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Disengaged or Differently Engaged? Students' Motivations, Expectations, and Engagement in the Multi-Expectational Undergraduate Experience

Clifford Davidson, *Western University*

Supervisor: Lehmann, Wolfgang, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the undergraduate experience from the student perspective, specifically as it applies to the dominant engagement success narrative. This narrative articulates that, for undergraduate students to successfully navigate and gain the most from their time at university, they must engage in educationally purposive activities and enriching educational experiences. Research also connects students' motivations for enrolling in university to engagement and suggests that intrinsically motivated students are more likely to engage according to the dominant narrative, leading to a successful undergraduate experience. Conversely, students who are more extrinsically motivated tend to not engage correctly or at acceptable levels and are considered disengaged. However, this research excludes student voices and prescribes a universal undergraduate experience.

Using data collected from 33 interviews, I examined undergraduate students' motivations for enrolling in university and their expectations of the undergraduate experience. Data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis and compared students' views of the undergraduate experience to the dominant engagement success narrative. Analysis showed that students' motivations were a complex mix of various pressures, norms, influences, and personal wants, leading to an equally complex set of expectations of the undergraduate experience. This complexity resulted in tensions between students' numerous and often competing expectations, leading to a variety of consequences. Additionally, students had to choose between these competing demands, picking between personal wants and normative expectations, highlighting this complexity and the challenges that come along with it. Students were shown to be differently engaged rather than disengaged, as they

navigated and negotiated the undergraduate experience cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. These differently engaged students were able to respond to this complexity in ways that allowed them to meet their individual educational goals.

Findings highlight the complexity of the undergraduate experience that is missing in the current discourse and draws attention to the importance of including student voices in discussions that directly impact them.

Keywords

Disengagement, undergraduate success, motivations, expectations, multi-motivational tensions, multi-expectational tensions, undergraduate mental health, university, Canada, Ontario

SUMMARY FOR LAY AUDIENCE

This thesis looks at the undergraduate student experience from the student's point-of-view, specifically as it applies to the dominant view of being successful at university. This view suggests that students must attain high grades and participate in extracurriculars to be considered successful and get the most out of their university experience. Research also indicates that students' motivations for coming to university impact their engagement—students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to be engaged in the undergraduate experience, while students who are extrinsically motivated do not participate fully in the undergraduate experience and are labelled disengaged. However, this view does not include students' perspectives and frames students' time at university as a one-size-fits-all undergraduate experience.

I conducted interviews with 33 undergraduates and asked them about their motivations for enrolling in university and their expectations of the undergraduate experience. Analyzing student's words, thoughts, and feelings, I compared students' views of the undergraduate experience with the dominant view. Analysis showed that students' decisions to go to university were very complex and included a variety of pressures, influences, social norms, and personal wants. This complexity translated into students having many expectations of their time at university, such as needing high grades, wanting to gain job skills, and personal growth. However, students' expectations tended to create tensions for them, as the various demands that students had of the undergraduate experience were often in conflict with each other. These tensions led to consequences for students as they chose between competing expectations. How students navigated these different expectations show

that, rather than being disengaged by not participating according to the dominant view, students were differently engaged, employing a variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies to get what they wanted from university in ways that worked for them.

Findings highlight the complexity of the undergraduate experience that is missing in the current view and draws attention to the importance of including student voices in discussions that directly impact them.

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I. INTRODUCTION

DISENGAGED OR DIFFERENTLY ENGAGED?

STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS, EXPECTATIONS, AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE
MULTI-EXPECTATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

Developed countries have moved more and more towards the knowledge economy, which has increased the push towards more higher education credentials (OECD 2013). Canada has followed suit (Florida, Shutter, and Spencer 2016; Florida and Spencer 2015), and since the mid-1990's has increased the push towards more access, with a keen focus towards university (with only occasional pushes towards college/trades/apprenticeships; Clark et al. 2009). Additionally, social discourse has furthered the notion that, for social mobility—including a better paying career and more life chances—a university degree is the preferred trajectory (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2011b; Hardy and Marcotte 2020). The discourse has become so prevalent that going to university has become a social norm—high schools promote it, parents embrace its benefits, governments boast about it, employers recommend (and more-often-than-not, require it), and students buy into it. The prevalence of university credentials in Canada in general, and Ontario in particular, is high and continues to grow (Clark et al. 2009; Statistics Canada 2022), further entrenching it within the national and provincial psyche. Yet, there are frequent questions about just how effective this system of mass higher education is.

