Academic Matters

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OCUFA'S JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION
LA REVUE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR DE L'OCUFA

The pandemic and the future of the university

Ken Steele
Glimpsing the future, thanks to a pandemic

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Let's normalize kindness in post-pandemic learning

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The pitfalls of virtual learning and the challenges of post-pandemic education

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Inside the mental health crisis facing college and university students

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This journal is produced in the Dish With One Spoon Territory, which extends from the Great Lakes to Quebec and from Lake Simcoe into the United States. The territory exists as the result of a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee that bound them to protect and share the land and creatures within it. Subsequent Indigenous nations and peoples, Europeans, and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect. It is in this spirit that each issue of *Academic Matters* is produced.

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Academic Matters

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Academic Matters is published two times a year by OCUFA, and is received by 18,000 professors, academic librarians, and others interested in higher education issues across Canada. The journal explores issues of relevance to higher education in Ontario, other provinces in Canada, and globally. It is intended to be a forum for thoughtful, thought-provoking, original, and engaging discussion of current trends in postsecondary education and consideration of academia's future direction.

Readers are encouraged to contribute their views, ideas, and talents. Letters to the editor (maximum 250 words) are welcome and may be edited for length. To provide an article or artwork for Academic Matters, please send your query to Editor-in-Chief Ben Lewis at editor@academicmatters.ca.

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Editorial Matters

Ben Lewis

Pandemic learning

WHEN THE COVID-19 pandemic struck, significant and rapid changes were implemented at universities across Canada. As campuses were closed, classes were swiftly moved online, research was paused, and institutional decision-making became more centralized.

Health and safety were top concerns for many faculty, students, and staff at the beginning of the pandemic, but, as time wore on, workload-related stress surged and anxiety about the future grew. The very nature of the academy and the world in which we live seemed to be shifting around us.

Online teaching and research may have allowed us to connect in new ways, but it has also left many feeling unsatisfied and unsupported. The expertise of scientists, doctors, and nurses may have carried us through the pandemic, but trust in experts—whose work forms the foundations of the academy—seems to be declining.

What will the future of the academy look like? Across Canada, government spending increased in efforts to minimize the pandemic's impact, but neoliberal government budgeting could mean fiscal austerity for years to come—an ominous notion for postsecondary institutions already considered chronically underfunded.

The legacy of the past two years will play out for decades and the consequences will be felt disparately in different communities—potentially marking a paradigm shift in postsecondary education.

So, this issue of *Academic Matters* seemed like an appropriate opportunity to explore the future of universities in Ontario, and across Canada, as we emerge from this global pandemic.

In an overview of the myriad ways the pandemic has impacted higher education, Ken Steele considers the aspects of postsecondary education that are likely to return to a pre-COVID normal and those changes that are likely here to stay. He warns that while some of the pandemic's challenges may be behind us, more lie ahead.

Yvonne Su explores the feelings of anxiety and stress that many have been feeling over the past two years. Reflecting on the importance of healthy collaborative relationships in education and research, she points to the wave of kind and caring communities created at the beginning of the pandemic as an approach we should embrace over the long term.

Examining his experiences teaching virtually, Ari Gandsman notes the lack of active participation and engagement so important for learning. Online education removes some barriers to learning, but it creates others and there are important lessons to be learned if online education is to play a larger role in postsecondary education going forward.

Elizabeth Buckner looks at what the pandemic means for institutional internationalization strategies. Before the pandemic, international student enrolment at Canadian universities and colleges had been growing rapidly (as were the fees these students were paying). With national borders opening back up again, is there an opportunity to re-examine our approach to international student education?

Finally, Simon Lewsen and Chloë Ellingson, the 2020 recipients of OCUFA's Mark Rosenfeld Fellowship in Higher Education Journalism, investigate the mental health crisis facing college and university students. Mental health supports continue to be a major focus for university administrations, yet rates of mental illness amongst students are still rising—a trend amplified by the pandemic.

There is a feeling of great uncertainty about what will come next at Canadian universities. However, in this moment of abundant possibility, there is potential to chart a new path forward informed by pandemic experiences and to refocus the academy on its mandate to advance knowledge in the public interest.

Thanks to all of this issue's contributors for taking the time to consider these important issues. If we hope to move towards a more vibrant and inclusive future for postsecondary education, then we must look ahead with a more critical eye, ask some big questions, and set out a hopeful vision for the future of our universities.

This is my final issue as Editor-in-Chief of *Academic Matters*. It has been a hugely enriching and rewarding experience. My gratitude to all the amazing writers who have contributed during my tenure. You made every issue special.

A reminder that all the articles in this issue, and many more, are available on our website: AcademicMatters.ca.

Thanks for reading. AM

Ben Lewis is the Editor-in-Chief of Academic Matters *and Communications Lead for OCUFA.*

Glimpsing the future, thanks to a pandemic

Ken Steele

The breadth of the pandemic's impact on postsecondary education is difficult to fathom.

What is likely to return to pre-COVID normal, and what has the pandemic changed forever?

Campus servers and infrastructure were not prepared for 100 per cent of research, learning, meetings, and interactions to shift online overnight.

Long after their devastating impacts on lives and livelihoods, global pandemics almost always have lasting repercussions on medicine, architecture, society, geopolitics, and much else—including academe, of course. The Black Death emptied European university campuses in the late Middle Ages and closed Elizabethan playhouses, on and off, for decades. The plague may also have facilitated the adoption of teaching and learning in vernacular languages, and turned some playwrights to writing sonnets instead of scripts.

A century ago, the Spanish Flu prompted extended workplace closures, as well as public health orders limiting gatherings and requiring facemasks. It also contributed to the widespread development of public health departments and sanitary sewer systems; sparked worker revolts and unionization; and popularized verandahs, window screens, and washrooms near the front door.

However, the Great Pandemic of 2020-22, driven by the COVID-19 virus, is different in one crucial way.

The first digital pandemic

Unlike the Black Death or Spanish Flu, COVID-19 emerged in a world of unprecedented global connectivity and automation. Robotic assembly lines, warehouses, and meat processing plants could continue operating at full capacity, despite the viral threat to human workers. Thanks to widespread internet access, many office workers could opt to work from home, while online retailers and streaming services saw exponential growth. Even some of the most reluctant luddites learned to use online banking, food delivery services, curbside pickup, and videoconferencing tools. And, instead of shutting down our universities or reverting to correspondence by mail, most scholars and students pivoted to emergency remote instruction and digital access to libraries and other pedagogical resources. For better or worse, twenty-first-century technologies made it possible for the world's governments to impose more widespread and lasting lockdowns than had been previously imaginable.

Canada's universities were fortunate that so much digital infrastructure was already in place when COVID-19 struck. University libraries had been growing their digital collections and journal subscriptions for more than a decade. A full generation of scholars had become fluent users of email and web browsers. Videoconferencing platform Zoom had been around for eight years before the pandemic, and many academics and administrators had already used it at least once. Pretty much every postsecondary institution had adopted some form of Learning Management System, even if many instructors used it only to post their course syllabi. Laptop computers were more popular than desktops, and broadband internet was available to many (though not all) at a reasonable price.

A decade ahead

Management consultancies have calculated that the COVID-19 pandemic propelled ecommerce growth and technology adoption curves forward about a decade's worth in a matter of months. Likewise, higher education's slow and steady adoption of streaming and recording lectures, online learning, virtual conferences, and digital resources and simulations (all of which were clear trends prior to 2020) were abruptly kicked into overdrive by the pandemic. The future had arrived early—at least a decade early—and we were simply not ready.

Campus servers and infrastructure were not prepared for 100 per cent of research, learning, meetings, and

interactions to shift online overnight. Virtual meeting and conference platforms were still missing many features that could more fully replicate in-person gatherings, including breakout rooms and moderation functionality. Academic policies and grading rubrics (not to mention federal policies for international student visas) were all based on traditional assumptions about in-person classroom participation and examinations. Tech-enabled pedagogies like flipped classrooms, blended and Hyflex delivery, adaptive learning platforms, virtual reality, and gamified simulations were being pilot-tested by some early adopters, but were still far from mainstream use. Employment contracts and collective agreements were not designed with flexible or remote work in mind, nor the preparation and practice required for teaching and grading students effectively online. Most institutions had given little thought to the challenge of providing instruction, advising, and support services twenty-four hours a day in order to meet the needs of students scattered around the globe.

And, of course, none of us—faculty, staff, students, nor administrators—were psychologically prepared for months of isolation at home, with almost all social and professional human interaction confined to a laptop screen. The pandemic's relentless ambiguity and uncertainty sparked a shadow pandemic of anxiety and mental health challenges, particularly among teenaged undergraduates, but also for students dependent upon precarious income from frontline employment, parents juggling working from home while managing remote study for their children, and everyone fearful for vulnerable friends and relatives.

If the steady adoption of academic technologies had continued at its pre-pandemic pace, by the year 2030 many of us would have gradually developed skills, routines, coping mechanisms, and supports that might have substantially eased the digital transition. We might not have liked it, or chosen it, but we would have found the pandemic pivot far less painful had it occurred a decade or more in the future.

Asymmetric impact

In the initial panic of the 2020 digital pivot, most of us were so distressed by our own challenges and circumstances that we failed to realize we were in fact the fortunate ones. The COVID-19 pandemic had a profoundly asymmetric impact on many seriously disadvantaged populations, exacerbating economic inequities and widening the so-called "digital divide." Full-time university faculty had job security, health benefits, knowledge-based work, and substantial technology support from their institutions. Many had home offices, computers, and internet access already, or could establish it quickly. But many part-time and contingent faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and other university employees had few of those advantages—and sadly, the weight of pandemic challenges and risks fell disproportionately on younger, female, immigrant workers, and people of colour.

The pivot to remote and home schooling undermined the equalizing effect of public-school facilities and targeted supports—exacerbating the wealth gap between socioeconomic strata. Some parents had the resources to engage with their children's education and invest in private tutoring or "learning pods" with neighbouring families. However, disadvantaged students endured significant academic disruption without the usual attention and support. High school students struggled with attendance, motivation, and particularly mathematics, which is already impacting university applications. Elementary school students struggled with reading and experienced a learning lag that may persist for years and into university. In addition, preschoolers, isolated in their formative years, may struggle with social

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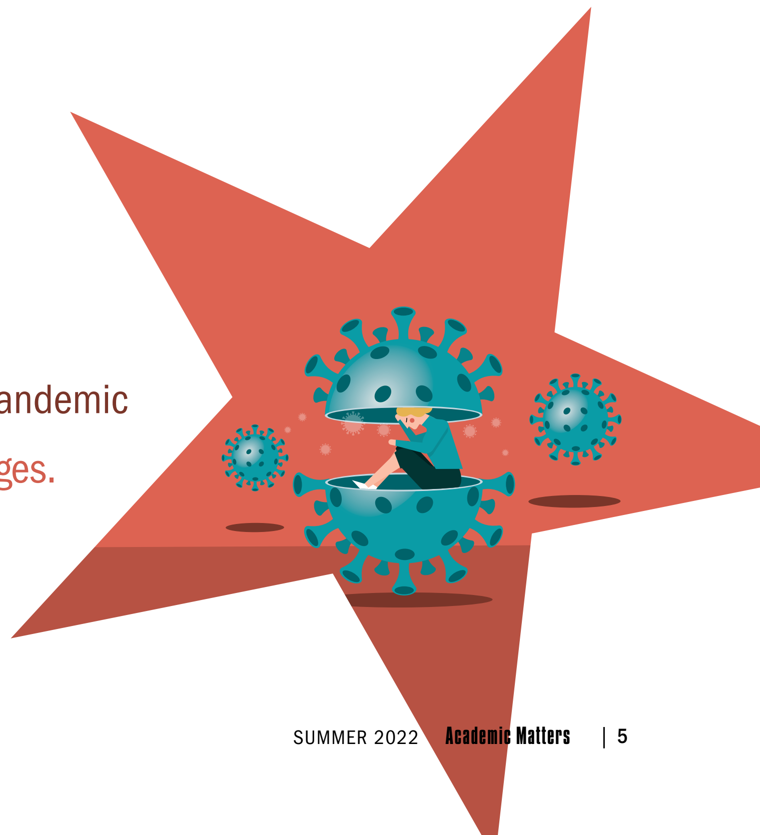


It became apparent that "one size fits all" approaches to work and study were inherently biased and unfair.

anxiety, interpersonal communication, and even some measure of learned helplessness for the foreseeable future.

