being good at school, being good at what you do. You're...I'm more likely to talk to my professors after class if I have a question, or email them. I feel like I can not only exist, like, as an academic, but as a person in that class. It encourages me to have...to be a good student, I think, yeah."

Theme Three: Taking Time

Sphere: Wellbeing

When faced with demanding academic workloads, students adapt by structuring their lives around their work and sacrificing parts of their personal lives. Eventually, they learn that to maintain a sense of wellbeing, they need to be able to participate in at least a basic existence outside of academics (including daily self-care, socializing, and hobbies). However, students with strong time-management skills are often unable to take care of their wellbeing without feeling the need to justify how fitting these activities in their schedule will improve their academics. Commuters, especially, report that "there's just not enough time in the day" to place mental health as one's highest priority. Attempts to take care of physical and mental wellbeing often get overshadowed by keeping up with academic deadlines.

Insights

1) "Looking at the Clock All the Time"

Students feel guilty when they are not doing academic work. They are hyper-aware of the passage of time and may feel a sense of panic if their productivity does not match their timed goals.

Supporting Data Points

"... You have to sit down and really focus. So, to get into that zone, sit down to write and focus, and then having your attention drawn to something else. And, of course, life happens, right? You get sick, you get.... Yeah, have fun with friends. I mean, you have to socialize, you have to have every aspect of life. So, things sort of fall out of focus. And then you have to rearrange your priorities."

"And I just wrote myself, like, a to-do list and tell myself, 'Okay, you're going to finish this one assignment, you're going to give yourself a certain time period....'"

"... When I give myself [a] timeframe, that forces you to start to get some type of work done. So when you're sort of moving on with that assignment, whatever you're working on, you look back and be like, 'Okay, I got some chunk of it done,' at least you're progressing through it. But it is stressful. I think, sometimes, like that timeframe stresses me more out than the actual assignment. Because it's kind of like a time bomb, right? [laughs] [If] we don't do it, like this might just blow up [...] [I'm] looking at the clock all the time."

2) "Turn Off That Brain"

Students learn from experience that they must find ways to incorporate healthy habits (including sleeping) into their academic schedule. Mindfulness and self-care activities are strategies to cope with stress.

Supporting Data Points

"... I took up running, which was really good, because it allows you to detach yourself from what you're thinking about. You just pop in your headphones and just think about nothing for an hour or so."

"Yeah. So don't be afraid to take breaks or to take naps, because in the long run, it helps better than just to go straight through […] And to realize that, like, sometimes a thirty-minute break, even though it's like, oh my gosh, thirty minutes, I could be studying. Like that breaks are important. Because it just help[s] you like, turn off that brain for a second."

"Yeah, I think being somebody that practices yoga, and I think one of the main things, meditation and being mindful about how you're feeling in the moment. You continuously hear all these terms about being present and being mindful and being aware. […] Sleep is the one that is really bad for me, and I'm at least aware of its importance, and I do consciously make an effort to get more sleep. I think that is the one area I sacrifice the most."

"I told myself, 'Your resolution coming to Toronto is going to be just trying to stay in the moment and taking things one by one.' And that's what I do when I came here. […] And if you finish, it will be finished. If not, you're just going to finish it tomorrow. […] But being there [camping trip] made me.... First of all, I was very relaxed. I didn't think of school once. And that was something that I desperately need at that point. Because I'm so busy with school assignments, reading, I was happy to be at a university that offers such a thing. So yeah, that's what I thought about.... I enjoyed the experience, and it helped me to calm down. And when I got back, I realized how stressful my life at university can be."

3) "That Helps in the Long Run"

Some students begin to schedule their time in a pragmatic way, claiming that taking a break from studying and pursuing another activity will help them remain focused later on. This mindset is not incorrect, but prevents students from partaking in enjoyable and healthy activities "just because."

Supporting Data Points

"Choose at least one thing in your life that, you know, doing this will make you feel happy, or feel...sort of like stress-free. And make sure that you return to that thing every once in a while. You do need a break. And that could be like any sport or hobby, or just like...trying to maintain one thing in your life that it's stable and, you know, that returning to it. Even if it's temporary. I think that helps a lot in the long run."

"Take out some time for your self and for your mind, to relax it and not be as stressed out, and it should be a daily practice for people. I think this is valuable, and it helps you, and it improves your quality of life."