The history of the modern university is rife with critiques and questions about the effectiveness and ability of universities to deliver on their mandates—often finding that the university is in crisis (Arum and Roksa 2011; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011). However, over

time the dialogue has shifted from the university in crisis towards a crisis in the university. Previously, universities were problematized around being able to live up to their mandates of providing higher education, which expanded to include research after the Second World War and intensified in the proceeding decades (Clark et al. 2009; Johnson 1968; Jones 1990, 1997b). The crisis during this time was framed around expansion, funding, and the ability to cater to various recommendations from a litany of organizational, provincial, and federal reports (see, for instance, Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2011a; Committee of Presidents of Provincially Assisted Universities 1962; Macdonald 1962; Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec and Parent 1963; Royal Commission on Higher Education in New Brunswick and Deutsch 1962)—questions surrounding whether universities could keep up with mass education proliferated. Eventually provincial governments, including Ontario's, took on a new managerial approach with the aim of increasing accountability and transparency with regards to large expenditures towards higher education (Clark et al. 2009; Ramlal 2009); in 2005, the Ontario government created the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO] a government agency tasked with conducting research and providing evidence-based policy suggestions aimed at accessibility, quality, and accountability. Around this time, more and more stakeholders also started to influence the university crisis dialogue, including parents who were paying ever-increasing tuition for their children (Clark, Trick, and Van Loon 2011; Côté and Allahar 2011), employers who questioned the universities' ability to provide graduates with job skills (Deller, Pichette, and Watkins 2018; Harrison 2017; Weingarten, Drummond, and Finnie

2015), and federal and provincial governments who implemented numerous and far-reaching policy changes (Clark et al. 2009, 2011).

As more stakeholders' voices entered the dialogue surrounding the role of the university, an increase in the student population (see Clark et al. 2009 for an overview of increasing university access and participation rates) added further complexity to an already complicated discussion. Universities were now expected to facilitate an expanded roster of roles including increased services to attract new, and to provide for current, students. As universities' roles expanded and accountability measures increased, universities tried reframing student success through measures that approximated universities fulfilling their mandates of providing higher education, namely graduation rates, and post-graduation employment rates (Clark et al. 2009; Côté and Allahar 2007). However, during this transition, the mandate of the university shifted from only providing education to also include training for the job market, and more recently, services and programs to facilitate the increased diversity of the student population. As a result, universities were able to highlight their student-centered approach through initiatives such as student success centers, newer and increased access to technology, co-curricular records emphasizing transferable skills learned as part of a student's university education, and specific student subgroup programs such as those directed toward first-generation and mature students, as well as institution-wide Indigenous and equity, diversity, and inclusion programs aimed at providing safe spaces for particular students as well as education and training for the general university population (students, faculty, and staff). By highlighting and focusing on these items, the university

could showcase how they were fulfilling their mandates, but also deflect criticisms to the students as problematic if they were unable to fulfill them.

Within the university, as the student population increased, class sizes got larger and the professoriate was stuck in the middle of trying to provide high quality education, but on a mass scale. This was in addition to the increasing pressure on the professoriate, under New Public Management reforms, to increase research outputs, which, when viewed together with the changing mandates of the university, conflicts with the demand to teach an increasing number of students. The result of this is that some research has suggested that the university has been less and less able to provide the quality of education it has been mandated to do (Arum and Roksa 2011; Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2011b; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011). Yet, other research has also linked some of this problem to the students themselves, noting that the massification of university and the increased access for non-traditional students has exacerbated problems in the university. Literature has highlighted an increasing number of students who have been labelled as unprepared for university (through lack of high school preparedness and grade inflation; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Grayson et al. 2019), as disengaged (merely here to get the degree with as minimal effort as possible; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; see Chipchase et al. 2017 for an overview of student disengagement literature), and entitled (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Morrow 1994; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt 2011). Outside of the university, employers have added to this, noting that, often, university graduates arrive to the workforce unprepared and lacking requisite skills and competencies (Harrison 2017; Sullivan 2017; Weingarten et al. 2015).

There is an underlying subtext to this dialogue suggesting that students are to blame for the problems said to plague universities; yet, this narrative often comes from anecdotal evidence, survey-constructed engagement measures (e.g., the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE]), and perhaps most egregiously, without asking students about their views on the university experience as it applies to them. This lack of student voice within discussions about individual educational trajectories is the focal point of this dissertation, which seeks to examine the undergraduate student experience and how students negotiate the field of the university, specifically from the point of view of the students themselves. In particular, this dissertation aims to understand the following: 1) undergraduate students' decision to attend university (motivations); 2) how undergraduates make sense of the/their university experience (expectations); 3) tensions experienced by undergraduates within these motivations and expectations and any resulting consequences of these tensions; and 4) undergraduate responses to these tensions. An additional secondary analysis is conducted between traditional and non-traditional students based on research suggesting that non-traditional students experience more difficulties at university compared to traditional students (see, for example, Finnie, Childs, and Qiu 2012; Malik et al. 2011). A key objective of this research is to better understand 'how' and 'why' students make the choices they do with regards to their university experience and to bring to question the taken-for-granted, common aspersions that are often cast upon undergraduate students as being disengaged and entitled. Additionally, it is hoped that results in this dissertation will lead to policy changes aimed at improving the undergraduate university experience.

