

Teacher Candidate Well-Being in the Lakehead Faculty of Education, Orillia

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The *Operation Happy to Be Here* (OH2BH) project aims to centre the experiences of Professional Program students while enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. Among its goals is to establish a sense of their well-being, including (a) the mental health issues (anxiety, stress, worriedness, etc.) they cope with during their time in our program; (b) what contributes to their disconcerting circumstances; and (c) what individual, institutional, and structural interventions might serve as appropriate responses to student wellness concerns.

OH2BH, in operation since 2018, is based on several theoretical foundations, including the importance of democracy and student voice in education (Bron & Veugelers, 2014), a focus on each student's social and intellectual growth (Tinto, 2012), and the centrality of an ethic of care in teaching practices (Noddings, 1984). The project draws upon a variety of data collection methods, ranging from straw polls, focus groups, student assignments, and other feedback-generating mechanisms, but its hallmark research instrument is a questionnaire administered annually in the consecutive education Professional Program. In our most recent survey, 103 students (18%) at the Orillia campus completed the 114-question instrument between February 27th and March 13th, 2023. Student responses from the survey have been transcribed verbatim in the present article to best preserve the authenticity of student voice.

What mental health issues are our students experiencing?

For the benefit of comparison, several questions in our annual questionnaire were drawn from a nationwide survey of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) which tracked the wellness of all citizens in Canada (Policy & Research, 2023). One of these parallel questions asked, "In the past two weeks, how frequently have you felt worried, nervous, anxious, or on edge?" In our student sample, almost half of our students (43%) said they felt this way *every day*, while another 15% felt so on over half those days. Nine out of every ten students felt some of these emotions at least once in that period (Figure 1).

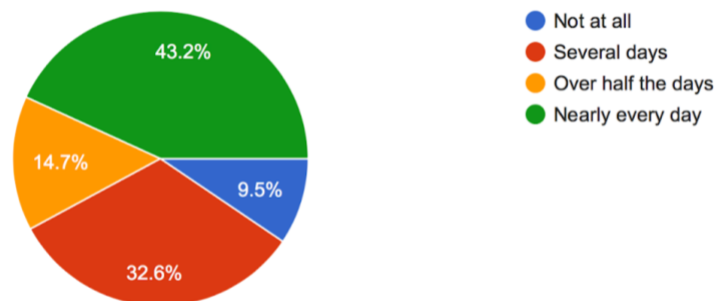


Figure 1. In the past two weeks, how frequently have you felt worried, nervous, anxious, or on edge? (n=95)

Nearly identical findings emerged when students were asked if they had trouble relaxing (Figure 2).

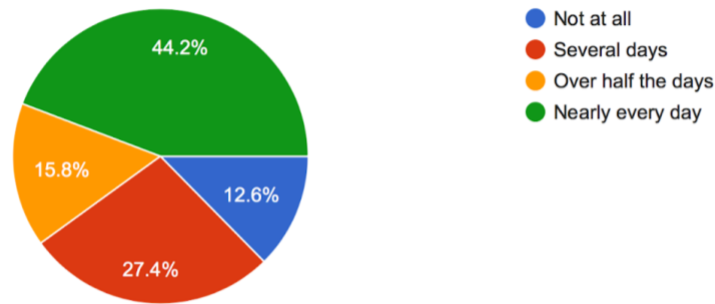


Figure 2. In the past two weeks, how frequently have you had trouble relaxing? (n=95)

These levels of distress are well above those of the general Canadian population described in the CMHA study, a comparison that we have unpacked in greater detail elsewhere (Pluim & Hunter, 2021). Not only are mental illness rates high among our students, but many of them also endured physical illness during the school year as well. For instance, less than one-third (29%) of our sample said “not at all” when presented with the statement, “I got sick this term and it affected my ability to fully participate in the program”. By contrast, the majority of our students responded with either “over half the term” or “several weeks”, or, as over half (57%) replied, “several weeks” (Figure 3). These findings underscore that physical wellness emerges in combination with mental wellness to impact students’ full participation and the corresponding academic outcomes during our relatively short-term (9-week) program.