"... The ones that kind of don't come in with the 'How do I check off the box of what is required for my class,' they are much, like they just, it [placement program] just becomes this real grounding piece."

4) "My Way of Coping"

When addressing mental health concerns,[2] students often look to themselves first to solve the issue. This self-reliance leads them to explore self-care strategies (e.g., better eating habits, being active) before seeking help from their support system or professionals. Staff members perceive that these high-achieving students are not used to recognizing that they need help, asking for help, and advocating for themselves within a bureaucracy to obtain necessary resources.

Supporting Data Points

"I started out just trying to...do my own initiatives, like working out, eating well.... That was my way of coping at first. Um, and then I actually talked to, like, my family doctor, and she was the one who connected me with Accessibility Services and also the [therapy] group, umm, so that's how I found out about that. I'm not sure if I, uhh, if I would have considered signing up for that of my own accord: it was definitely helpful to have that connection made for me."

"... Having a social anxiety–provoking experience with a teacher, about the fact that you didn't understand something in class and you need the extra time, or you would like to write your exam in a guidance counselor's office, like these are not fun things to do.... The smart kids who have always had 90s who come here are not often equipped with those skills."

"You have to fill out a lot of forms. And since you're an international student, your insurance, everything has to be in place. So, um, that was kind of challenging for them, because they hadn't ever done that. So I kind of walked them [through] the process. [...] One other thing that was really challenging for them was that they needed to see someone urgently because it was an emergency. And I know university towns or, you know, go to the hospital. But if you're an international student, I don't know, like with your insurance, I don't know exactly how that works."

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[2] To read more about mental health concerns, please refer to Appendix C.

Theme Four: Finding the Future

Sphere: Future

Students need to feel confident that the choices they are making have a future.

1) "I Have No Idea"

Students find it hard to imagine themselves entering a professional role and are nervous about being able to find a job directly after graduation. They simultaneously question the applicability of their degree to the real world *and* believe they can rely upon U of T's reputation in their careers.

Supporting Data Points

"Um, being in my fourth year, people ask me like all the time, you know, what am I planning to do when I graduate? And, and…I have no idea.... Umm, and I don't know how American Studies will lead to a job…."

"It was like you studied finance, you got a job in finance, and that would be your job [monotone]. But if you're in the position where you're studying finance, and you don't like finance, and you don't want a job in finance, then the idea that you could try and find something else that you're interested in versus committing yourself to a life of working in a corporate job that you don't like. Although it's uncertain, maybe in the sense that I don't know what job I'm going to end up in...."

"…. Umm…yeah, I don't know where I want to go, but at the same time, like my graduation certificate from U of T is like an insurance for my career."

2) "What Drives You?"

Some students look beyond getting their first job and are wary of simply joining the "rat race." Instead, they value finding a personally fulfilling career, even if this potentially comes with more risk. This is especially true among students who value choosing a combination of majors and minors that cover their various interests. These students often do not have a particular "job" description in mind, but are hopeful that their passion will attract them to the right opportunities in the future.

Supporting Data Points

"The general atmosphere of, like, people working downtown is very…big, like, rat race…almost isolating because you're running numbers and you're just like, 'Who? Who is this helping?' And if that's…if that's kind of, like, what drives you, that need to help others, or to feel like what you're doing is meaningful, then…a job in finance is probably not for you. […] It [psychology] might eventually […] lead to something that could be helping people. Whether it be, like, research? Or…a job in psychology, or a job in science, or a job in, like, cancer research, you know you're actually doing something that can, you know, can help people at the end of the day. […] Although it's uncertain, maybe in the sense that I don't know what job I'm going to end up in.... It's not

uncertain in the fact that I'm giving myself a chance to be happy and find, uh, find my path. So...yeah, I guess you could say there is certain uncertainty. But...the way that U of T is set up is that it...can become certain when I figure out, okay, what are the majors and minors that I'm really passionate about that, you know, I know can lead to something afterwards."

"I think everyone around me [has] realized, like, I am a lot happier. And I am doing a lot better now doing, like, what I wanted to do, versus before when I was very stressed out about a subject that I didn't care about, or like, didn't do well in. And now I think because they're seeing successes and the opportunities that I've had based on pursuing something I actually enjoy."