The plan of this dissertation is as follows. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature which helps to frame and contextualize the current study. This chapter begins with a brief history of the Ontario higher education system, underscoring various forces and highlighting key stakeholders that have shaped the contemporary university in Ontario. The discussion then shifts to the current state of the university, specifically framing the current student engagement discourse that dominates the broader student success literature. Next, potential causes and predictors of student disengagement are explored from three levels: societal, institutional, and individual. The chapter ends by problematizing this engagement narrative, leading to my research questions and objectives.

Chapter 3 presents my methodological framework, beginning with my ontological and epistemological philosophical paradigms. I then discuss my data collection tool—semi-structured in-depth interviews—highlighting the benefits of using interviewing and interview data in general, and in the context of my research plan, philosophical paradigms, more specifically. This is followed by a discussion of methodological considerations and processes, including interview design, research setting, sampling, recruitment, and administration. Next, I present my approach to analyzing the data using thematic critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995), indicating my approach to coding and theming. This is followed with a brief discussion of research ethics, leading me to contextualize my role in this study through a reflexive explanation of my standpoint and positionality. I end the chapter by noting study limitations.

The first of my findings chapters, Chapter 4, focuses on undergraduate students' decision to go to university. The goal of this chapter is to answer RQ1 about students'

motivations to enrol in university, how students came to the decision to enrol, and how this decision and the students' motivations compare to the dominant discourse. Findings show that students' decisions to attend university are a *mélange* of personal motivations and external norms, pressures, and influences—students have multi-motivational orientations—in their decision, highlighting a nuanced interplay between external expectations and internal aspirations. The chapter concludes by highlighting motivational tensions that students feel between and within the different aspects influencing their decision to enrol in university, contributing to answering RQ3 about conflicts, consequences, and negotiating these conflicts and consequences.

Chapter 5 builds from Chapter 4, and bridges the gap between student motivations and undergraduate success expectations. The goal of this chapter is to answer RQ2 about students' expectations of the undergraduate experience and how students negotiate their expectations compared to the dominant narrative. Findings highlight how there is a general internalization of the dominant narrative as normative, but that students have different and/or additional expectations of what it means to be a successful undergraduate, including the importance of the different aspects of the dominant narrative. The chapter further highlights how interviewees problematized the dominant narrative and highlighted tensions within and between interviewees' undergraduate success expectations—expectational tensions. Concluding the chapter is a discussion about how interviewees reframed expectations of the undergraduate experience to align more with their individual motivations for attending university. Findings throughout the chapter also contribute to answering RQ3.

Building on findings from Chapters 4 and 5, Chapter 6 explores how students navigate and negotiate the expectational tensions noted in Chapter 5. The goal of this chapter is to help answer RQ3 about conflicts within and between motivations and expectations, consequences of these conflicts, and how students negotiate these conflicts. As such, this chapter is divided into three main sections: the impact of expectational tensions on students, student responses to expectational tensions, and student suggestions for preventing and resolving expectational tensions. The first section highlights consequences of expectational tensions including pressure, stress, and mental health concerns; comparisons to and competition with other students; feelings of failure; reduced focus on learning; and feeling disadvantaged or disconnected. Section two focuses on interviewees' responses to these tensions, specifically a reduced emphasis on grades, reframing success as a process, and adjusting engagement emphasis and behaviours. The third and final section of the chapter presents interviewees' suggestions on how to mitigate or ameliorate these expectational tensions.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings from Chapters 4, 5, and 6 into an overall narrative focused on how the student voice contributes to the undergraduate experience discourse more generally and the dominant engagement success narrative more specifically. I begin the chapter resolving my research questions and objectives, starting with an overview and analysis of my research findings, which is framed within the dominant engagement success narrative, challenging this discourse, and amplifying the problematization with this narrative presented in Chapter 2. Next, I highlight my research contributions, underscoring the implications of these findings within the extant literature and contemporary discourse on

undergraduate success, highlighting important takeaways for key stakeholders, including policy and initiative suggestions. The next section provides an overview of study limitations leading to a discussion about suggested directions for future research. The chapter ends with some brief concluding thoughts.

Taken together, this dissertation will give a voice to students within contemporary higher education literature, more specifically, the engagement success narrative in the undergraduate experience discourse. Though there is a focus on Ontario universities, the findings in this dissertation may be familiar to other students, faculty, and university administrators, as well as within other extra-university discourses including undergraduate students' parents, the media, and society more generally. Most important, however, is amplifying the student voice in a space where they are traditionally left out, the inclusion of which challenges aspects of the dominant narrative, providing the beginnings of a dialogue that desperately needs to happen with regards to the undergraduate experience. The students in this study have not only highlighted tensions within and between the various and numerous expectations of the contemporary undergraduate experience including the dominant engagement success narrative, but they have also offered hope by offering some touchpoints from which this discussion can begin, including ways to rethink undergraduate success and suggestions to reduce or prevent expectational tensions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand the current study, this chapter is divided into five main sections: contextualizing the current study, framing (dis)engagement, causes and predictors of disengagement, problematizing the (dis)engagement narrative, and research objectives and questions. Given the importance that has been attached to higher education across societies, it is no surprise that there is a plethora of research on various aspects of the university, for example, its greater role within society (research, teaching, training), the value of a degree, and who attends and persists to graduation and who does not. However, though there are literally hundreds of books and thousands of articles written across various spaces and times about numerous aspects of university, often this research excludes the undergraduate student voice—an odd thing considering that a large amount of government funding, academic and institutional research, and the university experience is about undergraduate education, directly impacting undergraduate students. But why is this, and how did we get here? This is explored in the following sections: the history of the university in Ontario, framing (dis)engagement, causes and predictors of disengagement, and problematizing the disengagement narrative. The final section of this chapter builds on this problematization and specifies my research questions and objectives.

