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Chandaria Research Centre

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

Research Snapshot #2

THE FIRST YEAR STORY:
WELL-BEING AND THE POST-SECONDARY TRANSITION

**CHANDARIA
RESEARCH CENTRE**
BRANKSOME HALL

Original Research by **Branksome Hall**

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The transition from high school to post-secondary education is often a time of self-discovery and exploration for young adults. At the same time, it may also be a period of increased vulnerability and stress as they undergo a double transition (Marcotte et al., 2018) — a developmental transition as well as an institutional transition that reflects a change in the level of their education as determined by the structure of the schooling system (Anderson et al., 2000).

Among young people in industrialized countries, the developmental transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood is characterized by significant physiological, intellectual, and emotional changes (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults learn to accept responsibility for themselves, make independent decisions, acquire financial independence, and develop a more egalitarian relationship with their parents (Arnett, 2001). This transition comes with increased freedom and autonomy, which many young adults enjoy, but which also requires the greater exercise of executive self-regulatory processes such as self-control and discipline.

For many young adults, this developmental transition coincides with an institutional transition as they graduate from high school and begin university, with the latter often involving separation from family and social support networks, an increased academic burden, and the need to define academic and professional goals. This double transition therefore has the potential to expose them to significant life stress, anxiety, and uncertainty (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004).

This snapshot is the second in a three-part series reporting 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 Toronto, Canada. The study focuses on alums' well-being during their first year, the changes they experienced at the time, and how they coped with them.

The data presented in this snapshot was collected before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who are transitioning into university now face the additional stresses and uncertainties brought on by the pandemic. It thus becomes even more important to understand how this transition unfolds in normal circumstances so that we may use this as a baseline for understanding how things may have changed as a result of this global health crisis and the implications of these changes on young adults as they transition into adulthood.

THE ROAD AFTER - STUDY OVERVIEW

DATA COLLECTION YEAR

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
CLASS OF '17	E 📄	1 📄 🎤	🎤		4 📄 🎤	5 📄 🎤					
CLASS OF '18		E 📄	1 📄 🎤		3 📄 🎤	🎤	5 📄 🎤				
CLASS OF '19			E 📄		2 📄 🎤	3 📄 🎤	🎤	5 📄 🎤			
CLASS OF '20					E/1 📄 🎤	🎤	3 📄 🎤	🎤	5 📄 🎤		
CLASS OF '21					E 📄	1 📄 🎤	🎤	3 📄 🎤	🎤	5 📄 🎤	
CLASS OF '22						E 📄	1 📄 🎤	🎤	3 📄 🎤	🎤	5 📄 🎤

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, and 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 surveys, respondents were asked about the influence of well-being initiatives at Branksome Hall, and their levels of stress in Grade 12 at Branksome Hall as well as in the first year of university. Respondents were also asked about the factors that contributed to their stress levels and the strategies they used to navigate stress. Similarly, the interview participants were asked how they understood well-being, how this was impacted in their first year, and the strategies they used to promote their own well-being. In order to protect participants' identities, this report uses participants' chosen pseudonyms.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Shifting Perceptions of Stress

The findings of this study support research suggesting that the change from high school to university can be unsettling, demanding, or stressful for some students (Tinto, 1982, 1993; Noel et al., 1985). In one Canadian study of six post-secondary institutions, 15% of students indicated they had sought professional support for one or more mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (American College Health Association, 2013). Adjustment difficulties and mental health problems are common among first-year college students (Boujut et al., 2009), with this group experiencing higher stress levels than upper-year students (Baldwin et al., 2003; Bayram & Bigel, 2008) as well as other populations (Ibrahim et al., 2013). In our study, more than 50 percent of Year 1 respondents rated their current stress level as high or very high. However, the results also indicate that a significantly larger number of them (85 percent) rated their stress level in Grade 12 as high or very high. The change in stress levels from Grade 12 to Year 1 was also noted by many interview participants. This aligns with International Baccalaureate research that shows students' perceptions of stress levels decrease and stressors change from high school to post-secondary education (Conley et al., 2014, Taylor & Porath, 2006).