"I don't think I have a final image of myself, but I always see myself as a process and I think my career will always be sort of continuing and building up. One final career I see is more like a project-based person and continually doing more interesting projects and working in more sort of inter-disciplinary fields and using my knowledge and applying towards new things and new technologies. As new problems arise, I think careers will sort of change and I think that the ultimate goal [is] continual contribution to the process of educating myself and applying my skills to newer projects continually. The continual process of enjoying the work that I do creatively and academically."

Synthesis of Themes

Usually, students perceive the Academic, Social, and Wellbeing aspects of their lives to be in conflict with each other. Clearly, spending too much time on Academic pursuits can leave a student feeling burnt out and uninspired. At the other extreme, if building a sustainable lifestyle takes up all of a student's time, they may not be making the most of the Academic learning experience they are paying for. It is possible to succeed in only some of these categories in the short term. On the other hand, synergies between the themes include:

Academic: Students who feel refreshed by improving their Wellbeing and Social life, and who are inspired by a sense of purpose for the Future, will have an easier time focusing on their studies.

Wellbeing: Students who achieve their Academic goals, have a Social support network, and do not feel anxious about the Future are likely to feel better overall.

Social: Students who feel that they belong Academically have an easier time connecting with peers because they have a stronger sense of self-worth.

Future: Students who feel able to achieve success in multiple areas of student life will have more confidence when navigating the Future. Talking about goals and values with Social connections (including mentors) can bring more certainty about the Future.

Even students who manage to find balance between Academic, Social, and Wellbeing often find that the daily struggle of keeping up can prevent them from gaining the perspective necessary to see how their current experience might lead to a viable and enjoyable future.

Personas and Journey Mapping

The following are fictionalized versions of some of the student stories shared through the interviews. The last persona's story contains more depth, capturing patterns that are present in the journeys of many students. For a summary of the student experience, including possible emotions and touchpoints, refer to

Persona One: Maurice's Story

Wired/Wireless Connections

Name: Maurice
Major: Psychology (originally Computer Science)
College: Trinity
Hometown: Montréal, Québec

My older sister also came to U of T, so she gave me a few tips. She insisted that I should join as many small groups and classes as possible. I'm pretty outgoing, so I didn't worry about that, but I listened to her because she made it sound so urgent. I signed up for a First Year Learning Community and a First Year Foundations "Ones Program." I'm glad I did. Especially the Ones Program: it was interesting; I got to delve into subject matter I never would have had a chance to discover. And I was surrounded by really high-achieving students who inspired me. I'm still close with some of them today. I'm glad I took that initiative in first year, because I never lived on residence, so there weren't as many opportunities for me to meet people. My sister also told me to join Trinity, and I'm not really sure why.... It's pretty and stuff, but I'm not a fan of that social hierarchy they've got going on.

I originally wanted to major in Computer Science and minor in Psych, but I just missed the cut-off. I was really sad; I had no idea what to do next. I had spent so much time studying for that course, and I got an A...just not an A+, you know? I spoke to my registrar and he asked me if I considered Psychology. Initially I planned to minor in Psych, and I was taking a bunch of those courses for fun, really. I was at the top of my class there, and he said it's so competitive, but I meet the requirements so I should try it. So things flipped and I enrolled in a Comp Sci minor.

In third year, I stopped caring about my grades quite as much.... I met all the minimum requirements, but beyond that, I decided it was up to me how hard I would try in each course. So if I liked the professor or thought the subject matter would be relevant later, I'd push for that 90 %. But if the course was just to meet a requirement, sometimes I wouldn't try as hard. My transcript is a bit all over the place.... I mean I never thought I'd see a C on my transcript, but here we are. Health and Wellness offered some group therapy sessions on coping with stress, and this helped me to get some perspective there. Obviously, not getting straight A's anymore was a difficult adjustment for me, because I was always one of the "smart kids." If I can't claim that identity anymore, then who am I? Anyways, in the group, I realized I wasn't the only one questioning my worth in this way, and the facilitator suggested that I was maybe internalizing too much self pressure. And it's true: I don't need U of T to tell me who I am or what I'm worth. Now I spend time on what matters to me, and I have more time to do things that matter. This year, I am mentoring first years, working out most days, making time to see my friends and have

a relationship, watching documentaries and reading, and I am teaching myself some German, and I feel great! I'm not just ticking off boxes towards my degree anymore, I am learning for myself.