As noted, research and discourse on higher education in general and university in particular covers numerous and varying aspects of the field. This creates for an exceptionally complex and wide-ranging set of interconnected ideas, opinions, and resultant theories, initiatives, and policy recommendations—all of which can be difficult to navigate. As such, this research is contextualized within a very specific narrative focused on undergraduate

students within the Ontario university sector (and one institution in particular). The following brief history of the Ontario university system highlights various forces and stakeholders shaping Ontario's higher education narrative (see Anisef, Axelrod, and Lennards 2017, Clark et al. 2009, Harris 1976, and Jones 1997a for a more in-depth history of higher education in Canada in general, and Ontario in particular).

2.1. Contextualizing the Current Study: A Brief History of the Ontario University System

Most Canadian higher education institutions have been modelled on European and American institutions and structures; yet, up until the 1950s Canada's higher education system and structure generally came about haphazardly and with little deliberative planning (Clark et al. 2009). It was in the early 1950s that concerns about the universities' ability to handle post-WWII enrolment increases and rapid changes in technology led to a nationwide discussion involving federal and provincial governments and educational leaders, culminating in transformational changes in the 1960s that laid the groundwork for the future of Canadian higher education (see Bissell 1957; Committee of Presidents of Provincially Assisted Universities 1962; Macdonald 1962; Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec and Parent 1963; Royal Commission on Higher Education in New Brunswick and Deutsch 1962). However, due to the structure of the Canadian education system—Section 93 of the Canadian Constitution confers university structure and funding decision-making to provincial governments, making Canada's higher education structure “a collection of different provincial/territorial systems operating in parallel” (Jones 1997b:ix–x)—the structure of Ontario's higher education system—though informed by these

discussions—evolved based on its own unique history, characteristics, and issues informed by various political, economic, and social narratives.

Historically, universities in Ontario were primarily teaching institutions; however, over time and in their current manifestation, they have taken on numerous roles while attempting to achieve a myriad of objectives such as

teaching - the provision of a “liberal education” or general education; *training* - the transmission of expert knowledge required for high-level jobs; *research* - the creation of knowledge through basic scientific research and scholarship; *public service* - the provision of practical knowledge and science to society; and *equalization of opportunity* - the extension of university education to all persons who could possibly benefit from it and the removal of participation barriers to increase the participation of underrepresented groups. (emphasis added; Anisef et al. 2017)

Additionally, there is a host of research that has outlined personal and intellectual gains as well as financial benefits that come with attaining an undergraduate degree. For example, students can develop specialized knowledge, as well as an expanded understanding and awareness of the world and other cultures, which in turn, encourages more active citizenship including political engagement; additional skills can also be enhanced, such as analytical, critical thinking, writing, and public speaking; and, on average, having a university degree is more financially beneficial than a college or high school diploma (Côté and Allahar 2011; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005).

The following briefly recounts how the Ontario university system has adapted, grown, and changed to take on these various roles, while meeting the numerous demands of individuals, the workforce, governments, and more generally, society. And, while numerous institutional reports, government policies, and discussion papers have influenced and shaped Ontario’s university structure and system, many of them sought to address similar concerns—namely system structure, funding, and access—and often with similar results, and

as such, most are left out of or are only briefly touched on in the following discussion (see, for example, Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario 1972; Commission on the Future Role of Universities in Ontario 1984; Commission to Study the Development of Graduate Programs in Ontario Universities 1966; Committee on the Future Role of Universities in Ontario 1981; Council of Ontario Universities 2004; Council of the Federation 2006; Government of Canada 2001, 2002; Ontario Council on University Affairs Task Force on Resource Allocation 1994; Ontario Ministry of Finance 2005; Rae 2005).