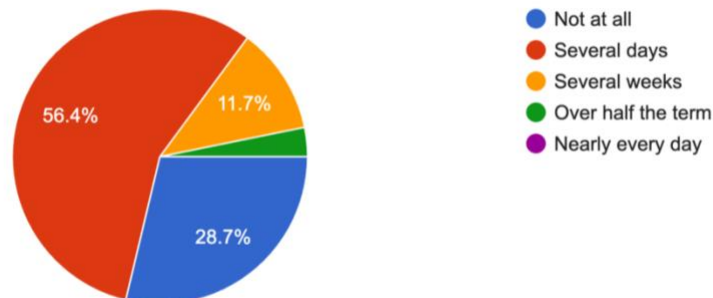


Figure 3. I got sick this term and it affected my ability to fully participate in the program. (n=94)

Constraints to Student Wellness

To better understand what contributes to student well-being and anxiety, further questions in the OH2BH survey enabled the research team to disentangle what students find unsettling as they complete our program. The OH2BH data shows that four major concerns stand out: Two relate to our students' personal circumstances (lasting pandemic issues and financial stressors), and the other two appear to be instigated by features within the program experience (excessive workload, and assessment issues). In what follows, these matters are explored in greater depth.

a) Personal circumstances

Students' personal and domestic circumstances emerge as significant factors affecting their wellness during our program. For one, despite being almost a year removed from the pandemic, numerous students spoke of the lockdown's lasting implications. As one student explained:

Since contracting Covid-19 last year, my short-term memory and lung capacity have been significantly impaired. I have also lost practice at developing sustainable routines and habits, and struggle to maintain my mental health. All of these things at one time or another have impacted my educational experience.

Another student described the prolonged physical effects they experienced during the pandemic:

Due to isolating so strongly over the past few years my immune systems is weakened. ... I attribute my illness this year to classes in Orillia. I got covid twice this year and was sick several days of class time. This caused me to miss classes.

The lingering impacts of Covid-19 on our teacher candidates suggest that a return to pre-pandemic wellness conditions has been slower than anticipated. Recent CMHA data similarly notes that even as social spaces in our country began to re-open by late 2022, it took most Canadians much longer than that to acknowledge the end of the pandemic (Assessing the Impacts of COVID-19 on Mental Health, 2022).

For many of our students, financial strain also contributes to chronic distress during their university experience. With rising tuition costs, unprecedented barriers to affordable housing, soaring food prices, and the considerable living and academic expenses needed to sustain their participation at school, students must find ways to manage these costs. Most of our students opt to balance part-time work while they take their university courses; Indeed, in 2023, a full two-thirds of our student body (67%) held at least one part-time job on top of their classes, while over a quarter (28%) worked *two* jobs while attending their courses (Figure 4).

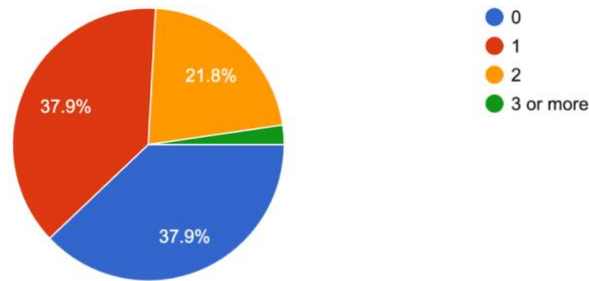


Figure 4. How many current paying jobs do you have outside your education? (n=87)

Some students, both those with and without part-time jobs, receive a loan from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) to support their enrollment in our program. Within our program, nearly three-quarters (74%) of our sample received funding from OSAP this year to enable their academic studies (Figure 5). Others, in confidence, have shared that they *would have liked* to receive OSAP, but were denied this funding due to the amount of their parents' or spouse's incomes, *despite* not receiving financial support through those relations.