Some inequities are well documented already and will likely be targeted by substantial federal and provincial remediation programs. During the pandemic, economic and technological obstacles grew substantially for Indigenous, rural, and remote Canadians—even as COVID-19 ravaged their communities and overwhelmed their hospitals. The asymmetric impacts of the pandemic were even experienced by universities themselves: large, urban, prestigious institutions attracted more applications domestically and internationally, while many smaller, remote institutions struggled with steep enrolment declines.

Lessons in compassion

Without question, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inequities and invisible disadvantages affecting some of our colleagues and students in a way that was impossible to ignore. Economic and geographic barriers made it a challenge for some to join a Zoom session, underscoring the inequities of synchronous instruction. Immunocompromised students, or those with vulnerable family members, faced unfair risks attending classes or exams on campus. Emergency financial supports like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) were available to some students but not others. Many researchers working in on-campus labs found their progress slowed or suspended by building closures. Financial, academic, and mental health challenges derailed the education and research of many university students and scholars, and their academic trajectories will show the scars of the pandemic for years.

If the pandemic has a silver lining (however thin), it is that the unequal circumstances and invisible challenges faced by many of our colleagues and students—both before and during the pandemic—have become strikingly evident. It became apparent that "one size fits all" approaches to work and study were inherently biased and unfair. Across Canada, university administrators emphasized the need for compassion and wellness, to manage work/life balance and protect personal time. Some institutions provided additional sick leave and suspended or extended tenure clocks. Most began accepting unofficial transcripts and converting archaic paper processes to digital ones. Instructors deployed asynchronous pedagogies and made room for more self-paced learning, and some adopted principles of Universal Design for Learning to accommodate students in widely divergent circumstances. Academic senates relaxed policies on doctors' notes, encouraged alternatives to high-stakes testing, and encouraged deadline leniency. Many institutions even offered "academic forgiveness" and pass/fail or credit/no credit grading options to students. Leading universities expanded their summer orientation and bridging programs to reinforce math and science fundamentals and prepare students for academic success.

Most of these efforts to provide more flexible, personalized, and supportive contexts for learning and work during COVID-19 could be invaluable for students and scholars struggling with invisible disabilities, personal challenges, or private crises in the future. With luck, we will find appropriate ways to provide more flexibility and support beyond this global health emergency.

Blended instruction

Prior to 2020, university campuses were occasionally closed due to natural disasters, like wildfires, earthquakes,

hurricanes, floods, or ice storms. Facilities managers had to consider these extreme scenarios in their risk management plans, but few academics would have considered them in designing courses or programs. Now, after two years of pandemic uncertainty and recurrent pivots to online, blended, or hybrid instructional delivery, Canadian universities are realizing that academic continuity for students (and business continuity for the institution) may well demand heightened readiness and capacity to pivot in future. Epidemiologists assure us that we will see more pandemics in the years ahead, as we enter "a pandemic era" fuelled by climate change, habitat destruction, zoonotic viruses, and global travel. Extreme weather events are intensifying in frequency and impact. Access to campus classrooms and labs cannot be assumed as a given anymore.

While online learning offers considerable flexibility in time and space, it remains popular primarily with students for whom such flexibility is paramount: remote students who do not wish to relocate, part-time students juggling their studies with children and work, students with mobility impairments or extreme social anxiety, and professionals seeking postgraduate credentials or in-service certifications.

In general, traditional-aged, full-time undergraduates not only dislike the online experience, they struggle with motivation and persistence in online courses and learn less than they would in person. During the pandemic, many high school seniors sought to delay university entrance in order to avoid a disappointing online experience, taking "gap years" or "victory laps" (which some Ontario school boards even promoted as "Grade 12+"). Undergraduates, forced into remote instruction, intensified their dislike of online studies in the second year of the pandemic. Research has consistently found that the best learning outcomes occur when the mode of instruction is freely chosen by both the instructor and the student—another reason why an involuntary pivot has left most frustrated and dissatisfied.

Even before COVID-19, studies found that blended delivery offered statistically significant improvements in student learning, compared to purely online learning or traditional classroom instruction. Using Open Educational Resources (OER), digital simulations, and asynchronous teaching tools while devoting precious classroom time to more interactive, engaging activities has been shown to enhance student persistence and academic performance. Bringing online cohorts together on campus for brief residency periods demonstrably improves their social integration and academic experience, too. From the institution's perspective, blended delivery allows better classroom utilization and reduces facilities costs considerably.

It seemed obvious, pre-pandemic, that higher education would inexorably move in the direction of blended delivery, and the pandemic has unquestionably accelerated that trend. After two years experimenting with remote and blended instruction, university faculty have spent more time collectively thinking about their own pedagogy than ever before. Full-time undergraduates are clear that, even once they return to the post-pandemic campus, they want and expect to continue enjoying the conveniences of streaming and recorded lectures, virtual office hours, asynchronous peer interaction, OER textbooks, and other technologies. Using in-person class time for lectures will seem pointless to students and may cease to be the default instructional mode for many instructors.

The pandemic may not usher in a stampede of eager online learners, but it will pave the way for more conscious, active pedagogies that better leverage the affordances of in-person and online technologies.

Universities are realizing that academic continuity for students may well demand heightened readiness and capacity to pivot in future.

The pandemic will unquestionably increase the online options available to mature learners in the future.

have to decide whether to ignore this non-traditional market, serve them exclusively through continuing education divisions, or reconsider and redesign traditional programs and delivery modes to better meet their needs. By accelerating institutional adoption of online delivery and educational technologies, the pandemic will unquestionably increase the online options available to mature learners in the future—and, by exposing more learners to online delivery, it will provide increased options for a generation more open to ongoing, lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning

That is not to say that there will be no demand for purely online learning—but the demand will not come just from teenagers straight out of high school. The pandemic pivot forced us all to become lifelong students, learning new software and developing our skills to work remotely. Likewise, the pandemic's disruption of whole economic sectors and the reinforcement of automation has displaced many workers from their jobs—encouraging them to pursue further education. Massive Online Open Course enrolments have skyrocketed, driven largely by adults laid off or working from home. As Canadian universities began offering their courses and programs online, mature learners and working adults explored their options and part-time enrolments climbed at many institutions. Long before the pandemic, governments were emphasizing the need for "upskilling" and "reskilling" mid-career workers and the recently unemployed. The World Economic Forum has warned that a "Fourth Industrial Revolution" will eventually displace almost half of all workers, due to the adoption of artificial intelligence and robotics. Colleges and polytechnics around the world have embraced workforce-oriented micro-credentials and, in Canada, most college students are non-traditional in age.

To the extent that the pandemic encouraged the development of part-time, online, and micro-credential offerings, it has likely accelerated expectations of some learners for a more modular approach to education. Canadian universities

Challenges of change

Canada will eventually emerge from this pandemic (although, as I write this, there is no reason to feel confident that it will be this year). Our institutions, colleagues, and students will find a new equilibrium of hybrid work and learning; personalized programs and supports; on-campus engagement and interaction; and online independence and efficiency. For some time to come, we will see a broad diversity of personal attitudes towards masking, social distancing, remote working, and mass gathering.

The challenge for university communities will be to adapt their policies, procedures, contracts, and traditions to permit flexible, compassionate, and personalized approaches to work and study, without requiring a global health crisis or public health orders. Faculty collective agreements may have to be updated to recognize changes in workload, preparation, supervision, and intellectual property.

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled us all out of our comfort zones and gave us an admittedly imperfect glimpse of the future of higher education. As we gradually adjust, the question we must answer—individually and collectively—is: How much of what we have learned do we wish to keep? AM

Ken Steele is Canada's best-known higher education futurist, facilitator, and consultant in branding, marketing, and innovation. Learn more about Ken's work at www.eduvation.ca.

Let's normalize KINDNESS in post-pandemic learning

Yvonne Su

Anxiety and stress work against the healthy collaborative relationships that make learning and knowledge advancement possible. How do we maintain the culture of kindness and care that has proven so vital during the pandemic?

In the post-pandemic university, it is more important than ever for us to be kind and build a culture of care.

As a child of immigrants in Canada, I felt immense pressure to help provide for my family. My parents opened up a Chinese restaurant in a small town in rural Ontario when I was nine years old and I would work there after school from Tuesday to Sunday (thank god no one wants to eat Chinese food on Mondays). This happened until I went away to university at the age of 18 and, even then, I came home almost every other weekend to help.

If the pandemic took place when I was in university, I surely would have moved back home and been expected to work at the family restaurant while trying to attend my classes online. I can imagine the situation now—I would break the news to a hungry customer that, "No, you cannot substitute your one egg roll for an order of orange chicken," right before unmuting to share with my peers online that "I disagree with Hobbes, life is not nasty, brutish, and short!"

So, yes, I understand deeply how challenging it is for students from marginalized backgrounds to balance living at home, working, and learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I saw that my fellow faculty members shared this understanding at the beginning of the pandemic. There was a similar sense of "caremongering" that took place across academia and in higher education. The caremongering movement that took over Canada in the early months of the pandemic saw people volunteering to buy groceries for seniors, making or donating masks, and contributing to #SupportLocal, to name a few examples.

As a scholar that researches post-disaster community resilience, I could not help but take notes and track the caremongering movement over time. What I discovered aligns with established trends of short-lived solidarity that manifest after disasters and crises. One year into the pandemic, as income inequality was soaring and vaccine distribution was being concentrated in wealthier neighbourhoods, it was clear that the end of the caremongering movement was drawing near. By January 2022, the caremongering movement was dead, as most of the caremongering Facebook groups that had started in March 2020 were inactive or no longer existed.

In academia and higher education, we saw a similar trend. Initially, there appeared to be significant empathy and sympathy for the move to online learning, for the steep learning curve faced by older faculty members doing remote work, for the unequal childcare burdens faced by faculty members with young children, and for students who had their studies impacted or delayed.

However, this solidarity was short-lived. As the pandemic wore on, the corporate machinery of universities kicked back into gear, demanding high levels of productivity from faculty. And, as faculty tried (unsuccessfully) to continue their normal teaching, research, and service work, while also struggling to do childcare and unpaid domestic work, their patience and kindness towards students diminished.

This is unfortunate. In the post-pandemic university, it is more important than ever for us to be kind and build a culture of care. This culture is vital—for students and educators—as the pre-pandemic levels of stress and burnout in both populations cannot be tolerated.

During the past two years, while I cultivated my own practices on how to create a culture of care in the classroom, I wanted to also learn from others. So, I took to Twitter to ask "What approaches did you use to practice kindness towards students?" and these were the leading results.

