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Chandaria Research Centre

The Road After: A Longitudinal Study of the Lives and Early Careers of Alums

Research Snapshot #3

THE FIRST YEAR STORY:
EMERGING ADULTHOOD, AUTONOMY AND THE POST-SECONDARY TRANSITION

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
The transition from high school to university is an important rite of passage for many young people. It is often a first major step into adulthood and toward the personal growth and development that accompanies it. It is also marked by a series of qualitative changes in young people's lives. University entrance comes with a marked increase in autonomy. Often for the first time, students will live away from their families and social support systems. They will be free to make their own decisions and structure their own time. At the same time, however, they will experience a corresponding increase in responsibility. They will now be responsible for their own self-management and take care of themselves physically, emotionally, socially, and academically.

University transition thus requires the development of coping and self-regulatory skills. The post-secondary transition falls, in fact, within the developmental stage of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2007; 2010), a distinct developmental period between adolescence and adulthood typically lasting from age 18 to 25 and characterized by unique cognitive, emotional, and behavioural changes. The brain's centre for problem-solving and reasoning fully develops during the emerging adult period: the pruning of gray matter that begins in adolescence continues into the twenties and mid-thirties, along with growth in the brain's white matter (Tanner & Arnett, 2016). Emerging adulthood is thus characterized by changing and developing cognitive capacities, strategies, and organization, and the attainment of wisdom-related knowledge and judgement. One of the primary psychosocial goals in this period is that young

people become autonomous, self-governing, and self-regulating (Arnett, 2000; 2001). The stage is also characterized by identity exploration; feeling caught between adolescence and adulthood; instability; self-focus; and a belief in open possibilities for the future (Arnett, 2010; Tanner & Arnett, 2016).

This snapshot is the third in a three-part series that reports on key findings from The Road After study about Branksome Hall graduates' experiences in their first year of university. Branksome Hall is an all-girls' K-12 International Baccalaureate school* in Canada . The study focuses on alums' navigation of emerging adulthood, their experiences of increased autonomy after graduation from high school, and their ability to cope with the responsibility that accompanies this new freedom.

THE ROAD AFTER - STUDY OVERVIEW

DATA COLLECTION YEAR

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
CLASS OF '17	E (survey)	1 (survey + interview)	(interview)		4 (survey + interview)	5 (survey + interview)					
CLASS OF '18		E (survey)	1 (survey + interview)		3 (survey + interview)	(interview)	5 (survey + interview)				
CLASS OF '19			E (survey)		2 (survey + interview)	3 (survey + interview)	(interview)	5 (survey + interview)			
CLASS OF '20					E/1 (survey + interview)	(interview)	3 (survey + interview)	(interview)	5 (survey + interview)		
CLASS OF '21					E (survey)	1 (survey + interview)	(interview)	3 (survey + interview)	(interview)	5 (survey + interview)	
CLASS OF '22						E (survey)	1 (survey + interview)	(interview)	3 (survey + interview)	(interview)	5 (survey + interview)

LEGEND: 📋 SURVEYS (**E** - EXIT; **1** - YEAR 1 FOLLOW UP; **2** - YEAR 2 FOLLOW UP; **3** - YEAR 3 FOLLOW UP; **4** - YEAR 4 FOLLOW UP; **5** - YEAR 5 FOLLOW UP)   🎤 INTERVIEWS

Figure 1: Research methods and study timeline

Note: This research snapshot focuses on the First Year Story, which includes Exit and Year 1 data from the 2017–2019 Classes, indicated in colour. No data was collected in 2020 due to COVID-19.

The Road After study documents Branksome Hall graduates' perceptions of their lives over a five-year period after high school. It explores the extent to which graduates' schooling experiences at Branksome have an impact on their post-secondary education, interests and their development as young adults. The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are graduates' perceptions of the impact of an International Baccalaureate education on their lived and academic experiences?

What are graduates' experiences as they transition into post-secondary education and/or adulthood?

To answer these questions, we involve multiple cohorts of graduates (starting with the Class of 2017 and ending with the Class of 2022) in this ongoing longitudinal study. The study uses a combination of surveys and individual interviews to generate case studies of the Branksome Hall graduate experience, as illustrated in Figure 1. Graduating Branksome Hall students are asked about their perceptions of the impact of their academic program. The same cohort is surveyed again at the end of their first year of post-secondary education and/or following a gap or sabbatical year taken for travel or work (Year 1), midway through their programs (Year 3) and then upon graduation (Year 4 or 5). A select number of students (5–10) within each cohort is asked to participate in a series of interviews that probe more deeply into their experiences to gain additional insights. The participants are asked about their academic experiences as part of the International Baccalaureate program, their global engagement, their approaches to well-being and their perceptions of their leadership skills.

WHO ARE THE RESPONDENTS?