I think I'm doing pretty well now, but the hardest part has probably been explaining myself to others, especially my family. My sister is now in law School at U of T, so that makes sense to everyone. But I kept getting questions like, "What are you going to do with a Psychology degree?" And the answer is I'm not entirely sure. I can think of why Psychology is important in society, and how it fits with Computer Science, but when I try to explain it, I get a lot of blank stares. The worst part is I don't even want to go to grad school or anything, so that doesn't even give me time to stall and figure things out. But...I trust myself to figure it out soon. Over the summer I am doing some research in Germany with a professor. It's funny because, like I said, my grades are nothing special, and I heard that as an undergrad you're never going to get any hands-on experience without a 4.0. But, in a moment of self confidence, I applied anyway. So many of my friends applied to this position because the prof is really great and her research is cool and innovative. I got an interview, and I was scared that when she took another look at my transcript, she would realize she had made some mistake. But instead we talked about everything. She seemed impressed that I am trilingual (and teaching myself a fourth language), and as the conversation progressed, she realized I had done my own reading in that area of Psychology. I am ready for an adventure!

Persona Two: Dorothy's Story

Name: Dorothy
Major: Accounting
College: University College
Hometown: Hanoi, Vietnam

I think my biggest struggle in university was with my mental illness. I was hesitant to tell anyone about the way I was feeling and just tried my best to cope with it on my own. But after moving so far from home, and having less time to rest generally, it was getting worse. Brianna was always there for me, and she gave some helpful advice. And then my parents came to visit over Christmas break, and we went to see a doctor. When the doctor asked, "Is there a family history of depression", my father hesitated before saying "not diagnosed"….[3] Things got a bit better after I found the right medication for me. The doctor also referred me to Accessibility Services.

I guess it's my fault that I didn't make that many friends at first. I didn't actually expect to stay in Toronto for long. I was looking into transferring schools to be with my boyfriend in New York, but that plan didn't work out. I was also a bit stressed about getting work experience as soon as possible so I would be qualified to be able to stay in Canada after graduating. I was initially hoping to reduce my course load to help me with stress, but at Accessibility Services I was advised that this may disqualify me from getting a work permit later. Anyway, I failed MAT 135 in first semester and ever since then, I was just afraid of failing everything. And I fainted right before my first ECO 100 test, and that didn't go so well either. My registrar helped me to switch to the easier math MAT 133 for the next semester, and that was better for me. Now that I think about it, I understand that there was help available and I should have tried to access it sooner. But every time I didn't understand something, I would try on my own to figure it out, and then I'd move on to something else and tell myself I'd come back to it later. These days, I probably use

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[3] https://thevarsity.ca/2018/07/06/op-ed-why-all-families-should-have-the-talk-and-i-dont-mean-about-sex/

the Economics Aid Centre more than anyone, and I've already been to my professors' office hours many times. I especially like the Aid Centre, because it reminds me that all the students here are asking for help; it's not just me who is missing something. I think about it differently now. Getting help means I am smart, not stupid!

During Reading Week, I was able to visit New York, so that was a lot of fun, but I realized I can't spend four years here and not even give Toronto a chance. So, I decided to try to make some friends. I used to do yoga, dance, or painting every day back home, but somehow, I thought I would have to give these up when I got to university. Now, at the beginning of every week I check how the Hart House workshops can fit into my calendar, and I go as much as possible. I'm starting to see some familiar faces and talk to some people. The first few times, I made Brianna come with me, but now I don't want to bother her too much because being a Physics genius is a full-time job. Anyway, I feel so much more motivated overall, now that my whole schedule doesn't revolve around academics. And I still call my parents once a week and video call my boyfriend every day, but it's not the only thing keeping me going anymore.

Oh and this is kinda random, but it was SO COLD this winter. I wasn't used to it at all. 10 degrees is cold for me, so imagine how I felt when it feels like –35. One day after class, I had to take the subway straight to the shops and use my emergency credit card to buy all new winter gear so I wouldn't freeze to death on my way home. I got a new coat, boots, gloves...everything! My parents weren't pleased at first, but they understood.

Persona Three: Brianna's Story

Name: Brianna
Major: Engineering (switched to a Double Major in Math and Physics)
College: Innis
Hometown: Hamilton, Ontario

Chapter One: First Impressions
I'm not sure if University of Toronto was the right choice for me. I mean, I definitely don't regret it. I learned a lot about myself here and met a lot of cool people. And the direction I'm thinking of going with my academics, like, I'm not sure if I would have found it at some other school. But it was quite a journey...a difficult transition and maybe I wasn't always the most informed. I found a letter I wrote to myself in the first week of classes for my First Year Learning Community.... Here, take a look. I told myself I wasn't supposed to open this until I was wearing my iron ring from the Engineering department, but...oh well.