Flexibility

In many aspects of the classroom, flexibility was a common way to build a culture of care. The shift online allowed for asynchronous learning and recorded lectures. This permitted students to engage with the material at times that were most convenient for them. With some students picking up jobs or more hours at work to make up the income lost by other family members as a result of the pandemic, this flexibility was important and welcomed.

Professors also practiced flexibility around deadlines, offering a range of dates students could submit assignments and offering extensions without question. Recognizing that not all students were in a home environment that allowed them to unmute and talk, faculty provided a diversity of ways to participate, including through chat, email, and online forums. Further, flexible test times made it possible for students to complete exams at different times or over longer periods.

Listening

An approach that substantially contributed to building a culture of care in the classroom was listening. Dianne Lalonde, a PhD candidate at Western University, shared that she found that many "students needed someone to talk to" during the pandemic. So, she made time for her meetings with students to be longer and more frequent.

I had the same experience, but I had trouble being kind and listening without overstepping and taking on the role of a therapist or a counselor, or even a friend. This was something that other faculty were struggling with too. Knowing about the counseling services and other resources available to students and being able to direct students to these resources when appropriate became an important part of a faculty member's toolkit.

Many faculty realized that students responded positively to sincere questions about how they were doing. KB Heylen, a sessional instructor at Macquarie University, shared that "Telling [students] I'm proud of them and acknowledging how hard it is right now" and "Cheerleading them through bad days" made a difference.

Other professors believe that normalizing these challenges by sharing that they themselves are struggling during the pandemic will help their students, who will realize that they are not alone in their anxiety and stress. For example, in an evaluation of one of my courses, a student shared that my "willingness to create meaningful relationships" made the class "extremely enjoyable and exciting."

Lessening anxiety and stress

It was clear that many of the reasons behind the push for flexibility was to lessen the anxiety and stress that comes with higher education. For Professor Renee Marlin-Bennett from Johns Hopkins University, it was important to "Avoid testing practices that make students super nervous (too many questions on the exam; too many unknowns about the exam; or that incentivize bad practices like cramming)." Others shared that they had cut back on the number of assignments or transitioned exams to an open book model.

In one of my classes, I decided to get rid of the exam completely, having determined that it wasn't the most effective way to test for critical thinking. Reflecting on my pre-pandemic approach, I realized that I felt the need to have exams as an evaluation tool because they were included in other syllabi. However, they didn't actually suit the learning outcomes of the course I was teaching, so I got rid of them and students were extremely thankful.

Encouraging self-care and wellness

In addition to lessening anxiety and stress, professors shared that they were proactive in encouraging self-care and the importance of physical and mental wellness among students. Professor Elizabeth Sweet from San José State University shared that "I encourage students early and often to put their well-being, and the well-being of their families and communities, first on their priority list, and I build plenty of flexibility into my class to make this easier for them to do." Similarly, Dr Krys Johnson-O'Leary at Temple University emphasizes to her students that "well-being is more important than deadlines."

Many of the reasons behind the push for flexibility was to lessen the anxiety and stress that comes with higher education.

When I asked about my students' learning needs, one wrote: "Prioritizing self-care—including taking breaks for ourselves, setting boundaries, slowing down, saying no." Taking this in mind, I have been designing my courses with a focus on wellness. And this has proven effective, with one student writing that they appreciate that I have "prioritized the class's mental and physical health and was especially accommodating during COVID."

A way to promote self-care and wellness is to make check-ins a part of the everyday classroom. Margaret Baker, a doctoral student at North Carolina State University shares how she does it: "I do a visual check-in every day in class… Recently, I've been calling it, 'what's the weather report?' Thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs in the middle, shrug, etc. Cues me to know where the student is at without calling out individuals." Similarly, Laura Munoz, an American Council of Learned Societies Emerging Voices Fellow at the University of Southern California, shares that she "Remind[s] students they are human beings first, students second. If there's anything happening in [their] personal life that makes it hard to be a human being, it stands to reason that the student part will slide, so let me know what I can do to help alleviate stress [or] provide support."

Other professors shared on Twitter that they make space by bringing individually wrapped snacks to their in-person classes, especially for courses that meet later in the day. Such acts of care mean a great deal to students who may be too busy to eat.

Creative and alternative assignments

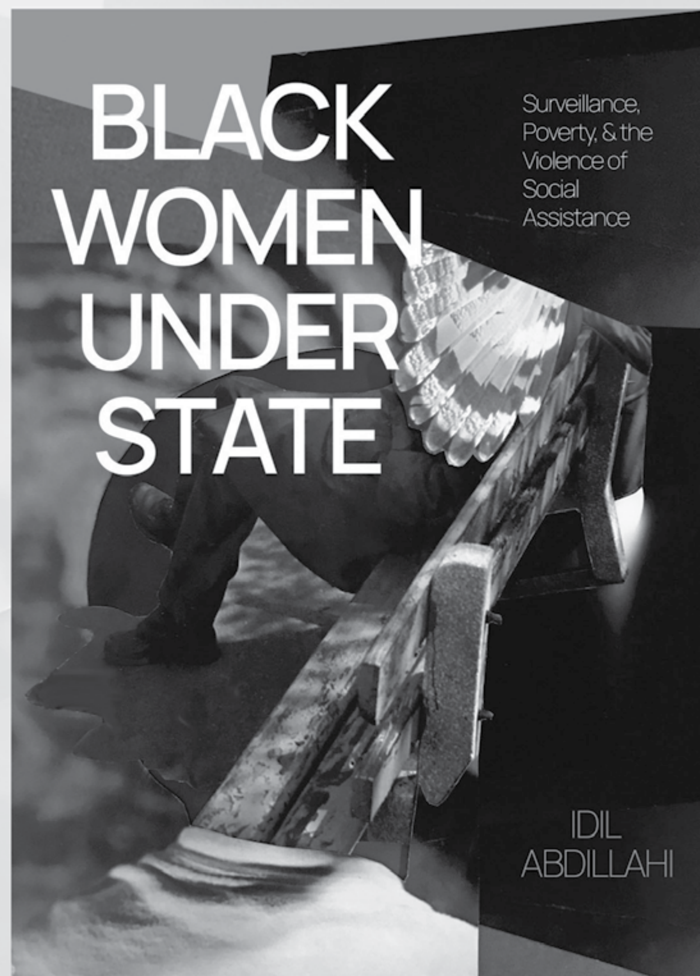
A final approach to building a culture of care in the classroom is to allow students more choice when it comes to assignments. After two years of online learning and staring at screens, I felt students needed an excuse or a motivation to get out of their chairs and into the outside world. So, I suggested an alternative to writing an essay. Instead, my students were asked to do a photovoice project that required them to make an Instagram account and take photos that capture a theme being discussed in class.

Since I was teaching a course on global migration and diaspora cultures, I asked my students to take photos that touch on the topic. I was amazed at the types of projects this approach inspired. One student, Paola, traveled around Toronto to find restaurants that served fusion foods. She captured photos of the restaurants and the food they served in the Instagram account @fusion_foodies_. Another student, Vansh, conducted an "analysis of retail and cultural diaspora and how retail uses cultural diasporas in different ways to turn it into profit for the capitalist world" through the Instagram account @realityofretailandculture. Lastly, Jabril looked inwards and documented his family's own story of migration and diaspora through the account @jabril_photovoice. Students found this alternative assignment refreshing and challenging.

For the same class, I had the idea of asking students to cook a dish from the diaspora as a way to understand diaspora cultures. I asked students to pick a dish from the UNHCR Cookbook and create a video demonstrating how to make the recipe. This was another attempt to get students to think creatively and do something different after two years of doing the same. Students found this assignment engaging and fun but it did not compromise the rigour of the class. For instance, one student wove in a critical discussion of power, structure, and agency when examining the diaspora origins of spaghetti and tomato sauce from Somalia.

While some of these practices seem obvious and easy to implement, they may slip through the cracks as the usual pressures mount on professors to increase their productivity and publish or perish. We must push to normalize kindness in the post-pandemic university so that it becomes core to the university experience and isn't treated as an exception or act of resistance. AM

Yvonne Su is an Assistant Professor of the Department of Equity Studies at York University.



The lives and conditions of Black women are inseparable from, and inextricably linked to, all dimensions of social and political life. *Black Women Under State* centres on the realities of Black women, both in-process and theory, who are living at the intersections of race, poverty, surveillance, and social services. Idil Abdillahi, who is uniquely positioned as a community organizer, practitioner, public intellectual, and scholar, engaged twenty women living at these life intersections in the greater Toronto area.

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BLANK STARES AND BLACK SCREENS:

The pitfalls of virtual learning and the challenges of post-pandemic education

Ari Gandsman

High-quality education requires active participation and engagement. Although the virtual experience implemented in response to the pandemic removed some barriers, it created others. In the struggle to pivot on and offline, what lessons have we learned about teaching?

> The accumulated negative impacts of almost two years of virtual learning are becoming harder to ignore.

A downward trend

The email that summarized my abysmal teaching experience this past term arrived on the final day. A student contacted me in a panic after I sent the class a reminder of a campus-wide schedule change. Confused because our hybrid mode alternated between virtual and in-person sections, the student thought our twice-weekly course met only once a week. They had missed a full 50 per cent of classes without realizing it. Perhaps, an honest mistake; the student apparently went the entire term without checking the class times and topics in the syllabus and without noticing that they were missing crucial course elements.

Cases of students so completely and utterly lost in a virtual haze have become commonplace during the pandemic. Before the Omicron variant of COVID-19 temporarily re-shuttered classes, the 2021-22 school year was heralded as a triumphant, albeit slow and incremental, "return to normal." Yet, the semester proved anything but normal—especially for those like me who taught in the hybrid format preferred by many institutions.

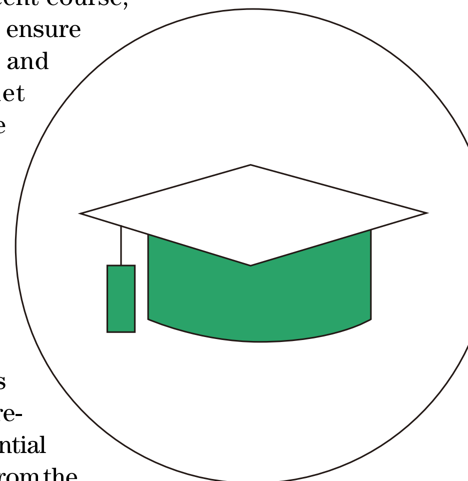
Hybrid is an inherently flawed format for large classes, in which it is impossible to manage virtual and in-person components simultaneously. Despite the presence of numerous wonderful and engaged students, this course ended up being the worst course I have taught. In the past 20 years, I have not encountered students more lost, or such an overall decline in student work quality and morale—even compared to when I taught the exact same course a semester earlier.

Although my experience can be dismissed as anecdotal, almost every academic colleague that I have spoken to who has taught a hybrid or virtual course has told me of similar experiences and concerns. The accumulated negative impacts of almost two years of virtual learning are becoming harder to ignore and signal a deeper and wider educational crisis that will reverberate far beyond the pandemic's end.

However, the depths of this crisis may be obfuscated by another consequence of the pandemic: the inflation of grades. A global phenomenon considered a humane response to pandemic stress; professors and school teachers reduced student workloads, liberally used curves, and made assignments easier during the pandemic.