93 participants from the 2017, 2018 and 2019 cohorts completed the Exit Survey	**64 participants** from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts completed the Year 1 Survey	**10 participants** from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts participated in the interviews	**60%** of survey respondents entered Branksome Hall between grades 7–12	**90%** of survey respondents attended Branksome Hall as day participants	More than **91%** of all respondents attended a post-secondary institution	The largest fields of study were **Liberal Arts / Humanities** followed by **Health / Medical Sciences**

Figure 2: The First Year Story: Exit and Year 1 study participants

The First Year Story

The First Year Story captures and compares alums' experiences in their first year after graduation. This story is based on the Exit and Year 1 surveys completed by the 2017 and 2018 graduating cohorts, as well as interviews from a smaller number of alums from these cohorts. The Exit survey was completed by 93 alums from the 2017, 2018 and 2019 cohorts. The Year 1 survey was completed by 64 alums from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (see Figure 2). In the study, respondents were asked about developing their independence and decision-making, as well as self-regulation and time management. In order to protect participants' identities, this report uses participants' chosen pseudonyms.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Emerging Adulthood and Autonomy

Emerging adulthood is marked by increasing autonomy. Research suggests that "emerging adults—especially university students—in Western cultures prioritize … responsibility for one's actions, independent decision making, equality with parents, and financial independence" (Galanaki & Leontopoulou, 2017, p. 419). Plug et al. (2003) identified autonomous decision-making and responsibility as the criteria most commonly associated with adulthood by young individuals. In the Canadian context, Molgat (2007) found that

autonomy from parents was the most salient feature of young adults' perceptions of adulthood, followed by financial independence and responsibility for oneself and others.

In this study, autonomy from parents, independent decision-making, and financial independence emerged as key findings. The participants appreciated that they were learning to be independent of their parents and other adults. Trianna (2017) described her ability to "function myself, not calling parents." Adrienne (2018) discussed learning not to be dependent on her parents "if I'm sick or if I need help." Ghost Islander (2018) noted that when parents are absent, "a lot of things are your choices." However, autonomy also had the potential to be overwhelming: "I realize independence is a lot because, you know, I'm further away from my parents and I'm not doing well at school. I'm not thriving and getting involved" (Ghost Islander, 2018).

Farzi (2018), who was a boarding student when she attended Branksome Hall, enjoyed the freedom from adults "not checking in on me every time." Spina (2018) also contrasted the boarding structure at Branksome Hall with the autonomy of the university setting:

"You really need to be ready to take control of your life. You have to go to classes on your own, no one is going to bug you to go. No one's going to tell you to do your readings and do your projects, and so autonomy, for me, was having that power over my life."

Some participants emphasized the experience of living at university without supervision (Jill, 2017), and, in particular, moving to a new city (Amelie, 2017; Spina, 2018) as fostering greater independence, especially from adult influence and guardianship. As Spina (2018) noted, independence is "figuring out everyday stuff" so that you "don't need other people to get through life."

Participants also reported being responsible for what they considered "adult tasks" in university: "having to feed [yourself] and do laundry" (Amelie, 2017), and "taking care of yourself [and] knowing what to buy and what you need to have" (Farzi, 2018). Esmerelda (2017) reported having to "pay my own bills. I have to set up my hydro." Spina (2018) filed her taxes for the first time and described following instructions and accomplishing it on her own without assistance. Adrienne (2018) described her plans to arrange for health insurance for herself.

Independent decision-making develops over the course of emerging adulthood as young people gradually acquire increasing cognitive maturity and are able to delay gratification, solve problems, self-reflect, and regulate their emotions (Wood et al., 2018). In this study, Jill (2017) described "being able to make decisions for myself" as the "biggest source of growth" for her. Trianna (2017) also talked about the freedom to make her own decisions, "having the independence to do what you want, what you like, and to pursue your own opportunities."

Study participants felt that they were in transition with regard to financial independence: while they were not fully there yet, they were on their way. Esmerelda (2017), for instance, appreciated her newfound financial independence, which allowed her to pay tuition and rent, and reported that it felt "good [because] I kind of have more control over my life" and that even though "I'm not completely [self-sufficient]

yet, … it feels kind of like it." For many participants, this was their first experience having a job.

The results of this study affirm the research finding that students typically experience increased autonomy and freedom during their first semester of college (Hofer, 2008). In this study, the participants focused particularly on the freedom to make their own academic decisions and organize their time.

Farzi (2018), for example, described autonomy as "the ability to choose what classes you take … [and] which courses and what topics I wanted to learn about," which she considered "pretty incredible" after the stricter structure of high school. Ghost Islander (2018) described her ability to schedule her "classes around what she wants." Similarly, Spina (2018) said: "In university, I could manage my time more, and my schedule was more flexible," because of which she felt she could "have more control and balance my personal relationships and my academics better." For Adrienne (2018),

"It was a bit of a shock … realizing that I have freedom to do whatever I want to and my course schedule varies day to day, I don't have a Monday to Friday specific hours in terms of class. So I can sort of plan my socialising and anything else I want to do with my time really freely. Whenever I want to do something I sort of work it into my timetable and make it happen."