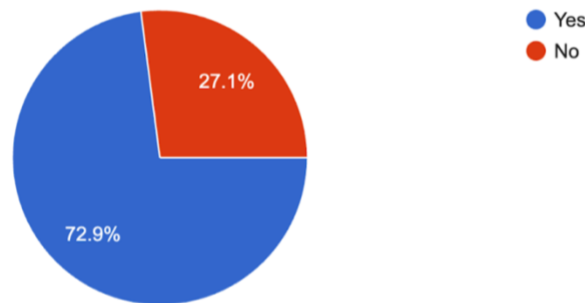


Figure 5. Did you receive OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) to enroll in Lakehead's B.Ed. program? (n=85)

Among the other associated costs our students incur include living expenses such as food, transport, and housing. Given the relative proximity of our Orillia campus to many cities in Muskoka, Bruce County, Huronia, and Southern Ontario (including the Greater Toronto Area), many of our students choose to commute from their homes while attending Lakehead to offset the cost of a short-term rental in Orillia. Our findings revealed that less than one-third of our students (22 of 71 responding) live in Orillia during the school term, and most choose to commute, sometimes up to one hour or more. Taken together, as Lakehead graduate student Matthew Boucher argued in his Master of Education portfolio, the financial strains that students experience in our program, coupled with the associated responsibilities that students take on to be able to fund their schooling experience (such as part-time jobs), often lead to distraction, limits in focusing, and even problems in self-regulation, as well as other wellness problems (Boucher, 2021).

b) *Programmatic aspects*

Beyond students' personal circumstances, the OH2BH data also illuminated several features of our program that our students find unsettling. One recurring issue is the overall workload that students sustain through their enrollment in the program. When asked what advice they would give to incoming students, certain respondents said, "Prepare yourself for the workload", and "Consider if [you] have the time to commit to the workload." Although the amount of coursework is not an uncommon issue for many university students to lament, the host of course responsibilities required in our Professional Program routinely emerges as a point of dissatisfaction for our students. This workload can be attributed to the overall number of courses necessary to complete the program, the number and rigour of assignments in each course, and the overall breadth of content necessary to develop competencies as a teacher. Here I will focus on the first of these concerns.

In the OH2BH questionnaire, students mark a clear distinction between the number of courses they are taking, and how many courses they feel would be optimal for their learning. While some students needed eight or nine courses to satisfy their degree requirements, most students were taking seven courses at the time of the survey (Figure 6).

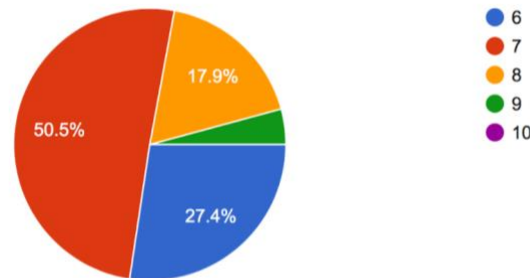


Figure 6. How many courses are you taking right now (this term)? (n=95)

By comparison, the vast majority (81%) of students suggested that five or six courses would be optimal for their learning (Figure 7).

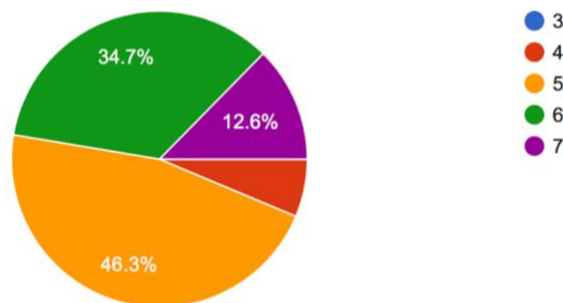


Figure 7. From your perspective, what is the optimal number of courses for a student to take each semester in the Professional Program? (n=95)

When provided with the opportunity to comment further, students contextualized their opinions against their desire to achieve in the program.

I think the optimal number of courses should be 5-6 a semester. In my first semester I was in 8 classes. I found the workload to be overwhelming, especially for a first semester when we're getting used to the program. I often found it hard to keep up with deadlines.

Another student compared our course load to other university requirements, and made connections to its overall impact:

5 per term is the recommended load for many universities, with 6 being a max. the professional program exceeds this with a standard of 6-7, with electives pushing to 8 course load. The workload is overwhelming and can interfere with students opportunities to succeed.