Shifting expectations

Coming out of the pandemic, one of the main challenges facing educators will be how to restore pre-pandemic standards. In this most recent course, my own incipient efforts to ensure university-calibre writing and critical thinking were met with fierce resistance. I have never witnessed so many protests about grades. Based on student meetings, emails, and my teaching assistants' experiences, I would estimate there was a tenfold increase in the number of complaints about grades compared to pre-pandemic years and a substantial increase in such objections from the previous term.

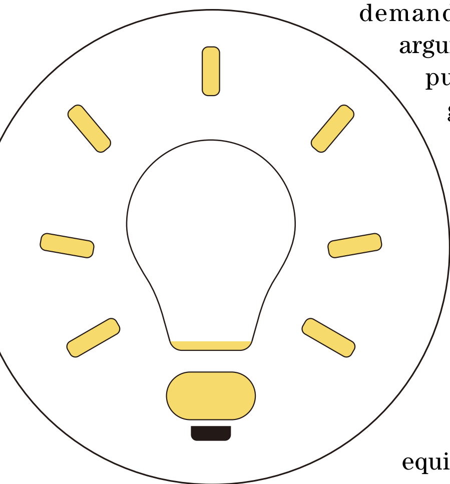


More than the contents of the complaints, what struck me was the particularly aggressive tone with which some students argued about their grades. Students would write to me or my teaching assistants to explain exactly why their grades were wrong and confidently assert that they

> Teaching during the pandemic has been characterized by a concerning level of student passivity.

deserved a higher grade. While it is well observed that there has been a rise of angry outbursts during the pandemic, especially in retail sectors, this trend clearly extends to universities. My four teaching assistants all told me stories of feeling harassed by belligerent students and, in one case, even threatened. No doubt, this is a consequence of our digital culture. We all know that the anonymous and distancing effects of the internet tend to bring out the worst tendencies in people.

I am not the kind of professor who cares about decorum, but a more general and basic decline of civility and politeness was palpable, extending to student emails that read like texts to friends or parents demanding course materials or arguing over deadlines, with zero punctuation or even a polite greeting. The largely anonymous student Discord channel—which, unfortunately, I often found myself monitoring for potential cheating—devolved into grievances and gripes about grades, course content, teaching assistants, and me.



Giving the students the equivalent of a blue book essay exam with a flexible two-week window for submission, I was called a "b*tch *ss" by one student who, rejecting any criticism as legitimate and insisting their work was A+ quality, wrote, "I want to throw a tomatoe (sic) at him." I can laugh this off, but untenured and contract faculty without job security are likely to worry that such feedback will affect their future work prospects.

Worse than the angry outbursts of a small minority, teaching during the pandemic has been characterized by a concerning level of student passivity, best exemplified by virtual students keeping their cameras off during class to listen only, instead of engaging with their peers or me. Rather than stimulating discussion about course content, questions have almost exclusively revolved around course requirements.

The anxiety and insecurity provoked by the pandemic has translated into an increased demand for certainty in learning. I have never encountered such a strong demand for step-by-step instructions on every aspect of a course, to the point where exercises became something closer to "fill-in-the-blanks" assignments rather than engaged and open-ended learning opportunities. This, in my mind, is completely antithetical to a university's mission of developing creative, critical thinking skills that can be leveraged to apply new concepts and integrate new knowledge.

At the end of the course, I was so exasperated that I was tempted to change my approach for future classes by using multiple-choice exams that emphasize rote memorization over building the kinds of skills I believe are so important. I realize there is nothing new about these concerns, and none of them were created by the pandemic. However, much like the mental health crisis that existed prior to March 2020, the pandemic has sharply exacerbated many pre-existing conditions. Plagiarism, already rife, multiplied exponentially during the pandemic. Even after my university instituted a mandatory training session for first-year students, we still found numerous cases of both overt and more subtle forms of plagiarism.

This article is not meant to demean my students. They are suffering, stressed, paying, and feeling lost, and none of this is their fault. They are also struggling to reconcile the high tuition fees that they have been paying with the less-than-ideal university experience presented to them

> The idea that you can multi-task while learning, is a huge problem.

during the pandemic. As the most visible figures of authority students interact with, it is understandable that their anger, frustration, and confusion would be directed at their professors.

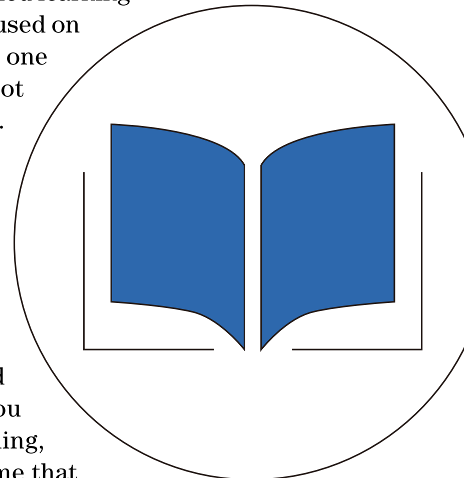
The attention crisis

The unfortunate truth is that, after two years of inadequate virtual education, many students are not prepared for university. Most first-year university students were 16 years old when the pandemic hit, so they have been particularly impacted. They did not choose a Zoom education but have had to live with the consequences. Even with hybrid classes being allowed this past fall, numerous students raised concerns about the lack of options because many professors refused to teach in this format. Several students told me that my class was the only in-person one they had.

We now understand the toxic consequences of too much screen time, especially for young adults. Yet, our university policies have largely treated virtual learning as a harmless alternative to in-person exchanges. While we are currently having a broader conversation about the harms younger students suffer as a result of virtual schooling, especially in terms of their psycho-social well-being and cognitive and educational development, this conversation must include postsecondary students as well.

Unfortunately, many university administrators still see virtual classes as an opportunity to draw a limitless number of international students from around the world who can be charged high and unregulated tuition fees to increase institutional revenues. To justify this strategy, university administrators point to a supposed substantial minority of students who now claim to prefer virtual to in-person classes. We are told that students like the flexibility of virtual learning.

Virtual education was required due to the pandemic, but offering more flexibility for students does not necessarily improve educational outcomes. When I asked students who chose virtual rather than in-person classes "Why?" their answers rarely identified learning conditions, but instead focused on convenience. For example, one student told me they did not like to commute to campus. Another said they preferred not to go out when it was too cold. Others claim to prefer virtual schooling because it makes it easier to multi-task. However, participating in a class demands unadulterated attention. The idea that you can multi-task while learning, like the student who told me that they listened to my course while working a construction job, is a huge problem. That the already existing "attention crisis" will be exacerbated because of the pandemic is another part of the problem.



We must reject arguments for virtual learning founded on motivations of revenue generation, cost savings, or convenience. When it comes to education, pedagogical considerations should always be the priority.

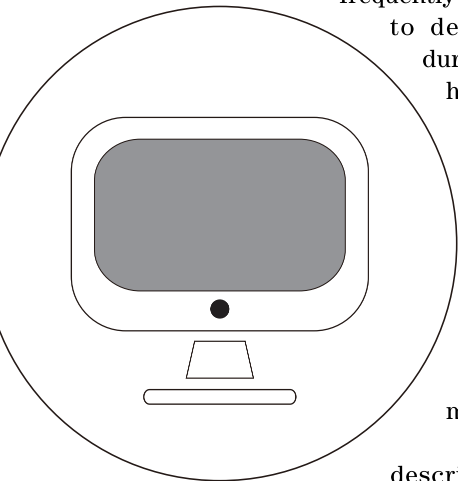
Post-pandemic challenges

Unfortunately, even after restrictions are removed and we return to in-person education, getting students back on campus may still be a challenge. When restrictions were briefly lifted in the fall term, before Omicron

We must reject arguments for virtual learning founded on motivations of revenue generation, cost savings, or convenience.

hit, I was able to invite all my students to physically attend class, 70 per cent of whom had said they preferred to be in person. However, barely any came. The issue was campus-wide. Poor attendance has clearly been encouraged by the pandemic practice—necessary for "asynchronous attendance"—of posting lecture recordings online.

This lack of attendance reflects larger social anxieties generated by pandemic public health measures. Students frequently used the term "desocialize" to describe their experience during the lockdowns, as they have missed many critical rites of passage that mark fledgling transitions into adulthood, such as proms and graduations. They have lost out on group activities, and, even then, their in-person physical activities have been structured by social distancing measures and masking.



A struggling student who described themselves as extroverted and social before the pandemic told me they now feared being around other people. Even for the small minority of students who came to class in person, an eerie silence replaced the noisy hum of pre-class student chatter that would have previously required repeatedly calling the class to attention. Whether due to the awkwardness of masks or social distancing, students are not interacting with each other as they did before the pandemic.

Another challenge of bringing students back to the classroom will be how to address public health messaging that has raised risk concerns for everyone. For example, a recent CBC story about the eventual return to campus at McGill University featured a student declaring, "I am so scared. I don't want to get sick and die." Many young and healthy students who are triple vaccinated continue to have health anxieties and it is troubling that so many are so worried. Of course, there are students who fall into vulnerable categories who should be accommodated, but how do we encourage the majority of students who are double and triple vaccinated to return to the hallways and classrooms of our universities? The health anxieties of students will persist far beyond any declaration of the pandemic's end, but anxiety alone should not justify keeping classrooms shuttered or forcing faculty to deliver hybrid courses.

We cannot forget that this has all been a grand social experiment. None of this would have been possible a decade ago, when broadband internet and videoconferencing platforms were far less accessible. While we bemoan the effects of technology on our lives, we have now allowed it to hijack our education systems. It is easy to forget the massive failure of Massive Open Online Courses that were once seen as the future of education but resulted in terrible outcomes and poor completion results. These lessons were largely put aside in the panic to quickly move courses online as a temporary response to the pandemic.

Many of the negative impacts of online learning may be inevitable, but they can and should be mitigated in the academic terms to come. This is a responsibility that administrators and faculty share: to enhance student educational outcomes while recreating an academic setting in which students are inspired to collaborate and socialize with each other. If not, we will be letting down a generation of learners and jeopardizing their post-pandemic futures. AM

Ari Gandsman is an Associate Professor in the School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies at the University of Ottawa.

The future of internationalization IN THE WAKE OF COVID

Elizabeth Buckner

International students have been a growing demographic at Canadian universities, which have become increasingly dependent on the fees they pay. Has the pandemic given us an opportunity to re-examine our approach to international student education?

Many Canadian institutions champion equity and accessibility for domestic students but charge exorbitant tuition to international students.

For the past few decades, higher education institutions throughout Canada have declared internationalization a priority. In the academic literature, internationalization most often refers to a process of integrating international and global perspectives into all aspects of higher education, including teaching and research. A core assumption is that internationalization is a process of organizational change, meaning that universities and colleges have strategic plans, working groups, and indicators that monitor progress.

Since 2018, I have been researching how postsecondary institutions strategize and enact internationalization. With a team of graduate students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, we have collected over 100 internationalization strategies from colleges and universities around the world, including 23 from Canadian universities and 11 from Canadian public colleges. We analyzed the strategies to understand what activities are marked as priorities and what values and justifications undergird those activities.

Throughout the strategies we examined, internationalization was portrayed as useful primarily for the benefits it confers to individuals and institutions. I call this *instrumental internationalization* because it reduces the purpose of internationalization to revenue, rankings, and reputation—preferably all three. However, having reflected on the future of internationalization in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to propose an alternative vision for internationalization that moves beyond the instrumental organizational-change approach.