Self-Regulation and Time Management

The corollary to increased autonomy in university transition is increased responsibility, which may take many forms. This study focuses on how participants experienced increased responsibility in the form of self-regulation and time management.

As previously noted, learning to self-regulate is one of the key goals of emerging adulthood. Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in new situations. A key form of academic self-regulation is time management. Time management is "the self-controlled attempt to use time in a subjectively efficient way to achieve outcomes" (Koch & Kleinmann, 2002, p. 201). It involves setting and prioritizing short- and long-term goals, estimating time demands, monitoring time spent on task, and deliberately structuring or allocating how time is used (Wolters & Brady, 2020). As students transition to university, they experience increased autonomy and responsibility with regard to academic work: they are required to engage in more learning activities outside of the classroom, under their own direction and without adult intervention (Wolters & Brady, 2020). At the same time, increased opportunities to engage in non-academic activities such as socializing, volunteering or employment require the development of strong time-management skills.

Research suggests that post-secondary students' self-regulation skills are typically not very developed in their first year of university (Thibodeaux et al., 2017). There is "convincing evidence that university students often are not particularly wise about their use of time and that this shortcoming is associated with diminished academic performance and decreased well-being" (Wolters & Brady, 2020, p. 4). For example, in a study of 188 first-year university students, 59 percent felt that difficulties with time management negatively affected their academic achievement (Rytkönen et al., 2012). Over time, however, "students typically develop skills of self-regulation, learning to take increased ownership of their own study habits and strategies and regulating their cognition and behaviour to achieve their academic goals" (Hofer et. al, 1998, as cited in Hofer, 2008, p. 10). At the same time, "there is an

extensive body of evidence with regard to academic performance suggesting that differences in low- and high-achieving students are closely linked to an individual's level of self-regulation" (Kitsantas et al., 2008, p. 42). Research confirms positive associations between efficient time management and both increased engagement and improved learning and achievement (Wolters & Brady, 2020), as well as higher grades (Kitsantas et al., 2008; Thibodeaux et al., 2017).

In the present study, approximately 60 percent of survey participants felt their IB education prepared them with effective time management skills. For example, Jill (2017) reported that "in general, time management is something that I value a lot. It's something that I learned at Branksome." Similarly, Trianna (2017) said: "If anything, that's a skill that Branksome taught me to deal with, about clustering all my due dates and figuring out how to organize and schedule my work, rather than procrastinate." At Branksome Hall, students are explicitly taught various time management strategies through learning strategies workshops, classes, and drop-in sessions, as well as individualized instruction. Students are taught to apply backwards planning, using a calendar for exam preparation, to estimate the length of tasks and then reflect on how long tasks actually take to improve their estimates over time, to build in buffer time for when things don't go according to plan, how to combat procrastination, and how consistent self-care practices support their ability to manage their schedules.

Having acquired these skills, participants felt prepared for the increased academic workload in university. As Amelie (2017) described,

"I think the one thing that I kind of – I hate to say it– I'm kind of better at and off the bat was time management. I think a lot of people in my year weren't used to having to dedicate so much time to work."

Participants in this study recognized the responsibility that came along with their ability to organize their own time. Spina (2018) noted that while "I could manage my time the way I wanted to … it was also kind of a responsibility to know that it's all on me now, and no one else is going to push me to do those things." Farzi (2018) noted that in university, "attendance is not mandatory" and "in general, professors won't notice that you're not there." Participants also realized that structuring and managing their time also required them to look after their own social and emotional well-being. For instance, Adrienne (2018) said:

"It is really easy to just lock yourself in the library and study for 18 hours a day and it's really easy to just not study at all or just try to cram the night before. And finding balance is something that everyone sort of has to figure out their own way."

For some alums, however, this realization came with experience, especially early on in their transition to university. For Amelie (2017), "[First] year was not a healthy time, like physically. I think the freedom kind of got to me and … also having to cook for myself and also being able to buy my own food and eat whatever I want." She reported that "for second year, I definitely took better control of my life and I was eating a lot healthier" (Amelie, 2017).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND IMPLICATIONS

Young adults' transition to university is often accompanied by greater freedoms, greater responsibilities, and a need for greater self-regulation—one of the biggest adjustments in their transition to adulthood. As they undergo this transition, young adults develop and strengthen the skills required for their adult lives. As this study shows, however, specific preparation for the transition—acquiring time management skills or learning to manage personal well-being, for example—may help ease their adjustment to post-secondary life.

This snapshot series highlights the core aspects of this transition: academics, well-being, and emerging adulthood skill development. Underlying the alums' experiences is a sense of intentionality that comes with adulthood: to begin making choices for oneself rather than the choices being made on one's behalf. We hope this series helps educators and other caring adults better understand what the transition period entails for first-year university students, and enables them to offer students the best support possible during this time.

Although data for this study was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, our learning about university transition is applicable in the post-pandemic world, particularly in the areas of academic preparedness, well-being, and developing autonomy. Our future research will examine how the pandemic affected some of these dimensions, and we look forward to sharing lessons to help educators support students through transitions in other challenging times in the future.

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