Dear Brianna of the Future,

Fourth year? Wow, congratulations, you must be so successful now, right?
You should be proud of me; I've been socializing so much in the past two weeks. Right now I'm in FLC, I also went to Orientation Week, and I'm trying to organize an event to get my floormates together. It's really exciting living downtown, and I hope to experience it as much as possible before things start to get crazy with school. I mean, I already have three quizzes this week.

Everyone seems really cool and friendly here, and they want me to have a good time and ask questions and everything. You should apply to be a FLC mentor next year, or an Orientation Leader! They said you don't have to be super outgoing or anything to get the role....
Okay, I have to go.... See you on the other side!

All my love,

Brianna of the Past

Okay, obviously, I didn't end up becoming an Engineer, but I'm sure Past Me would understand! Anyway, I remember that time so clearly, it was exciting but also super overwhelming. I enjoyed being a part of everything, especially the parade through Toronto, that was so cool. That's also where I met Dorothy, who became one of my best friends. We were paired together for an activity. Also my FLC mentor Maurice was awesome. Like, I don't keep in touch with him or any of my FLC group anymore, but they were friendly faces on campus. Also, he was there for me when I had some serious questions and didn't know who to talk to.

Chapter Two: Keeping Up
Things started out on a really positive note, and I felt pretty hopeful for my first year. But then a few things started to catch up with me....
For one thing, I didn't always make the best eating choices at the time. I was trying out a new way of eating, like, trying to be plant-based. I still am, but now I know how to choose the right foods, and eat enough—like more than I had to before. And I really like how it's working for me right now, but back then I had anemia, and I didn't know what was wrong with me. I would come home from classes and just fall asleep, cause my body did not have the energy it needed to keep up with the fast pace of university. I thought maybe I was just lazy, or too overworked, or I don't know what. Now I also know to take B complex vitamins and I've found those are so important for my mental health.
So that was rough. Also, I did enjoy the social events at the start of term, but as an introvert, I was overwhelmed at times and had to really push myself to not just want to sit in my room for the rest of the night after being around people all day. And then in my classes.... Like, I've always been good at math, right? But I found some of the courses kind of frustrating. They just weren't as interesting to me...not what I expected. I prefer to work more abstractly, not do endless computations. I had trouble keeping up...which was exacerbated by my low energy levels. So I did what I would do in high school—I know it's stupid—and didn't really look at quizzes that much but tried to learn everything before the midterm. It was doable, I guess, but stressful. Time started to lose meaning for me: I didn't have any sleep schedule, stopped exercising, and forgot to eat a few times.

And then socially...I had a few friends but not too many close ones, and not a group or anything. And I lived on res at the time, but most of my friends commute, so they'd usually be looking to go home as soon as possible after classes ended. On my floor...I felt a bit excluded. That event I mentioned in the letter didn't really work out. It's just that there were international students and they seemed to be happy just speaking to each other. I made an effort but...I don't know what I could have done differently to connect across that difference. Like, I get it, it's more comfortable to speak in your first language and talk to someone you have things in common with.

Chapter Three: S.O.S.
As finals approached, I got more and more stressed. I wasn't sure if I could do it because it felt like each of my courses needed all my attention, and I had five, and I was so tired and anxious at the time! And then...my family is decently well off, right, but it's not like we have $15,000 cash just lying around all the time for my tuition. I had OSAP and all sorts of grants and scholarships,

and I budgeted everything carefully. But then my mom got really sick and had to stop working. Without their dual income, I wasn't sure...I didn't even know who to talk to about all this? Maybe I could get a job, but would that even be worth it? Cause then I wouldn't have time to sleep. Luckily, I eventually found a registrar who was really kind and helped me apply to other sources of financial aid in time.

I also got really worried about my friend Dorothy's mental health. She really missed home, I think, and her boyfriend had gone to school in New York.... And she wanted to transfer schools, but when she realized that wouldn't work out, she got even more sad.... I wasn't really sure what to do or if it was really any of my business to say anything. She was really stressing herself out over this math course she chose to take that wasn't even required! And then she failed a course .... It was scary and unexpected, especially because she was one of those girls who stayed in Robarts 24/7, it seemed.