2.1.1. *System structure.* In Ontario, much of the current system structure stems from a 1962 report from the Committee of Presidents of Provincially Assisted Universities (predecessor to the Council of Ontario Universities [COU]) entitled *Post-Secondary Education in Ontario, 1962-1970*, which laid the foundation for many aspects of the system still in use today. Responding to concerns about predicted increased enrolments, educational quality, and rapid technological changes, the report listed six recommendations for consideration: increased staffing; expansion of facilities for university education, including arts and sciences and professional faculties and schools; financial support for this expansion; a new organizational structure to manage this expansion; technical training to fulfill roles needed for this expansion; and elementary and secondary school curriculum changes commensurate with this push for more enrolments (Committee of Presidents of Provincially Assisted Universities 1962). These recommendations led to a number of structural changes that have contributed to shaping Ontario's university system.

First, there was the expansion of existing and creation of new universities alongside an institutional framework that allowed universities to collectively and individually manage

their internal affairs separate from government influence, the result of which allowed universities to gather educational data that were then used to inform policy decisions (Clark et al. 2009). Second, a new provincial Department of University Affairs (which became the Ministry of Colleges and Universities in 1971) was created with a constricted mandate of providing and distributing funding, with only minimal input on the utilization of this funding and the functioning and missions of universities (Clark et al. 2009). Together, this meant that, though the newly formed university system was dependent on the government for operational funding, individual institutions could ultimately decide how to use this funding to deliver their self-determined mandates.

Third, Ontario introduced community colleges (Colleges of Applied Arts and Technologies [CAATs]), which were distinguished from universities in that they were non-degree-granting institutions and were more focused on the technical, non-academic side of education and employment preparation (Clark et al. 2009). Additionally, by 1973 all universities, even those that began as private institutions, were rolled into the public system; eventually, formal policy restricted private degree-granting institutions from opening (until 2000 with the introduction of the *Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act*; Clark et al. 2009).

Lastly, this new formalized higher education structure also entailed creating a new funding formula based on enrolments—“bums in seats”—in which the Ontario government provided equal funding to both the older and newer universities; though larger graduate programs garnered universities larger funding packages—an indication of the importance of

and move towards the research-based university (Clark et al. 2009). These structural changes are still part of Ontario's higher education structure in some shape or form today.

2.1.2. *Research.* Also shaping the current university structure was the increasing importance placed on research. Prior to the 1940s, Ontario universities were primarily teaching institutions, but with Canada's participation in WWII, the Canadian Government increasingly relied on universities for defense research and other defense-related input, which created a noted shift towards universities as research institutions, more firmly taking hold in the mid 1960s (Clark et al. 2009; Johnson 1968; Ontario Council on University Affairs Task Force on Resource Allocation 1994). This shift was intensified in the late 1970s, with an overall change in provincial sentiment towards economic development—research output—based on worldwide economic slowdown and competition from other provinces and jurisdictions (Clark et al. 2009). University leaders increasingly pressured the provincial government for separate funding for enrolments and research, which culminated in the Bovey Commission and the recommendation that every university should have a core research function (Commission on the Future Role of Universities in Ontario 1984).

From this, and aligning with the sentiment that universities had a significant role in research-based economic development, Ontario Centres of Excellence were created in 1987 (Clark et al. 2009). Further, a 1988 report by the Science Council of Canada, *Winning in a World Economy: University-Industry Interaction and Economic Renewal in Canada*, proposed that the future of research in Canada “includes closer university-industry interaction,” and that “it is imperative that the university's knowledge be put to work for winning in a world economy” (Kenney-Wallace and Science Council of Canada 1988:x–xi). Together, these

solidified the role of universities as centers of research on top of their role as teaching institutions. This emphasis on both research and teaching can still be seen in the distribution of faculty time. Many universities, collective agreements, and faculty evaluation policies suggest a faculty distribution of time as “40%, 40%, 20%” for teaching, research/scholarship, and service respectively; interestingly, this seems to be the norm across both research-intensive and less research-focused, primarily undergraduate universities (Anisef et al. 2017; Clark et al. 2009).

2.1.3. *Training and public service.* In conjunction with the move to more research-focused institutions, increased emphasis was placed on the need for highly skilled workers for the burgeoning knowledge economy. As such, universities now took on the role of training skilled workers, especially in computer science and software engineering during the technology boom of the 1990s (Clark et al. 2009). At this time, the discourse around these jobs took on a more important role within the social consciousness; the fact that more education—especially at the university level—meant access to ‘better’ jobs and higher income, on average, compared to high school or lower and college (Côté and Allahar 2011; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018; Reid, Chen, and Guertin 2020) was not lost on students or their parents, leading to more students enrolling in university, which was also part of the provincial government’s ongoing emphasis on access that intensified in the 1990s (Clark et al. 2009). In Ontario, undergraduate enrolments have more than doubled from just under 200,000 in 1990 to over 400,000 in 2019 (Government of Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development 2021; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario n.d.). And, though there have been some questions about the opportunity costs of higher

education (see, for example, Lederman 2008; Leef 2004), the most recent data from Statistics Canada on labour market outcomes of undergraduates still highlights a higher median income than for those with high school-or-less education (Reid et al. 2020).