Instrumental internationalization

At its most basic level, internationalization is often equated with the recruitment of international students, who pay substantially higher fees than domestic students. These fees constitute an important revenue source for public institutions in an era of rising costs and stagnant provincial funding levels.

Internationalization also entails integrating international perspectives into curricula and academic programs; supporting study abroad; and pursuing international research and partnerships. Collectively, these practices constitute an institutional project that seeks to transform the university into a global actor with influence that transcends its local community and national borders.

These activities are typically justified in educational terms: that is, to educate students for global understanding and awareness in an interconnected global economy and society. In our analysis of internationalization strategies, the top-mentioned rationale was "diversity." The basic assumption is that by recruiting diverse international students, we will ensure that domestic students are competent workers and informed citizens in increasingly diverse societies.

This approach is self-interested, with internationalization being pursued because it increases our profile in the world and, hopefully, enhances the education provided to domestic students. As a result, this approach has long been criticized for being neoliberal, utilitarian, and dehumanizing.

In our research on internationalization as an organizational activity, we found that achieving "successful internationalization" required meeting specific targets and impact indicators. For example, effective internationalization is often associated with the number of nationalities on campus, which reduces internationalization to "more and better coverage of the world." Colleges and universities identify a specific percentage of international students who should come from key "markets" (language that equates students with investments).

Student recruitment mostly focuses on Asia, including China and India, with much less attention to other parts of the world. When other regions of the world are discussed, particularly countries in Africa, they are often framed as recipients of international development, rather than sources of knowledge or expertise.

Our analysis also found striking absences. It may be hard to believe now, but virtual forms of internationalization were entirely missing from pre-2020 strategies. Additionally, there was almost no discussion of values, such as equity, justice, humility, or solidarity that might shape a re-envisioned internationalization. Further, there were very few connections made to other institutional initiatives. In particular, mentions of Indigenous peoples and knowledge; equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); and sustainability were rare. Indeed, many Canadian institutions champion equity and accessibility for domestic students but charge exorbitant tuition to international students with very little scholarship aid. These practices not only reproduce great

> The basic assumption is that by recruiting diverse international students, we will ensure that domestic students are competent workers and informed citizens in increasingly diverse societies.

wealth inequalities in the world but create conditions for students studying in Canada that make them vulnerable to sex work, housing precarity, and food scarcity.

Concerns with this instrumental internationalization were apparent long before COVID, and, even before 2020, many institutions were beginning to re-think their approaches to internationalization. However, the pandemic created an immediate shock that accelerated many of these trends and has forced us to rethink the status quo.

The catalytic impact of the pandemic

In 2020, many countries, including Canada, closed their borders. Although the suspension of in-person classes was disruptive to all students, the extended border closures had a dramatic impact on internationalization activities. Citizenship status became an important factor in individuals' experiences. Many international students were stuck in Canada, unable to travel to countries where their families lived. Many international students were isolated or stuck in precarious housing situations. Many others were also targeted by rising xenophobia, which hit East Asian students particularly hard.

Over the past year, I have worked with a team of researchers at OISE, the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, and the International Association of Universities on a SSHRC-funded project titled "The Future of Internationalization." Our first goal is to synthesize the literature on how COVID has affected the internationalization of higher education around the world.

Four themes emerged:

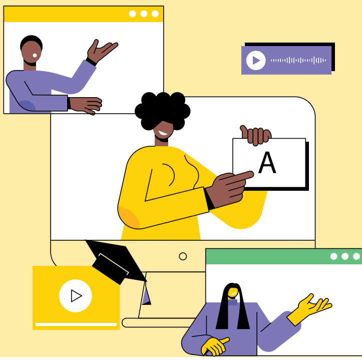
- First, consistent with an instrumental approach, changes in individuals' ability to move across borders was a focus. Publications expressed substantial concerns about whether institutions in recruiting countries such as Canada, the US, and the UK would maintain international student enrollments throughout the pandemic and what the impact on revenues would be.
- Second, there was clear recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic would have an uneven impact on institutions and students. The full consequences of this are still unknown, as are the long-term impacts of entrenching hierarchies in Canadian higher education. Yet, long-standing global inequalities have also been altered. Digital tools have made some forms of collaboration possible in ways that were impossible before, due to the need for visas and cost barriers.
- Third, many studies we examined documented how international students, like their domestic peers, faced discrimination and isolation while their mental health and well-being suffered. Although students throughout Canada faced similar challenges, international students' identities as non-nationals often created distinct difficulties and pressures, given their visa status, limitations on their employment, and their inability to travel home.
- A final trend worth noting is how the pandemic catalyzed geopolitical concerns that had been playing out previously. Geopolitics have now entered internationalization in new ways, and new inequalities have emerged, mapped onto access to fast and affordable Internet, free from censorship.

Charting the path forward

As we emerge from the past two years—changed in many ways—we have an opportunity to reflect critically on our approach to internationalization. I recall the hardest moments of the pandemic—borders were closed and we were socially distanced and isolated from one another. It deprived us of many forms of human connection that we had taken for granted, even while showing us the ways in which we were profoundly linked across borders. Internationalization has parallels to this dual nature of the pandemic. Our postsecondary institutions do an impressive job creating ways for people from around the world to communicate with each other, whether on physical campuses or in virtual spaces. However, fostering deep and meaningful human connections among these individuals, who have different backgrounds and worldviews, is a much more difficult challenge.

In light of the limitations of instrumental internationalization, my question for postsecondary educators and leaders is: How can we redefine and reimagine what counts as internationalization? In answering this question, I suggest that, by transforming how we understand internationalization, we can begin to change what we think and do in its name.

Internationalization does not need to be thought of as a rationalized strategic activity that primarily benefits the



Our task as educators in internationalized institutions demands more than preparing students with concrete skills for inter-cultural communication.

institution in concrete ways. It should be more than a set of quantified organizational activities with outcomes. Global understanding cannot be narrowly defined as acquiring knowledge, skills, or competencies. It must involve more than implementing a checklist of activities or organizational practices.

Accordingly, I view internationalization as a personal commitment to reflecting on how our actions, as we live and work in Canada, have unknown ripple effects around the world. A reimagined internationalization requires educating students to be interested, humble, empathetic, and responsible for our interconnected pasts, presents, and futures. This focus on attributes and reflective action, rather than knowledge acquisition and organizational activity, is a redefinition of how internationalization is understood and practiced by many. But, this re-definition is needed.

All indications suggest that our institutions will remain focused on international student recruitment post-pandemic, seeking to diversify students' nationalities to mitigate financial risk. However, we can all do more individually—in our classrooms and professional roles—to align our own practices, interactions, and relationships within the domains where we work to a non-instrumental approach to internationalization.

When we conceptualize the goal of international student recruitment as an opportunity to invest in the future potential of those who have not benefited from generations of accumulated privilege, we can come up with creative ways to make international student tuition more equitable. For example, one possibility involves providing scholarship packages to students who studied at public schools in countries in lower and middle-income countries. Another includes calculating a reasonable family contribution, as is done in many universities in the United States. When we stop thinking of international student recruitment as being primarily about revenue and reputation, we can find new ways to re-commit to bringing those most affected by conflict and disruption, including refugee students and displaced scholars, to our campuses.

Similarly, instead of being an instrumental project that is primarily revenue-generating and reputation-enhancing—skewing our treatment of students—we can centre relationships of care as a guiding principle for internationalization. We can appreciate our students' multifaceted identities, address the stereotypes and racism many face, and view supporting mental health as everyone's responsibility. Leaders can commit to providing faculty, staff, and international student advisors with the tools, resources, and training they need to take on these expanded roles.

When we stop viewing internationalization as a standalone project, isolated from other institutional priorities, such as EDI and sustainability, we can begin creating integrated programs and plans. We can begin to map out an agenda for internationalization that addresses the hegemony of Western and Eurocentric ways of thinking and resource extraction that are fundamentally unsustainable. One very small step in this direction is to reflect on knowledge production in our disciplines and research: We can look at our syllabi and ask ourselves if we are assigning readings by scholars outside of North America and Europe, and if not, why not? We can individually begin to challenge the Eurocentrism that positions Europe and North America as the world's primary sources of knowledge and progress. We can also begin to more seriously calculate the carbon footprint of international travel and choose more environmentally sustainable options.

When we stop mapping internationalization onto concrete and measurable activities for narrow outcomes, such as intercultural competencies, we can begin educating for the much messier global reality. The world is highly unpredictable—conflict, geopolitical tension, disease, and climate migration all mean that our task as educators in internationalized institutions demands more than preparing students with concrete skills for inter-cultural communication. Rather than viewing internationalization as acquiring skills, we can, instead, view internationalization as preparing students to have many of their basic assumptions questioned and to be comfortable with ambiguity and change.

In this way, we can imbue our internationalization activities with a greater sense of purpose—beyond self-interest and instrumentalism, we can re-think internationalization in terms of our impact on the world. AM

Elizabeth Buckner is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

Inside the mental health crisis facing college and university students

Simon Lewsen with photography by Chloë Ellingson

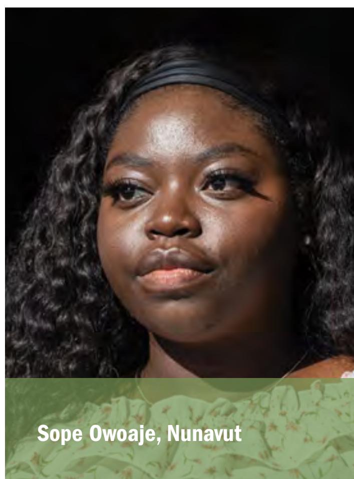
Campuses are offering more wellness programming than ever before, so why are rates of student mental illness on the rise?

This story originally appeared in The Walrus. *It was written with the financial support of OCUFA's Mark Rosenfeld Fellowship in Higher Education Journalism.*

In the summer of 2012, Sope Owoaje, then 15, travelled from Brampton, Ontario, to her hometown of Lagos, Nigeria, to attend her cousin's wedding. In Yoruba culture, weddings are extravagant affairs. Owoaje recalls that her father, a Lagos resident and executive at the central bank, paid for the entire event and walked the bride down the aisle.

Following a church ceremony on the third day of the festivities, Owoaje and her cousins returned to the family home for one last celebratory dinner. Her dad's car arrived a minute later, trailed by four strange men on motorcycles. Suddenly, a motorcyclist darted in front of the vehicle, cutting it off, while the other three crowded in. Owoaje watched as one of the men pulled out a gun and shot her father through the window of the car. "The bullet missed his chest and hit his upper arm," Owoaje says. "Everybody around me screamed. My dad had a rush of adrenaline. I saw him speed past me with his window shattered."

He drove himself to an emergency ward, where doctors hurried him into surgery. Despite the injury, he recovered fully, and the family chalked up the violence to an attempted carjacking. But, when Owoaje returned to Brampton, she felt changed. She withdrew from social life and her grades slipped. She replayed the shooting in her head and felt unsafe everywhere she went. "I was scared to be in rooms where I couldn't see the entrance," she says. "I needed to keep track of how many people were present, who was coming and going, and where the doors were located."


Sope Owoaje, Nunavut

When she was in grade 12, her mother took a new job and moved the family to Iqaluit. The wide streetscapes of her new hometown gave Owoaje a sense of restfulness, and Inuit culture, with its storytelling traditions and reverence for Elders, reminded her of her Yoruba upbringing. She often visited the Elders' Qammaq, a community centre where seniors gathered to talk. An Inuk woman in her nineties told Owoaje about how the residential school system had broken her family, and other people described being taken by ship to tuberculosis asylums where their friends died and were buried in unmarked graves. Owoaje began to understand trauma—how it stays with you and manifests in unpredictable ways.