One night when I was chatting with Dorothy on Facebook and trying to calm her down, I saw my FLC mentor Maurice had posted in the group that he was always willing to meet with any of us, if we ever had any questions. So the next week I stayed after our FLC session and told him about some of my personal struggles and also my concerns for my friend. He listened and was able to give some advice and referrals. He was the one who told me which registrar to talk to about financial aid.

Chapter Four: Adaptation
So, a lot changed after that first year. Mostly with my academic program, and just, like, my attitude towards everything. First of all, I switched programs. I did enjoy being part of the Engineering program.... It was supportive and exciting; it just wasn't me.... When I think back to why I chose that program, I just remember that I enjoyed my math and science courses and everyone in my family was like, "Perfect, so she's going to be an Engineer then!" And I was like, "Okay." I didn't really know what it was going to be all about. And even though it was a bit complicated to switch programs, I decided it was worth it. I appealed so that I would be able to finish most of it within four years...with a few summer classes and one extra semester. It was definitely a financial burden, but I decided I'm giving myself a chance to be happy now that I'm in physics and math. I've always preferred a more theoretical approach and now I can really explore that world.

Anyway, I started using the "Pomodoro method" to keep myself on track when I'm studying...that's 25 minutes of complete focus and then a five-minute break, and then after you've done that four times you might take a longer break. It really helps me to not get burnt out or anything, but sometimes I get stressed out when time is passing and I haven't completed what I thought I would. But then, that's where mindfulness comes in. Dorothy convinced me to come with her to some of those "Mindful Moments" and yoga classes at Hart House and the Multifaith Centre. She's Buddhist and I'm not really anything, but anyways that's not the point of the exercise. So I'm making an effort to apply the idea of mindfulness to my life. I take breaks sometimes, check in with myself, and just turn off my brain for a few minutes...

Chapter Five: Stasis
I admit that I don't really know for sure yet what I want to do with my degree. My family is proud because I'm getting good grades and so many opportunities are coming my way. That might not have happened if I stayed in Engineering; I would have just fulfilled the minimum requirements. In fact, I'm a Teaching Assistant this year, which is quite rare for undergrads. It's satisfying to help first years understand their proofs. I also got offered a position as a FLC mentor and I really wanted to take it, but I decided I need to focus on my academics and paid work.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Within the Academic, Social, Wellbeing, and Future spheres of their lives, student interviewees voiced their priorities, initiatives, desires, and fears. Students consistently expressed a feeling that they were the only ones who struggled to keep up academically. The amount of pressure they put on themselves; their perception of whether they "fit" in their program, college and university; and their self-worth all contribute to whether they feel able to ask for help revising their study strategies. Students mostly rely on themselves to figure out how to improve, but those who also collaborate with peers and find mentors (such as professors) who care about them as "whole people" report feeling valued. New students feel compelled to attend events so they can expand their social networks. Knowing people on campus is important to them, because it means seeing familiar and friendly faces around them and being less likely to be alone in daily life. When facing difficult times, students rely mostly on their close connections but also need to feel connected more broadly to peers who experience the same struggles. Students also feel the need to be self-reliant when maintaining their wellbeing. However, students do not initially prioritize their wellbeing, because they believe that they must achieve academically by any means necessary, and that other aspects of life can and should be sacrificed for success. Regarding the future, students, especially those who do not perceive their academic path as "employable" and value personal fulfilment highly, need to feel confident that their choices have a future.

Students who achieve balance between the four spheres are most likely to feel a sense of pride in the university. This is especially true if students do not feel like they must overcome adversity and achieve this balance on their own, but rather feel supported and listened to in times of crisis. After graduation, alumni who enjoy stable, prosperous, and enjoyable opportunities and attribute some of this success to the university's support will feel the strongest sense of pride.

Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions are intended to guide conversations about the data in this report:

1. After reading the personas, what stands out to you?

2. How can we communicate to students that they are not the only ones struggling, so they will feel able to ask for help?