As has been shown, university is beneficial for both individuals and society in that it creates a more flexible workforce while promoting the social and economic mobility of its graduates who are also less likely to rely on government income support programs (Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity 2007). It seems, then, that going to university in Ontario is as prevalent as ever, due in part to prevailing beliefs and statistics about the positive return on investment for both the individual and greater society.

2.1.4. Equalization of opportunity. Commensurate with the idea that an economically prosperous province is connected to a highly educated workforce is provincial governments' ongoing concern with access and equality (see Clark et al. 2009; Clark, Trick, and Van Loon 2011; Rae 2005). As seen above, the returns on investment for attaining a university degree continue to be a net positive for both individuals and society alike, which aligns with human capital theory (discussed in more detail below; Clark et al. 2011; Côté and Allahar 2011; Rae 2005). It is no surprise then, that these two driving factors—government pushes for more access for qualified individuals and the removal of barriers to access, and the promise of upward mobility through better jobs and higher incomes—have led to an increase in non-traditional students enrolling in university (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2011b; Clark et al. 2009, 2011; Glauser 2018; Ontario Council on University Affairs Task Force on Resource Allocation 1994). From the 1990s, Ontario universities experienced a growth in non-traditional students including females, individuals from immigrant families,

first-generation students, and to a lesser extent, Indigenous applicants (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2011b; Clark et al. 2009, 2011; Côté and Allahar 2011; Glauser 2018; Rae 2005). Some scholars have suggested that the number of non-traditional students continues to grow (Basit and Tomlinson 2012), while others have suggested that the traditionally-defined ‘typical’ student—18-22 years old, white, middle class, and full time—is no longer typical of the university population as a whole (Deil-Amen 2011). Looking at university mandates, the increasingly varied demography of enrolments, and university responses through policies, centers, and initiatives (such as those for Indigenous, first-generation, low-income, and other non-traditional students; see, for example, Hayes 2015; Malik et al. 2011; Western Student Experience 2019; Wiggers and Arnold 2011) confirms that there is a significant enough population of non-traditional students that requires, and—as can be seen with the numerous programs, policies, initiatives, and the new roles created to manage them—receives, attention by universities. However, with the increase of both traditional and non-traditional students, there have been concerns about, what some researchers have called, the massification of the university—the move from an ostensibly elite institution to one serving the masses to the point that it could be seen as nearly universal. The problem has been defined as trying to meet the demands of increased enrolments—in particular, non-traditional students who have sometimes been framed as ‘at-risk’ (see Côté and Allahar 2011)—the delivery of high quality of education, and ability to conduct impactful research, especially with limited resources (Clark et al. 2009). An outcrop of this concern, specifically surrounding concepts of quality and accountability were part of several

catalysts that brought significant structural changes and an adjustment in the discourse surrounding universities in Ontario.

2.1.5. *The rationalizing of Ontario universities: quality, transparency, and accountability.* In the 1990s, a growing concern about how large government expenditures on higher education were being utilized led to various reports, task forces, and commissions that aimed to rationalize funding (see, for example, Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education 1996; Broadhurst and Task Force on University Accountability 1993; Ontario Council on University Affairs Task Force on Resource Allocation 1994; Smith 1991). At the same time, a number of governments across OECD countries began utilizing a more corporate way of managing their internal affairs. Known as New Public Management [NPM], these reforms focused on results-based planning and management borrowed from the private sphere—which led to more institutional accountability—including from universities (Côté and Allahar 2011; Ramlal 2009). As governments, and in turn, universities came to adopt the practices and principles of corporations, some observers lamented that “the university is not just *like* a corporation, it *is* a corporation” (emphasis added; Readings 1996:22) that is structured to maximize profit, growth, and marketability (Westheimer 2010).

This corporatization led Ontario universities to become more business-like, adopting similar operating language as private corporations—students became BIUs (Basic Income Units), professors became education managers, and a university education became a product delivered to high-paying client-customers. Corporatization has steadily increased and is now the de facto form of management across all Ontario universities (see Ball 2004; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Davidson-Harden and Majhanovich 2004; Davidson 2015; Kaye, Bickel,

and Birtwistle 2006; Turk 2000 for more about the corporatization of the university and its impacts on university governance and functioning). Combined with reduced funding and increasing tuition fees, a chorus of stakeholders increasingly pushed for more accountability and transparency in university spending, looking for ways of measuring how effectively taxpayer money and student tuition was being spent, and how effectively the university was fulfilling their ever-expanding—and increasingly complex—mandates.

As enrolments increased, and fearing intervention by provincial governments that compromised institutional autonomy, university administrators initiated a pre-emptive discourse about quality in education (Clark et al. 2009). Taking the initiative to create the discourse on quality allowed universities to not only control the dialogue, but also allowed university administrators to create the tools for measuring quality according to the discourse that they created. As such, universities were able to show accountability to quality education and research on their own terms, allowing them to hang any deficiencies in attaining these goals on external entities—specifically a lack of funding—to fulfill their mandates (Clark et al. 2009, 2011). However, once external stakeholders and the provincial government using NPM reforms began demanding more transparency about how universities were measuring their own performance, the dialogue surrounding higher education quality also shifted.