A related concern for students is the perceived reliability of assessment practices within and across the faculty. For example, while our program's required math exam is an important measure of our students' competence in elementary mathematics, it is also repeatedly cited as a source of much anxiety for many students. Elsewhere, our students report a degree of disparity in the assessment approaches used among the courses that they take. Although the faculty institutes certain standard grading practices, there is a considerable variety of techniques used by instructors across our education courses. For instance, consider that instructors could evaluate students using numeric grades (i.e. percentages), levels of achievement (4, 3, 2, 1), which mirror the elementary school rubric in Ontario, or via the letter system (A, B, C...). In resistance to the hegemony of standardized systems, some faculty deliberately incorporate alternative assessment strategies such as pass/fail, contract grading, peer assessment, and even ungrading. By contrast, the long-standing tradition of "bell-curve" within academia influences how other instructors conduct their assessment. Taken together, this unevenness results in a sense of frustration for students and relatively few students—barely a third (34%)—agree that grading reflects their effort in their courses (Figure 8).

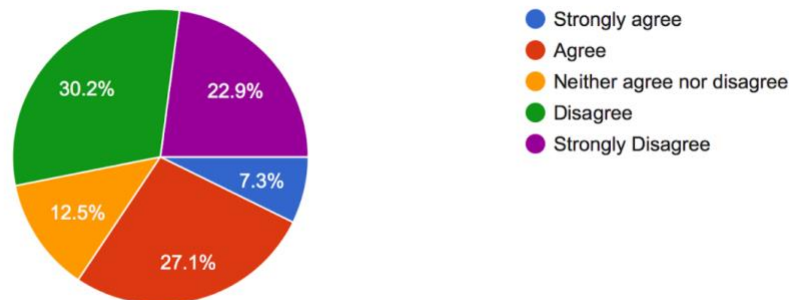


Figure 8. I feel that grading reflects the effort that I put into my assignments. (n=96)

Those students seeking a high standing in our program tended to be the ones who provided further explanation. This student, for example, lamented on the strict adherence to the bell curve:

I am a perfectionist and an over-achiever, and am used to receiving grades in the 80s/90s. So, having course instructors tell us that we would not be receiving

more than a 75 was completely disheartening. It did not matter how much effort I put into assignments, I always received the same percentage grades which made me lose motivation. If it was simply a pass/fail system, I think there would be much less pressure and cause for upset.

Of course, decreasing the motivation for our students to excel is precisely the opposite outcome we would hope for our students in our feedback and assessment processes. This respondent, for instance, elaborated on how assessment affects their effort:

Marks have been bell curved and students have been told that class averages cannot be high. Once I heard this, I stopped putting in effort in my assignments as I clearly do not feel valued with regards the amount of effort I put into my assignments. I should be fairly evaluated on my work, not based on the criteria of marks being bell curved.

It follows that students experiencing different grading practices across a large number could be quite distressing for them. These programmatic concerns frequently exacerbate the personal wellness issues already experienced by students, as the stress of the program is layered on top of students' existing home life circumstances. As one student shared, "I was working but could not continue on top of Lakehead's workload." Clearly, a comprehensive response to student wellness is needed, considering a full range of inputs by students, instructors, the education faculty, the full university, and provincial/federal policy.

c) Responding to the Student Wellness Crisis

Given the extent of wellness issues experienced by our students, interventions can, and are, be(ing) implemented from multiple standpoints: from individual students and instructors, to the institution, to the support structures in our society. At one level, students can exert their individual agency to prioritize their own wellness. They take their own initiative to ensure balance in their lives, maintain positive social relations, ensure healthy outlets and physical activity, practice mindfulness, and develop strong executive functioning. Students can draw on the many supports provided by the university, such as those provided through Lakehead's Student Health and Wellness department. They can also profit from wellness strategies taught in their courses, and access outreach programs and counselling services provided outside of Lakehead.