3. How can we help students meet their needs of having a broad network as well as close connections they can rely on?

4. How can we promote effective time-management practices while encouraging a well-rounded lifestyle?

5. How can we help students to imagine themselves in a role where they feel fulfilled professionally and personally?

Next Steps

This report offers an exploratory, yet comprehensive, perspective of the student experience. To deepen understanding of the knowledge presented here, future projects could:

- Increase focus on student interviewees whose needs fall into specific categories (e.g., international students, commuters, or alumni)
- Uncover alternative patterns in student development for additional Journey Maps
- Delve deeper into the relationships between needs in Academic, Wellbeing, Social, and Future spheres of student life

Appendices

Appendix A: Journey Map

Mapping the U of T Student Experience

Stage	Feeling	Touchpoints	Thinking	Doing
FIRST IMPRESSIONS	Hopeful, Excited	• Family, friends, alumni • Recruitment officers • Orientation leaders • College registrar, residence • Professors, classes • One programs, first-year learning communities • Bookstore	"How do I balance expectations with my own happiness?" "What do I like to study?" "I need to make friends as soon as possible to avoid being alone"	• Making choices about university, such as their college + program • Attending large social events welcoming students to UofT (e.g. frosh week) • Joining clubs and extra-curriculars to meet people
KEEPING UP	Frustration, Self-Doubt, Guilt	• Peers • Professors and TAs • Past self (reflective) • Libraries	"I have to prioritize grades over everything or risk my chance at success in the future" "There must be something wrong with me, nobody else is struggling" "My strategies aren't working... that means I must not be working hard enough"	• Continuing study habits and expectations developed during high school • Begin making lifestyle sacrifices to stay on top of school work
S.O.S	Panic	• Existing support network such as friends and family • Health and Wellness • Centre for International Experience • Accessibility Services • Professors and TAs • College registrar	"I can't go on feeling like this... I need help, but who do I go to?" "Who do I trust enough to open up to? Who won't judge me?" "Am I allowed to use these resources? I might be taking away from someone who really needs them...."	• Experiencing academic "failure" for the first time • Realizing they need help and seeking assistance from a trusted source
ADAPTATION	Determined, Hopeful	• Health and Wellness • Multi-Faith Centre, Hart House, other hubs for mindfulness and physical activity • Writing centres, Math Aid Centre, Learning Strategists, etc. • Career Centre • Self (mindfulness)	"My grades don't determine my value as a person" "I need to make some major changes to my lifestyle and work habits to create more balance" "I may not be certain about the future, but at least I'm giving myself the chance to be happy"	• Asking for help with school and utilizing available resources • Making time for self-care and interpersonal relationships
STASIS	Driven, Resilient	• Career Centre • Career Learning Network • Professors, mentors	"I'm glad I have support groups to fall back on when I get too stressed" "My new program may have fewer job prospects but my passion for it is drawing opportunities to me" "I'm excited to graduate and see where life takes me!"	• Continuing coping and self-care strategies learned through the adaptation stage • Withdrawing from extra-curriculars to focus on existing connections and gaining work experience

Appendix B: Commentary on Smartness

In her ethnography of Wall Street, Liquidated, anthropologist Karen Ho highlights the "Culture of Smartness" that exists among students at schools such as Princeton and Stanford as they are groomed for roles in the investment banking industry.[4] During recruitment season, these students are constantly reminded that they are world-class and should jump at the chance to work with some of the "greatest minds of the century." She observed that as her informants adapt to their new employment, they begin to congratulate themselves for their "smartness," aggressiveness, and self-confidence. Ho thinks critically about precisely what investment bankers mean by "smart" and what gives them the right to claim this description for themselves. She notes that "their impressiveness and financial influence are further cemented and proven by surviving brutally intense hard work and an insecure job environment, which in turn allows them to internalize the merit of their analyses and recommendations." Indeed, her informants are initially shocked by the demands on their time (often expected to work 100-hour weeks), but eventually begin to "claim hard work as a badge of honor and distinction." Based on their ability to survive "hard work", they feel justified in their decisions, even when the outcomes are disastrous for workers in America and worldwide. Evidently, a narrative of "smartness" can be insidious: shaping an entire institutional culture by inciting young people to work beyond the point of exhaustion and conditioning them to take extraordinary risks with other people's livelihoods.