Two key items changed the narrative from university-created and -measured indicators of quality to one based on accountability to the Ontario government. The first, the *Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education*, indicated a growing concern about the quality of undergraduate education, not just in Ontario, but across Canada (Smith 1991). The second was the move towards more accountability by Ontario's Provincial Auditor

General, leading to the creation of the *Task Force on University Accountability* that sought to realign Ontario government objectives and universities' actions—in essence, slowly taking away institutional autonomy from universities. (Broadhurst and Task Force on University Accountability 1993; Clark et al. 2009). These shifts initiated more discussion on government funding and university expenditures (see Ontario Council on University Affairs Task Force on Resource Allocation 1994), resulting in increased governmentally-imposed measures of quality and accountability, with funding now being tied to a variety of measures linked to university performance (Clark et al. 2009:115).

Transparency and accountability measures implemented by the provincial government at this time were the reduction of operating grants but more tuition flexibility and a shift to indicator-driven funding with the introduction of Key Performance Indicators [KPIs] in 1998. Working on recommendations from *Excellence, Accessibility, Responsibility: Report of the Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education [Smith Report]* (Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education 1996), KPIs became the foundation for quality, transparency, and accountability through measurements of graduation rates and employment after six months and after two years (Clark et al. 2009; Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations 2006). However, these KPIs have been critiqued as failing to measure quality within Ontario higher education.

By using graduate employment rates, the emphasis shifts away from evaluating the development and dissemination of knowledge – pedagogy – and focuses instead on simple market outputs that are more contingent on general economic conditions than they are on what happens during a student's time in university. Graduation rates track degree completion rates but they do not measure the quality of education the student receives. (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations 2006:4)

KPIs, however, are still in place and are still used as a measure of quality of education as per provincial guidelines. Universities seem to have accepted the use of these measures, which may contribute to a continued focus on getting students to persist to graduation—a prevailing concern for Ontario universities.

Around the time that universities began using provincially-mandated accountability measures, another research-driven dialogue was gaining prominence—that of student success through engagement. Built on scholarship that emphasized similar measures of university and student success—namely reducing student attrition and increasing persistence to graduation and how to accomplish this (Astin 1984, 1993; Pace and Kuh 1998; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005; Tinto 1975)—the discourse shifted to highlight the importance of how students *spend their time at university*, from the ostensibly positive outcomes that students *gain from going to university* (see Pace 1995). The core of this narrative became known as student engagement and was generally based on the student experience (see Kuh 1993, 2001, 2003, 2009; Kuh et al. 2005, 2006, 2007; Kuh, Hu, and Vesper 2000; Kuh and Vesper 1997 and the section below for more about student engagement).

This student engagement success narrative became the foundation for the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE]—currently taken every 3 years by all Ontario universities as mandated by the provincial government. First administered in 2000 and updated in 2013 “to develop new measures, refine existing measures, improve clarity, and update terminology” (Kuh and The Trustees of Indiana University 2015), the NSSE survey

collects information ... about first-year and senior students' participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending [university].

And

Survey items ... represent empirically confirmed “good practices” in undergraduate education. That is, they reflect behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of [university]. *NSSE doesn’t assess student learning directly, but survey results point to areas where colleges and universities are performing well and aspects of the undergraduate experience that could be improved.* (emphasis added; National Survey of Student Engagement 2021)

Although the NSSE does not explicitly assess student learning, it is used as a measure of accountability informing changes aimed at improving the undergraduate experience, with universities across Canada implementing institutional changes and initiatives based on NSSE results (see, for example, University of Alberta 2017; York University 2022).

With the introduction of these accountability measures, universities were now under the microscope, being held to fulfilling their mandates of teaching, training, research, public service, and equalization of opportunity, while at the same time, providing an engaging student experience for undergraduates. However, behind these accountability measures focused on university quality and performance is a more problematic issue. First, by using the NSSE and its results, universities are able to show that they are providing students with—or working at improving—programs and activities that contribute to their undergraduate experience and enhance their learning and personal development. Second, focusing on engagement allows universities to suggest that they are fulfilling their mandates by providing opportunities for students—quality through time spent at university—which leads to students persisting to graduation, a key KPI. However, taken together, this allows university administration to put the onus on students to engage with these programs and activities to hold up their end of the educational bargain—failing to do so frames students negatively and as deficient—something to be corrected either by the student themselves or

through programs or interventions, lest these students drop out, also negatively impacting university KPIs. The following discussion aims to disentangle this student disengagement narrative and how it has been problematized by highlighting its conceptualizations and influential factors leading students to disengage from their studies.