At another level, many instructors in our Faculty of Education currently foreground wellness in their course structure and online pedagogies. Many faculty regularly use stress-reducing practices such as mindfulness-based interventions during their classes, pre-course check-ins to get to know their students, and outdoor or physical alternatives to stationary, in-door learning. Our program administrators have also adapted their course structures to include blended learning to reduce the exhaustion of commuting, and many instructors embed flexibility in assignment options (such as "passion projects") and provide students with choices for the grading schemes of their assignments. All these individual initiatives go a long way to foster the well-being of our students and to create a healthier learning environment.

However, I would argue that much more can be done at the institutional and societal levels to enable a healthier, happier, and more sustainable experience for students during

their educational journeys. Clearly, the overwhelming workload that students experience can be reduced through a more tightly orchestrated program, either within our existing courses by paring down assignments or reducing redundancies between them, or, by reducing the overall number of courses required during each semester; a feasible consideration given the flexibility of the accreditation requirements of the provincial regulating body (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017). While the knowledge, skills, and competencies we could provide for new teachers appear to be infinite from the perspective of zealous instructors supporting novice students, more content does not necessarily result in better outcomes when added workloads ultimately detract from meaningful learning. In the long run, an ethic of care guiding the curriculum and pedagogies of our program should remain at the foundation for our program excellence (Noddings, 1984).

Similarly, course assessment is never as straightforward as it seems from a student's perspective. University instructors may be teaching multiple courses, hundreds of students, multiple assignments, limited instructional support, and operate in a relatively short time frame, must reliably perform these assessments and evaluations. Yet, several solutions exist to ease these tensions for students. For one, I would argue that these complexities of and possibilities for assessment could serve as an opportunity to introduce future teacher to not only their pros and cons but also the imperfections of any grading system. Further, part of inspiring future educators is impressing upon them that the journey of lifelong education should be at least as much based on *internal* rewards as on any single *external* mechanism. This is not to say that we can expect students to fully accept varied and even conflicting approaches to assessment, as years of standardized tests, numerical grades, and immediate feedback condition learners to a narrow view of assessment. Of note are the frustrations of those students who expend much effort to produce high-quality outputs, only to confront an unreliable assessment system. Undoubtedly, a certain degree of predictability, transparency, and standardization across the faculty is equally important as good practices and to ease these student anxieties.

Finally, a great deal of student stressors can be attributed to the drastically shifting societal conditions of recent decades, especially in terms of the Canadian and global political economy. For example, the share of government funding to Canadian universities has dropped by more than 30% in the past several years. In 2019, governments were funding less than a quarter (24%) of universities' expenses, compared to 83% in 1982. In Ontario the government subsidizes \$7,425 for each post-secondary student, far less than the national average which stands at \$12,930 per student (OCUFA, 2022). Naturally, this lack of social funding must be made up elsewhere, with rising student tuition filling much of this gap. Clearly, student pressures can also be attributed to these changing economic circumstances, which require different responses than the personal and programmatic concerns discussed above.

Related expenses for students are also on the rise worldwide, most notably as of late being housing expenses. In Canada, rental fees continue to set records, with the average Canadian per-month rental cost for August of \$2,117 (Rentals.ca September 2023 Rent Report), making that choice for students increasingly prohibitive. Rising inflation affects other costs and global stressors such as the climate crisis cannot be discounted. Thus, the activist work of lobbying policymakers for better social, economic, and educative conditions must be among the responses to ameliorate students' expenses at university.

Conclusion

Despite the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, Lakehead students in the Faculty of Education Professional Program continue to move through our program with proportionately high degrees of anxiety. The OH2BH initiative has illuminated certain factors that impact our students' well-being during their time in the program, including personal situations of financial strain and lingering pandemic issues, and program causes such as an overwhelming workload and frustration with assessment approaches. As a caring community, Lakehead faculty need to continue to prioritize our students' wellness. And while university students should employ strategies to sustain their own well-being during and after their time at university, we also must think more deeply about how, together we can drive institutions and societies to enable the conditions that will improve student wellness in a sustainable, life-long manner. Programmatic benefits of healthy and happy students have been widely demonstrated: these students are more engaged, enthusiastic to learn, and satisfied with their journey. They are also more likely to contribute to the academic community during and after their stay in the program. But more importantly, cultivating healthy, motivated, and inspired students must remain a moral imperative for faculty in educational communities.

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