In the university context, the "smartness" narrative has the effect of ranking types and sources of knowledge, determining what type of person is worthy of making important decisions in society, and often turning students away from subject matter they may have something to contribute to because they feel like the field isn't highly-valued in society and among family members. According to our interview data, students believe they can quickly and accurately rank the "smartness" of their peers. Indeed, the way students categorize each other follows a consistent pattern. Apparently, "smart" students are deserving of respect because they study "hard" (i.e., mathematical or scientific) subjects in exclusive programs. Students used words like "hardcore" to describe mathematical subjects and perceived a "fear of physics and math" among their peers. While students studying these theoretical subjects are perceived as "smarter", they are also seen as less employable (than engineers, for example). Meanwhile, qualitative work is often perceived as something anyone could do. When asked why they insist that they are not "smart," students explained that they could not learn new material as quickly as their peers. After inquiring further, these students reflected that perhaps they did not have the same technical foundation as their "smarter" peers. According to Sal Khan (of Khan Academy),[5] this could be because students are taught for test scores and not mastery. Over

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[4] Ho, K. (2009). Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street. Durham: Duke University Press.

[5] Khan, S. (2016). Let's Teach for Mastery—Not Test Scores TED Talk. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MTRxRO5SRA

time, they "accumulate gaps in their learning," and as they approach more advanced topics, eventually they conclude that they do not have the "math gene." He observed that some students ae able to fill these gaps by following his instructional videos, realize that they were capable of doing math all along, and renew their interest in it. It does not necessarily take a mathematical genius to excel in a "hard" U of T undergraduate course. Instead, a focus on mathematical literacy in society can open up possibilities for all students.

This discussion is particularly important to stakeholders who want to promote diversity in fields that rely on mathematical proficiency. In a cross-cultural analysis of students with exceptional talent in mathematical problem solving,[6] researchers found that countries such as those in Eastern Europe and Asia produced students who could compete internationally based on their profound intrinsic mathematical aptitude. The researchers conclude that in North America, mathematically gifted students, particularly young women, exist but are not routinely identified or cultivated due to factors in their social and educational environment. Considering psychological theories regarding negative stereotypes and attribution of performance to the self or environment, perceptions of one's "smartness" could be the highest determinant of success in high-pressure situations, next to intrinsic ability. Almost all U of T students express dissatisfaction with their level of "smart"ness. In their minds, this amplifies their failures ("I am not smart") and causes them to downplay their successes ("That midterm was too easy").

Appendix C: Commentary on Self-Care, Mental Health, and Mental Illness

To reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, campaigns have begun raising awareness of the fact that mental health is something that can affect us all. This narrative explains that even people who are not mentally ill may experience mental health challenges at some point in their life. To avoid and alleviate mental health challenges, especially in high-pressure environments where burnout is common, self-care practices have become popularized. For example, if you ask a U of T student how she maintains her mental health, she might say something like, "I go to the gym three times per week, cook my own healthy meals, and make time to call or see my friends and family." In general, self-care is a good idea. It means going beyond the simple daily tasks that keep one alive and functioning in society (such as personal hygiene): self-care suggests that you should also make time for healthy habits and wellness activities you enjoy and remember to treat yourself once in a while. In this way, one could justify eating poutine once a week as self-care, for example.

Overall, it is obvious that taking care of oneself will have a positive influence on all aspects of life. However, self-care has been criticized for promoting unnecessary consumerism as an antidote for personal or social problems and for neglecting the difference between mental illness and mental health. At the end of an article about how to properly practice self-care (by being mature and

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[6] Andreescu, T. (2008). Cross-Cultural Analysis of Students with Exceptional Talent in Mathematical Problem Solving. Notices of the American Mathematical Society. 55(10) 1248-1260.

"parenting" yourself),[7] someone commented "For those who do not have mental illnesses, this may be a good article. But from a treatment standpoint, where this originated…this is no good. Creating a life you don't need to escape from at times can be an impossibility for those with mental illnesses. Self-care IS making healthy meals and doing the things that need to be done...but it is also salt baths and going to the movies to escape and eating chocolate cake. Some people struggle to get out of bed in the morning and it's no fault of their own." Clearly, self-care narratives that aim to reduce the stigma around mental illness must be careful not to erase mental illness in the process. While self-care can help anyone cope with poor mental health, it will not address mental illness. Some students will find that self-care greatly improves their mental health, while others may need to access additional resources and mental healthcare. Furthermore, if the self-care narrative implies that self-care is adequate, students with mental illness may blame themselves for their failure to feel better.

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[7] Wiest, B. (2019). This Is What "Self Care" REALLY Means, Because It's Not All Salt Baths and Chocolate Cake. Retrieved from https://thoughtcatalog.com/brianna-wiest/2017/11/this-is-what-self-care-really-means-because-its-not-all-salt-baths-and-chocolate-cake/

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