For more than 90 percent of the Grade 12 survey respondents and approximately 85 percent of Year 1 respondents, academics was reportedly the largest stressor. Because Branksome Hall alums felt highly prepared academically for university, it is not surprising that they experienced less stress about school work and were able to focus more on the developmental transition and adapting to a new institution.

In addition to academics, other most commonly reported causes of stress (more than 50 percent) in this study were sleep difficulties and social relationships, which align with the findings of other similar studies about first-year university stress (Beeber, 1999; Marcotte et al., 2014). Interview participants spoke about the loss of social support in the first year and the impact of this on their well-being. Esmerelda (2017), for instance, reported that in her first year, she had "stumbled a little bit and then … kind of got myself back on track" after having been cut off from the support she had previously enjoyed. Spina (2018) reported initially loneliness and homesickness, and described herself as having "cr[ied] a lot" in her first year. The challenges alums faced reinforce the importance of student awareness of, and access to, support programs offered by post-secondary institutions as they navigate their first year.

Shifting Relationships

Relationships, both old and new, emerged as an important recurring theme, especially in the interviews. The first year of university is observed to be a time of social volatility as students' support systems shift and change (Brissette et al., 2002; Dawson & Pooley, 2013). Alums spent the first year adjusting to their new environments, "meeting new people, developing new friendships, evaluating, renegotiating or maintaining old friendships, homesickness, modification of parental support, as well as knowledge acquisition of university resources" (Dawson & Pooley, 2013, p. 45). In this study, participants spoke about the changing nature of their relationships. Ghost Islander (2018) noted, for instance: "my friends—that's my new support." Trianna (2017) described "learning how to feel still connected to my relatives and my family here while being geographically separated."

Interview participants also spoke at length about how they negotiated family relationships. Research suggests that students' changing relationships with their parents particularly affect their well-being and their academic performance. During the post-secondary transition, "the emergent adult must deal with becoming independent from their family, developing an equality-based relationship, and at the same time maintaining a supporting relationship from their parents" (Marcotte et al., 2014, p. 730). One study suggested that students who reported a decline in the quality of their relationship with their parents also experienced more anxiety, depression, personal and emotional adjustment difficulties, as well as lower grades (Hiester et al., 2009).

The study's participants tried to successfully maintain and navigate their changing relationships. Spina (2018) described, for instance, using her free time to "mak[e] sure I'm available for my friends, for my boyfriend, for my family." A number of students reported improvements in their relationships with their parents:

"I would actually say that [my relationship with my family] got better … probably because … they just give me a little bit more room to breathe because I think they see me more as an adult" (Esmerelda, 2017).

With respect to friendships, study participants displayed a growing acceptance of change in their high school relationships, and a recognition that new friendships now constituted an important part of their social support networks. Some alums reported that remaining in touch with their old friends provided them with both a network to lean on and a sense of support:

"Sometimes, during the first semester, I Skyped with my friends from Branksome, and that was also a bit helpful because you know, we realized we were all kind of feeling lost, and different" (Spina, 2018).

Others spoke about maintaining old relationships even as they recognized that these differed from the new bonds formed with university friends. Adrienne (2018) reported that

"I still talk to my friends from high school and I hung out with them this summer but it was very clear when I came home this summer that I have a different level of friendship with my high school friends than I do with my friends at university. Because I spend so much time with my friends at university and we do everything together … and have all these similar experiences that we can talk about. But while I have that with my university friends, my friends from high school I still feel like I have a deep connection with, in terms of, like, knowing them for so many years and having that more emotional connection. I guess that this takes time to develop" (Adrienne, 2018).

Jill (2017) described this difference in terms of how she interacted with her new friends:

"I find that also just because we're older, our discussions tend to be more focused on what's happening in the world, and in the news, and what we're learning about in class, whereas at Branksome, it was a lot more of just shared common experience because we grew up together."