In Iqaluit, she began to heal, but when, in the fall of 2014, she moved to Winnipeg to study life sciences at the University of Manitoba, her anxiety returned. During orientation week, she had a fever that consigned her to her thirteenth-floor dorm room. When she emerged, it appeared that everybody except her had made new friends. "I was more lonely than I'd ever been in my life," she says. For lectures, she'd show up early to pick an optimal seat—sufficiently close to the exits to enable a speedy escape but far enough away that she wouldn't be in the line of fire if a shooter came in. "If I got to class and saw that somebody had taken my spot," Owoaje says, "I would go back to my dorm room furious with myself." She had expected university to be exhilarating, but instead, she felt terrified and unexcited to learn.

She wanted professional help but couldn't find an online link to student mental health services. She called the campus medical clinic instead and, after three weeks, received an appointment. "I told the doctor, 'I need mental health counselling,'" Owoaje recalls. "And he said, 'Sorry, we only deal with physical issues here.'" Clearly, she'd gone to the wrong place, but he didn't mention where the right place might be. (In an email to *The Walrus*, a spokesperson for the University of Manitoba wrote that the school offers "an integrated continuum of care, and a 'no wrong door' philosophy to ensure students are directed to the services they need." The spokesperson did not comment on the specifics of Owoaje's experience.)

Owoaje felt rebuffed, as if the university were chastising her for failing to keep herself together. What she didn't tell the physician was that even getting to the clinic had been an ordeal. "It was at the end of a long, dark corridor," she remembers. "I knew that, if I went far enough down that hallway, I wouldn't be able to see the exits."

Although Owoaje's story is extreme, her frustrating experiences with the university health bureaucracy are common. Over the last decade, reports of postsecondary students trying and failing to secure psychological services have become ubiquitous. Pundits and psychiatrists now talk about a mental health crisis on campus, and it isn't hard to see why.

In 2019, the National College Health Assessment, which surveys students at Canadian postsecondary institutions, found that almost 70 per cent said they had felt "overwhelming anxiety" in the previous twelve months, and more than half said they were living with debilitating depression.

The same study found that over 16 per cent of students had seriously considered suicide, an increase from 10 per cent in 2013. Reported suicides on campus are a fraction of the overall numbers, but even these figures are shocking: six at the University of Ottawa during the year

leading up to April 2020 and another suspected five at the University of Alberta during the two years before that. Since 2018, a single building at the University of Toronto—the Bahen Centre for Information Technology—has had three student deaths in its atrium alone.

Universities have responded by expanding their mental health resources, running resilience workshops, and hosting meditation sessions. But Owoaje's experiences—and those of numerous other young people—suggest that many institutions still misunderstand the crisis, which has little to do with a lack of wellness programming or mindfulness training and a great deal to do with shifting demographics and the changing role of the university in our society.

Ashley, New Brunswick

When we imagine the typical student who seeks psychological services on campus, we might picture a young adult who is struggling to handle the stress of assignment deadlines and exams. We don't picture somebody like Owoaje, who continues to suffer side effects from a traumatic event she lived through. But people arrive on campuses today with a wide—and ever-widening—range of life experiences.

In 2001, 14 per cent of postsecondary students in Canada identified as visible minorities; by 2019, that figure was 44 per cent. Over roughly the same period, the number of new international students in the country jumped from 70,000 to 250,000. Statistics Canada does not collect class-based data on postsecondary enrolment, but one 2010 survey shows that half of students—compared with one-quarter in the mid '70s—worked part-time jobs while studying.

Clearly, a student seeking mental health support today can be affluent or poor, Canadian or foreign born. And, while some are struggling with the circumstantial stresses of university life—independent living, time management, friend-group formation, and academic pressure—others are contending with highly individualized experiences. Psychologists have long known that the results of such traumas often manifest between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, just as students in our crowded postsecondary system embark on what has become a financially precarious, emotionally exhausting phase in their lives.

Critically, the campus mental health crisis predates COVID-19. Of course, nobody would argue that the pandemic has been good for psychiatric health. As universities have transitioned to remote learning, students have found themselves isolated from friends, health care providers, and support networks—the latter being particularly important among queer and trans youth, who may depend on one another for self-affirmation. It's tempting to assume that, as campus life normalizes, the crisis will return to the pre-pandemic status quo, but the status quo was dire to begin with. When it comes to student mental health, the worst that can be said of COVID-19 is that it exacerbated a problem it didn't create.

Ashley has been a perfectionist for as long as she can remember, a tendency she attributes, in part, to her relationship with her father. She recalls that he belittled her constantly. "He'd tell me I was stupid and worthless and destined to die alone," she says. "I thought, 'If my own father is saying these things, they must be true.'" To prove him wrong and to establish a sense of control, she threw herself into her studies, seeking not just excellence but flawlessness. If she got 95 per cent on a test, she'd soon be crying in the washroom. (To protect her identity, Ashley's last name has been withheld.)

Students have found themselves isolated from friends, health care providers, and support networks.

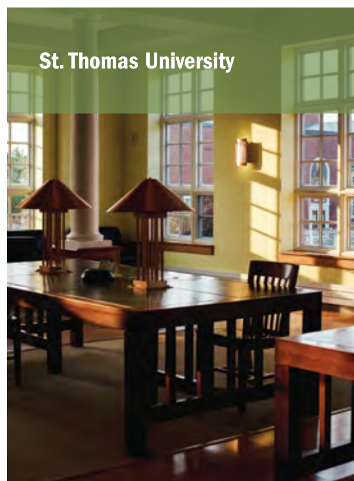
Her parents separated when she was young, and she was shunted between two homes. At 13, she returned from a trip abroad and abruptly announced that she was cutting ties with her father. She didn't want to live with him or see him for weekly visits, and it soon became clear that he would no longer fund her future university education, a realization that increased her academic anxiety. Like many Canadians aiming to get a degree, Ashley now faced the prospect of taking on years of debt. "I told myself I needed to work my ass off to get a scholarship," she says.

In 2018, she arrived at St. Thomas University, in Fredericton, to study criminology and psychology. She had received a full scholarship—a clear victory, although it didn't feel like one. To keep her funding, she needed a 3.7 GPA, and to get into law school, she needed to do even better. Reasoning that a strong resumé couldn't hurt, she packed her schedule with courses, extracurriculars, and

part-time retail jobs. Her days felt joyless and exhausting. The insomnia and nightmares she'd experienced as a teenager returned, as did chest pains, loss of appetite, and recurring crises of confidence.

She'd been warned that university grades tend to be lower than high school grades, but she wasn't prepared for her first A-minus, on a 300-level criminology course she'd taken in first year. Was it good enough, she wondered, to warrant a partially or fully funded law school placement? She'd always been one of the highest achievers she knew. If she was no longer that, what was she? Had her high school successes been a mirage? Had her father been right about her all along?

A great deal has been written about why students today experience extreme self-doubt and anxiety, but many of these theories neglect to reckon with trauma or familial and financial pressures. The crisis is sometimes attributed to social media. Online discourse, after all, can be toxic and polarizing, image-based platforms like Instagram wreak havoc on self-esteem, and tech-mediated connections are a dismal replacement for in-person relationships. Another explanation focuses on a growing child-rearing trend among middle- to upper-class families—sometimes called intensive or helicopter parenting—in which parents subject their children to constant supervision and extracurricular activities, depriving them of opportunities to build resilience and emotional independence.



Both hypotheses offer convincing if not fully satisfactory explanations. The social media theory attributes problems at Canadian schools to tech companies in faraway Palo Alto and Beijing, and the intensive-parenting theory fails to account for students, like Owoaje and Ashley, who weren't raised in the kinds of hypercompetitive households where such parenting practices are prevalent.

To fully understand the present crisis, one has to appreciate a fundamental and often overlooked fact: higher education is not what it used to be. Not only do we have a more diverse student body with equally diverse psychiatric needs, we also have an academic culture that has changed profoundly in the past six decades, making the university experience more stressful than it once was. The classic liberal conception of postsecondary institutions as places where young people take a kind of sabbatical from life—read the great books, engage in endless debates, and learn to see themselves as citizens—has given way to a new model, more narrowly vocational in focus.

If you attended a Canadian university in, say, 1961, you were probably white, Canadian born, and part of a small, economically secure demographic. (That year, there were only 130,000 full-time students in the country. Today, the number is nine times that.) What's more, you were probably pursuing your studies out of intrinsic rather than vocational motivations. "It was easier back then to have a middle-class lifestyle without a university degree," says Alex Usher, president of the consulting firm Higher Education Strategy Associates.

In the decades that followed, things slowly shifted. First came the economic downturn of the 1970s, which brought a new era of class stratification. The prosperity gap between an increasingly credentialized professional elite and a less-educated economic underclass began to widen and hasn't stopped since. Then came the early '90s recession, which saw both dramatic cuts in government funding to higher education and two-fold increases in tuition. By this point, universities had become both less affordable and more necessary than before. "The cost of education went up," says Usher, "but people became more—not less—likely to enrol, because white-collar labour was now valued so much more relative to unskilled labour."

In the twenty-first century, skyrocketing property values further increased students' cost of living in some parts of the country. By 2018, average student debt at graduation had more than tripled since the early '80s. Schools also got bigger as millennials came of age and universities began aggressively courting international students, who pay vastly more in tuition than their Canadian peers. Between 2000 and 2019, total enrolment at Canadian universities increased by 78 per cent, placing new demands on student support systems. Today, the combined population of just three schools—the University of Toronto, York University, and the University of British Columbia—exceeds the number of people enrolled in the entire Canadian system six decades ago.

As campus populations grow, students have reported depersonalized classrooms, making university culture more alienating than before. The National College Health Assessment survey notes that, in 2019, 70 per cent of Canadian students experienced extreme loneliness. Rising enrolment numbers have also contributed to a sense among young people—perhaps more illusory than real but strongly felt nevertheless—that they are jockeying in a crowded arena for a dwindling number of jobs. By

historical standards, the employment market for university graduates in Canada is far from terrible, but students nevertheless fear joblessness. “When young people become extremely anxious, their ability to evaluate future probabilities becomes skewed,” says Steve Mathias, a psychiatrist and the executive director of Foundry, a network of youth mental health clinics in British Columbia. “Students will say things like, ‘If I fail this test, I’ll become homeless and destitute.’”

As campus populations grow, students have reported depersonalized classrooms, making university culture more alienating than before.

These combined stressors put immense pressure on young people to prioritize scholastic pursuits over other opportunities—for aimless reading, say, or romantic and sexual exploration—that campus culture can offer. Like their American counterparts, Canadian students now compete fiercely for prestigious undergraduate placements—software engineering at the University of Waterloo, commerce at the University of British Columbia, health sciences at McMaster University—and then more fiercely still for a limited number of postgraduate slots, many of which require A-level transcripts. “We have an education system that starts talking about university in elementary school,” says Joanna Henderson, director of the Margaret and Wallace McCain Centre for Child, Youth, and Family Mental Health, in Toronto. “Students are expected to build their postsecondary applications by taking leadership roles, getting top grades, and excelling at STEM. They work tremendously hard to arrive at this destination only to realize that it’s not an end point but a beginning.”