These new friendships contributed greatly to student well-being and to their adjustment in their new settings.

Well-being, Coping Strategies, and Resilience

The extent to which students cope with stress during the first year of university has important implications not only for their social-emotional adjustment and well-being, but also for their academic success (Leary & DeRosier, 2012, p. 1215).

How well they cope depends on factors related to mindset and resilience, including the presence of goals and a sense of being emotionally adapted to the new institution (Marcotte et al., 2014); optimism (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Scheier & Carver, 1992); and self-efficacy (Chemers et al., 2001). Perceived autonomy from parents and social support also play a role in students' successful coping (Tusaie et al., 2007; Dawson & Pooley, 2013).

The present study captured the various strategies that participants used to cope with stress. The most common stress management strategies, as reported by about 70% of alums, were sleeping and talking to others. Daily physical activities were the third most common strategy, reported by about 43% of respondents.

Two additional themes emerged from interviews about how participants navigated stress. First, they described using well-being practices to manage their stress. Some of these practices of taking time for oneself were first cultivated in high school:

"I definitely think that the whole well-being aspects and taking time for myself, that was definitely a Branksome thing, because if I didn't go to Branksome I would've been pulling those same all-nighters and filling myself up on coffee and, you know, doing things that wouldn't make me feel good" (Ghost Islander, 2018).

Physical exercise, for instance, was a practice that Adrienne (2018) adopted while still at Branksome Hall:

"… Halfway [through] high school I started getting pretty into fitness, so working out regularly was a big, big thing for me. And going into university was a goal of mine to make regular working out a thing, and I was at the gym almost every day last year."

However, not all the strategies can be traced back to their high school experience in which participants felt academic pressures. Some participants clearly described building up personal resilience and learning to take care of themselves during their first year of university:

"I've gotten better at adapting and dealing with change, and sort of keeping things in perspective when something feels like a really big deal, but isn't" (Jill, 2017).

"I feel like [during] my first year, taking care of myself definitely fell under a lot of other responsibilities because I haven't had to take care of myself … But I mean more like making sure I was okay emotionally and mentally" (Farzi, 2018).

Alums explored a range of resources available to support their well-being at their respective post-secondary institutions. Spina (2018) reported attending the "free therapy and counselling sessions" provided to them by the university. Ghost Islander (2018) described the various supports available at her university: "they've got their health resources. They've got peer training resources. They've got their on-campus job resources, scholarship resources. So … it's really supportive."

IMPLICATIONS

These study results have important implications for K-12 educational programming. Because of the potential for increased stress and negative impacts on student mental health during the transition to university, schools should ensure that students develop the knowledge and skills required to successfully manage these transitions. Helping students and parents develop realistic expectations around changes in their social and familial relationships will help students navigate these shifting relationships with less stress. Teaching effective coping strategies for managing stress productively and developing resilience should also be a high priority for SEL learning. How well students cope also depends in part on the mindset they bring to their life experiences: they need to be supported to be able to maintain perspective, to be self-aware, and to make sound choices, especially around self-care.

Students who are transitioning to university during the COVID-19 pandemic will face additional challenges related to navigating safety protocols, pandemic stress, remote learning and isolation, dealing with changing and adapting institutions, and many others. Those who end up learning remotely during their transition may experience arrested or delayed developmental transition and the frustrations that come with delaying increased autonomy. Those who move out for university will still have to deal with the "normal" transition challenges in addition to the effects of the pandemic, and may be more vulnerable to mental health challenges due to social isolation. The present study found changes in family and social relationships to be one of the most important themes of student well-being before the pandemic. To help new university students now and in the future, resources should be directed toward providing consistent opportunities for well-being support, academic support and fostering community connections.

The post-secondary transition is unique in that it brings with it a sudden increase in autonomy, independence, and responsibility for young adults. It also prompts a corresponding need for strengthening self-regulation skills. How Branksome Hall graduates navigate their newfound autonomy and responsibility is the subject of the third snapshot in this series.

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