By prioritizing high achievers, Henderson argues, universities are selecting not only for diligent candidates but also for those who view scholastic success as central to their identities. For such students, a bad grade can be destabilizing. When that grade appears on an exam worth 80 per cent of a final course mark, or when it comes from a harried teaching assistant who doesn’t offer in-depth feedback, students can feel like they are losing a game whose rules were never explained. Imagine being told all your life that you are ahead of the pack and that you must stay there, both to secure a stable future and to get a return on the investments that family members or granting agencies have made on your behalf. Then, imagine falling behind, for reasons you don’t understand, at the precise moment when staying on top feels more critical than ever before. Furthermore, imagine that you are contending with profound loneliness, past trauma, and financial insecurity, all while working a part-time job with the usual mix of erratic hours.

Such stressors can lead to sleep disruption, irregular eating, and substance abuse—all of which correlate with mental illness—or they can trigger pre-existing psychiatric conditions. They can deplete reserves of neurochemicals, like dopamine and serotonin, needed to sustain a sense of well-being, or they can flood the brain and body with cortisol, the stress hormone, which, in excess, can push people into near-constant states of anxiety, making it difficult to conceptualize daily challenges in a proportionate or healthy way. They can also lead to identity confusion and an acute sense of shame. “When you think about predictors of suicide, an important in-the-moment factor is relationship disruption,” says Henderson. In her clinical practice, she often sees young people who are upset about their university grades—and who, when expressing these feelings, immediately mention their families. “They say things like ‘My parents are going to be so disappointed in me’ or ‘My parents are going to kill me.’”

Of course, university has always been challenging, but Juveria Zaheer, a clinician scientist and medical head of the emergency department at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), in Toronto, says that the stakes seem higher today than ever before. For many students, an undergraduate degree can feel like a four-year, $30,000 gamble. “There’s a reason adults have dreams that they’ve missed an exam,” says Zaheer. “It’s a primal fear. Young people are actually living those nightmares.”

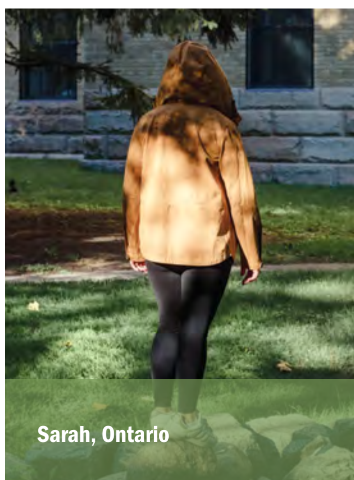
During her shifts at the emergency department, Zaheer frequently sees youth patients in severe psychiatric distress. “When they get to us, a lot of difficult things have already happened in their lives,” she says. “They come not with one problem but with several—intense suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, deteriorating social relationships. Often, I’m the first psychiatrist they’ve seen. It’s worrisome that so many young people are making their initial presentation for mental health care at an emergency department.”

It’s hardly surprising, though. Just as postsecondary institutions have misunderstood the causes of this crisis, they have miscalculated the solutions. In Canada, Zaheer argues, upstream funding for mental health supports on

campus could help prevent serious mental health presentations at acute care downstream. Canadian mental health care is funded primarily by federal contributions to provincial health budgets. But the system is two tiered: anybody with a health card can see a doctor who's licensed to prescribe psychotropic medications, but psychological services, like cognitive behavioural therapy or interpersonal psychotherapy, are mostly covered by workplace insurance plans or must be paid for out of pocket. (There are exceptions to this rule. The system sometimes offers free counselling to people who've been hospitalized for mental illness, and non-profit clinics across the country, many with limited means, also deliver affordable therapeutic services to patients in need.)

Like the Canadian system writ large, campuses provide too little by way of sustained, patient-focused support. At many schools, sessions with mental health counsellors go either to students in acute distress or to those who've waited their turn in the queue. In extreme cases, students may wait up to two months for basic counselling. Outreach is a problem too. A 2020 survey of six Canadian universities showed that only 56 per cent of students were even aware of the mental health services their campuses offered.

Moreover, the services themselves aren't as flexible as they could be. Most involve a fifty-minute meeting (or a limited number of such meetings) booked in advance. "Some people can do remarkably well with short-term interventions," says Amy Gajaria, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at CAMH. "But there are other people—those who've been dealing with mental health challenges since childhood or those with trauma and comorbid substance-abuse problems—for whom even two or three months of counselling isn't enough."


Sarah, Ontario

When treating young adults, clinicians need time just to arrive at a diagnosis. If an eighteen-year-old first-year student suddenly starts drinking heavily and burning through scholarship money, is she having a manic episode or behaving like a teenager who's finally away from home? "A lot of illnesses present in young-adult populations," Gajaria says. "But there's also diagnostic uncertainty because the brain is still evolving. It's best to get to know a patient over several months, but our system isn't set up for us to do that."

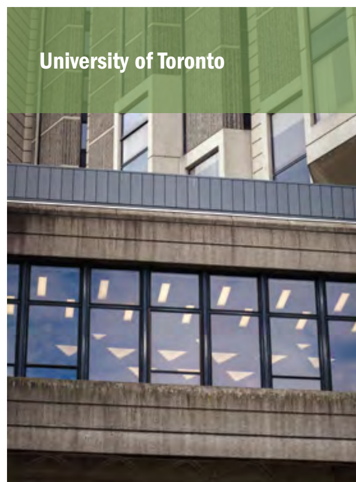
She adds that, on campus, specific types of services are woefully undersupplied, like dialectical behavioural therapy, which can treat borderline personality disorder, or trauma therapy, which is complex and time intensive. There's also a lack of culturally relevant services: counselling in languages other than English, therapies that are integrated into spiritual practices, or Indigenous programs that involve spending time on the land. Of course, universities and colleges can always refer students to off-campus resources, but these, too, are overstretched and underfunded, and private care can easily cost $200 per session. "The wait for publicly available trauma therapy can take up to two years," says Gajaria. "Should we really be asking an eighteen-year-old in distress to wait that long for treatment?"

Mathias, the Foundry executive director, argues that what's missing from campus services—and from the Canadian system more generally—is a sense of balance. "Our system provides a narrow scope of interventions to young people who have lost a great deal of their function to mental illness," he says. "But we don't assign resources to those who are just starting to struggle or who are struggling just a bit. Young people are falling off a cliff. We're putting doctors and hospitals at the base to catch them, but we're failing to prevent the fall itself."

This is what happened to Sarah, a life sciences student at the University of Toronto. (To protect her identity, Sarah's real name has been withheld.) When she stepped into the exam room for her first midterm test, in organic chemistry, she felt nervous but ready. She'd studied diligently, attended every class, and uploaded her lecture notes to the course website for the benefit of fellow students. But the ambience of the room was stifling. "I have a fear of crowds," she says. "I could hear people shuffling around me, and I could feel their stress." The proctor set the test in front of her, and her mind went blank. "I looked at the page and thought, 'I don't know any of this. It's like a foreign language.'"

A week later, the professor returned the test and posted anonymized grade data on the overhead projector, revealing that Sarah had scored 35 per cent, one of the lowest marks in the class. She ran from the lecture hall crying. As an international student from the Middle East, Sarah feared that, if she failed too many courses, her visa might be revoked. The exam incident soon metastasized into a general sense of disquiet—a similar, if heightened, version of the anxiety she'd experienced for much of her teenage life.

At an appointment with the school's health and wellness centre a few weeks later, she explained to a campus doctor that her mental health was spiralling. "I asked, 'Can I see a counsellor?'" she recalls. "He said, 'Not really. There's a wait list, and it's for people who need more help than you do.'" He suggested she might have ADHD and gave her a prescription for clonazepam—a tranquilizer in the benzodiazepine family—for which a known side effect is depression. "Suddenly, I was crying every day," Sarah says.



In her second semester, she switched to mirtazapine, an anxiety medication, at which point she developed irritable bowel syndrome. At the time, she assumed the IBS was caused by the medication, though she now suspects that the link might be coincidental. Nevertheless, the condition was so severe that she could rarely sit through a full tutorial or quiz. "It was horrible," she says. "I'd gone from anxiety to depression to IBS in a single year. I was like, 'What's going to happen next?'" She did manage, however, to register with accessibility services and receive additional time to complete her exams, at which point her grades improved.

In her second year, she moved out of residence and into an apartment in Toronto's Kensington Market neighbourhood. To make rent, she took a night job at the university, a position that required her to walk to campus at 11:30 p.m. On the way, she was often followed, cat-called, or verbally harassed. "A lady yelled, 'I'm going to fucking shoot you in the head and rape you, bitch,'" Sarah recalls. "I'd never experienced that kind of language before. I felt like it was my fault, like I was doing something to bring out that anger in people." Her IBS made social life difficult. "Other people could go out and eat together," she says, "but I couldn't get through a meal." Her exhaustion compounded her loneliness, anxiety, and shame, until she found herself back at the health centre, telling a doctor—a psychiatrist this time—that she no longer wanted to live.

When Sarah had first presented at the clinic, a year earlier, she'd been surprised by the lack of urgency the staff had shown. This time, however, the psychiatrist sprang into action. She got up, called campus police, and told Sarah she was committing her to the in-patient ward at CAMH. "I asked, 'Is it okay for me to go there myself?'" she says. "And the psychiatrist said no." When the police arrived, she says, they put her in handcuffs and walked her to the back of a cruiser. It was among the most degrading experiences of her life.

In an email to *The Walrus*, Sandy Welsh, vice-provost of students at the University of Toronto, said that such incidents, involving police and handcuffs, are uncommon. "In situations where a student requires urgent care from specialized mental health support services, university staff will work with the student to arrange voluntary transportation to hospital, whenever possible," she wrote. "Campus police may be called upon to assist with transporting a student to hospital when all other options have been exhausted." She added that the university is currently reviewing its policies and procedures for handling such emergencies.

Nevertheless, at the University of Toronto, this incident—and others like it—quickly became campus lore. Students warned one another about the risks of seeking mental health services. Sarah was outraged not only for having been treated like a criminal but also for having been denied earlier therapies that might have made such extreme interventions unnecessary. "I learned that, if you go to health and wellness and say, 'I'm dealing with depression and anxiety,' they'll respond, 'You're not in critical need of support,'" she says. "But, the moment you say, 'I have a plan to kill myself,' they'll throw you in handcuffs."

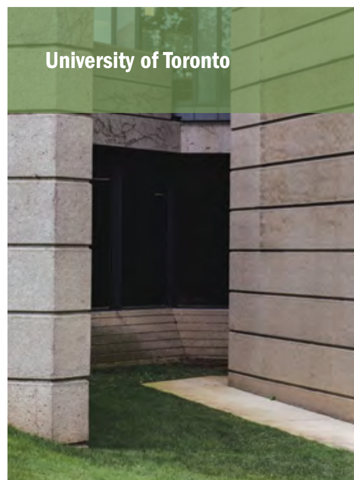
Students warned one another about the risks of seeking mental health services.

Universities and colleges were never intended to be psychiatric institutions, and administrators are perhaps justified in wondering whether the mental health crisis is theirs to solve. But the fact remains that the undergraduate years are an incredibly tumultuous period in a person's life. "About 70 per cent of mental disorders first arise in adolescence and young adulthood," says Emily Jenkins, a professor at the University of British Columbia's school of nursing who specializes in substance use. "This phase coincides with students' arrival on campus and often their departure from home, which, in itself, can be destabilizing." Surely, Jenkins argues, this implies some obligation on the part of the academy toward the young people in its care.

Of course, universities can't tackle the problem alone. Gajaria, the CAMH child-and-adolescent psychiatrist, argues that Canada urgently needs a sustained federal and provincial investment in psychiatric care. (Ahead of the fall federal election, the Liberals, the Conservatives, and the NDP committed to increasing funding for mental health care. The Liberal Party also said it would support the hiring of up to 1,200 counsellors at universities and colleges.)

Canada urgently needs a sustained federal and provincial investment in psychiatric care.

Postsecondary institutions will never be able to provide the full suite of mental health services, but they should be able to give swift referrals to clinicians and counsellors in the public sector. "The worst part of my job," says Gajaria, "is knowing what my patients need but being unable to get it for them." Parents, too, can help mitigate the crisis by talking to their university-age children about mental health and by reminding them that low grades and academic adversity aren't signs of personal failure but, with the right support, could be opportunities for emotional growth.


University of Toronto

Universities are increasingly investing in a range of early intervention therapeutic services with the goal of eliminating wait lists and reducing the number of extreme crises. (To their credit, several schools, including McGill University, the University of British Columbia, the University of Victoria, and the University of Regina, have made major strides in that direction.) In the past decade, campuses have begun facilitating open discussions about mental health, but such dialogues often focus on the safest subject matter: stress, burnout, and self-care. When a school provides leather-crafting workshops and therapy dogs to help students manage anxiety—as the University of Toronto does—but then forcibly sends other students to hospital in police cars and handcuffs, it sends a message: some types of mental illness will be supported here while others will be treated like crimes. "As soon as campus administrators hear words or phrases like *suicide* or *psychosis* or *eating disorder*, they lapse into risk-management mode," says Henderson, the McCain Centre director. "They say, 'Oh my God, I'd better take action or something bad is going to happen.' They need to recognize that turning a young person away from early intervention services is also a risk. Calling the police is a risk. You can end up traumatizing the student."

Beyond that, schools might innovate. Different universities could experiment with different approaches, all the while collecting data on what works and what doesn't. In time, these experiments may yield a set of best practices to be deployed nationally. Perhaps they will include initiatives at the University of British Columbia and McGill University to create a centralized hub—a single office, like a port of entry—where students get an adviser who sets up appointments for them and helps them navigate the campus health bureaucracy. Or perhaps such best practices will include the University of Ottawa's initiative to train teaching and administrative staff in basic mental health care. The goal isn't to turn professors into therapists; rather, it is to show them how best to communicate with students in distress and to give them an up-to-date list of campus resources.

Among the most successful programs are those that recognize the diversity within student bodies and zero in on specific communities. In 2005, the University of British Columbia opened a satellite campus in the Okanagan Valley, on unceded Syilx Okanagan territory. Two years later, it pledged to admit all Indigenous applicants. Those who didn't have the grades or high school education to warrant a direct admission could instead join the Access Studies initiative, a year-long program that combines university-level courses with "upgrading courses" in English or math, intensive one-on-one tutoring, weekly workshops on well-being, and Indigenous cultural activities. All Access Studies students are assigned an academic adviser who coaches them as they progress through the program. At the end, they're eligible to either continue at the University of British Columbia or transfer to any other university in the province.

Ian Cull—a former associate vice-president of students at the Okanagan campus, a member of Dokis First Nation, and an architect of the Access Studies program—sees such initiatives as an alternative to the approach that

many universities adopt. It is unreasonable, he argues, to expect all students, even those who've faced tremendous adversity, to arrive on campus and demonstrate instant mastery over the academic, social, time-management, and health challenges that await them.

Has the Access Studies program been good for mental health? Cull argues that the completion rates speak for themselves. In the 2020-21 school year, the retention rate for Indigenous students at the Okanagan campus was 84 per cent, compared with 89 per cent for domestic students at large, and the gap is narrowing. "Our Access students progress through their degrees at roughly the same rate as non-Indigenous students," he says. "Even the most underprepared Access students are performing as well, by second year, as those who come here through our normal admissions procedures." Similar programs can be found elsewhere in Canada. The University of Manitoba has its own year-long Access Studies program targeted at Indigenous, racialized, and rural students, as well as those who are newcomers or face economic barriers. The University of Toronto also has a new initiative that aims to recruit prospective Black and multiracial medical students via summer internships and a specialized admissions process.

Omar Patel, Ontario

Like Cull, Omar Patel, a Muslim chaplain, believes he's found a way to meet the needs of students who are underserved by mainstream campus culture. In 2012, he returned to Canada after completing his divinity training in the UK and South Africa. "I was looking for ways to bring spirituality to the public, particularly young people," he says. "In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, mosques were places of counselling and therapy. People would come to the Prophet to discuss marital and social concerns. But the mosques of today are primarily focused on prayer. They've lost their connections to the original prophetic mosque."

To help bridge that gap, Patel did a master's degree in pastoral care at the University of Toronto and took courses at the Toronto Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling Education, eventually becoming a registered psychotherapist. In 2015, he began working at the university's Muslim Chaplaincy, where he led Friday prayer services, offered regular counselling sessions, and acted as a liaison between campus administrators and students.

Patel argues that Muslim students reticent to visit the health and wellness centre may be more trusting of religious leaders like him, who are uniquely positioned to address culturally specific conundrums. What, for instance, might a Western-trained, non-Muslim psychotherapist say to a Muslim student who wants to sever relations with an abusive parent while at the same time honouring the Prophet Muhammad's exhortation to love and forgive one's kin? Or what might such a psychotherapist say to a student who, because of obsessive-compulsive disorder, is spending half an hour on ablutions for prayer, a process that should take two minutes?

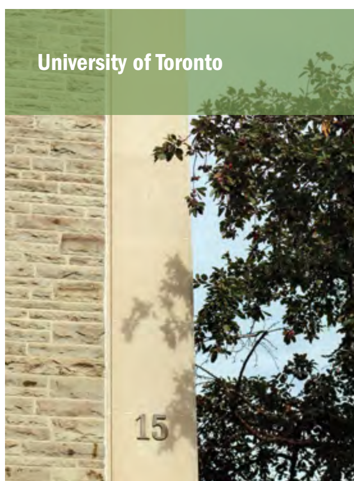
"If a student from a religious Muslim background sees a counsellor who has no connection to the faith," says Patel, "the student must devote a huge chunk of time to explaining their background. So, the problem the student came in with, which should be the focus of the session, doesn't get proper attention." Patel acknowledges that Western psychiatry works well for many students, but he argues that, in today's universities, no single model is sufficient. His opinions are backed by data: a 2009 meta-study from the journal *Psychiatric Services* shows that, when it comes to psychiatric care, culturally competent approaches reduce disparities in treatment outcomes between minority and majority populations. Initiatives such as Cull's and Patel's may be happening on the margins of the mainstream campus health bureaucracy, but administrators would do well to pay attention to them. Our large, multicultural campuses require an equally diverse approach to mental health, with bespoke services tailored to individual student needs. "The point of psychotherapy," says Patel, "is meeting the clients where they are."

Sarah left CAMH three days after being committed, only to find herself back at the health and wellness centre, back in handcuffs, and back at the hospital, this time for a month. After her second discharge and a suicide attempt, she registered in an outpatient program at CAMH and finally got access to the thing she'd wanted all along: regular appointments with a cognitive behavioural therapist. "I learned that your thoughts affect your emotions and your emotions affect your thoughts," she says. "I learned a new vocabulary to label my emotions and to tell people what I'm going through." By articulating her feelings, she could distance herself from them. The suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, and IBS abated.

During Ashley's first semester at St. Thomas University, a counsellor on campus asked her a question nobody had put to her before: Was she suffering from PTSD

because of her father? Ashley was skeptical (Isn't PTSD for soldiers?), so she read studies on the condition and asked friends for input. In time, she came to accept the diagnosis. Knowing the cause of her anxiety enabled her to better manage it. Today, she has a mental list of warning signs—joylessness, loss of appetite, loss of interest in physical activity—that alert her when she's overworked and on the edge of burnout. She will always be a high achiever, she reckons, but success doesn't have to come at the expense of happiness.

Owoaje eventually decided not to finish her program at the University of Manitoba. She returned to Iqaluit, where she enrolled in the nursing program at Nunavut Arctic College. It was then that she reconnected with Hunter, a high school acquaintance who had been friends with her brother. On their first date, Owoaje and Hunter saw *Black Panther* at the Astro, the only cinema in town. Hunter had visited the theatre earlier that afternoon to pick a seat where Owoaje would feel safe. Although she'd barely known him before, she felt that she was reuniting with an old friend. She told him the reasons for her PTSD, and he helped her reconnect with her community. "We'd drive around town," says Owoaje, "and talk about everything we'd missed in each other's lives." (To protect his identity, Hunter's real name has been withheld.)



Hunter was usually cheerful, with an infectious, dimpled smile, but he carried within himself a profound kind of pain. When his mood darkened, he'd turn silent. On bad nights, Owoaje would hold him wordlessly for hours until the storm passed. On good nights, he'd tell her about the activities that helped him re-establish a sense of well-being: hockey, basketball, and hunting, an Inuit tradition he found therapeutic. "Seals have delicate hearing. They pick up on every footfall. So, you have to be quiet for hours," says Owoaje. "You learn patience and humility, and you practise being alone with your thoughts." With Hunter, Owoaje found what she'd been missing at the University of Manitoba—a sense of connectedness with another person.

Two years after her return to Iqaluit, Owoaje took a solo trip to Paris, London, and Rome. For the first time since they started dating, she and Hunter would spend weeks apart. Hunter's community, meanwhile, had been selected to go on a narwhal hunt, a rare opportunity. (To preserve the species, the government of Nunavut regulates the number of narwhals that can be culled each year.) He was exhilarated at the prospect of catching a narwhal, an achievement that would surpass anything he'd done as a hunter. He and Owoaje sometimes spoke of the hunt as a healing practice because it allowed him to make plans and look forward to the future. "I said to Hunter, 'Promise me that you'll be fine and that you'll be here when I come back,'" she recalls.

She knew that Hunter's mental anguish could flare up unexpectedly, but she does not know the specific factors that led him to take his own life while she was abroad. She got the news of Hunter's death via social media, and on the plane back to Iqaluit, she was inconsolable.

Since then, Owoaje has thrown herself into activism. She started a Nunavut chapter of Jack.org, a national organization dedicated to youth mental wellness. In June 2020, she helped organize a protest outside the Nunavut legislature, calling on the government to increase funding to front line support and establish a mental health facility in the territory. She also ran a massive survey at Inuksuk High School about student mental health needs. The most common need: regular access to a trained counsellor.

Because of her work, she often finds herself reflecting on the duty of care that exists—or should exist—between students and the educational institutions entrusted with their well-being. Had she received the support she required at the University of Manitoba, she wonders, would her experiences there have been salvaged? Had she been less lonely, would her trauma have been easier to manage? She hopes future students will no longer have cause to ask such questions.

Once in a while, she visits her favourite spot, on a hilltop near the school, where she and Hunter used to watch the snowmobiles on the land or the fishers in their boats. If they saw one of his friends heading out on a hunt, they'd often spin a yarn about him getting trapped in a snowbank or firing his gun in the air to scare off a polar bear. Owoaje imagines that Hunter is still with her. He might point out a boat on the water. "I bet they're going to catch enough Arctic char for the entire community," he says. "Yes," she adds, "or maybe they'll catch a narwhal." AM

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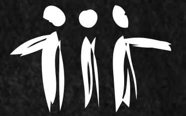

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