2.2. *Framing (Dis)Engagement*

A precursor to understanding the problematization of student disengagement is understanding student engagement, as disengagement has often been framed antithetically to the more positively framed engagement. There is a significant amount of literature on student engagement ranging in scope from conceptualization, to measures, to ways of improving engagement. However, to keep within the scope of this study, this section focuses on conceptualizations, definitions, and dimensions only.

2.2.1. *Conceptualizing student engagement.* With the significant importance placed on student engagement as a key component of undergraduate success, one would expect a clear conceptualization of what student engagement is and how it is measured; yet, this does not seem to be the case. As a recent meta-analysis has noted, the literature on student engagement “is a mixed bag” with “considerable variation in the nature and type of work” that often “has a normative agenda” that assumes “that engagement is necessarily positive”—an attitude that has been promoted “uncritically” (Trowler 2010:9). Further, Trowler (2010) also notes that

Many articles, conference papers and chapters on student engagement do not contain explicit definitions of engagement, making the (erroneous) assumption that their understanding is a shared, universal one. In addition, studies tend to measure that which is measurable, leading to a diversity of unstated proxies for engagement

recurring in the literature, and a wide range of exactly what is being engaged with under the mantle of ‘student engagement’. (17)

This highlights the complex tangle of student engagement with regards to an overall lack of consensus on its conceptualization and how it is measured.

In the North American context, however, conceptualizations and measures of student engagement have been institutionalized in the NSSE, which presents as the standard from which researchers, university administrators, and government agencies frame their notions of student engagement. Indeed, the NSSE has had over 1650 participating institutions and approximately 6 million students complete the survey since 2000, and its foundational principles of student engagement have been adapted to a number of other surveys at different educational levels and across nations, highlighting both its importance and pervasiveness (National Survey of Student Engagement 2021). The root of student engagement and the NSSE is based on a plethora of research documenting strong connections between ‘educationally purposive activities’ and student success and development outcomes, including persistence to graduation, academic achievement, and student satisfaction (Astin 1984; Berger and Milem 1999; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Kuh et al. 2005; Kuh and Vesper 1997; Pace 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). As such, student engagement is seen as beneficial for both the university and individual student, as engagement contributes to undergraduate learning and persistence, which is quantified through university KPIs.

2.2.2. *Defining student engagement.* With student engagement being seen as beneficial for both the individual student and the university, George D. Kuh, creator of the NSSE, has formulated a definition built on what has been learned through administration of the NSSE as well as previous research (see, for example, Kuh 1993, 2001, 2003; Kuh et al.

2005, 2006, 2007; Kuh, Hu, and Vesper 2000; Kuh and Vesper 1997) that frames student engagement through both students and institutions. Student engagement, as the basis for the NSSE, is defined as

the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college [in Canada, university] and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities. (Kuh 2009:683)

Here, the onus of student engagement is placed on both the university and the student; however, some research has suggested that, ultimately, even if institutions provide ways for students to engage, it is *up to the student* to actively do so. For example, even though Coates (2005) sees student engagement as a “joint proposition” between students and institutions, he presses that, “individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement” (26). As such, for this study, I take the view that student engagement is a function of agentic student actions, while institutional (and other non-individual) factors impact whether students can—or choose to—engage or not. Hence, I define student engagement as *the time and effort a student devotes to participating in activities linked to desired outcomes of university*.

2.2.3. *Dimensions of student engagement.* Two important aspects of the above definition need to be explored in more detail: the dimensions of engagement, and engagement with what (desired outcomes). From a student-centric view, as in the above definition, it becomes apparent that there are multiple dimensions of engagement, for example, effort, devotion, and participation. Research shows that, although engagement is usually thought of as the action of involvement or participation, additional dimensions of feelings and sense-making are important in student engagement. As Trowler (2010) notes, “acting without *feeling* engaged is just involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged *without acting* is dissociation” (emphasis added; 5). Hence, engagement is more than just

participation (Côté and Allahar 2011). As such, Trowler (2010), adapting research done at the pre-university level (see Fredricks, Bluemenfeld, and Paris 2004), suggests that engagement is three dimensional—behavioural, emotional, and cognitive—which can be viewed as positive, negative, or non-engagement (apathy or withdrawal). Accordingly, students may choose to engage positively, negatively, or not at all, across these dimensions in any number of combinations—the levels of engagement do not have to be the same (though they could be). Table 2.1. shows these dimensions of engagement and how they may be manifested.

Table 2.1. Examples of positive, negative, and non-engagement in university ^a

	Positive engagement	Non-engagement	Negative engagement
Behavioural	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
Emotional	Interest	Boredom	Rejection
Cognitive	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments

^a Source: Trowler (2010:6)

Here it is shown that, besides engaging in a positive manner (such as attending lectures), students can also choose to engage negatively (redefine parameters for assignments), or not at all (zone out through boredom). This also leads to the second aspect of the definition that requires more explanation—engagement with what.

2.2.4. Engagement with what. The term student engagement, when specifically applied using the student-as-agent view, suggests that students must *do* something in order to be engaged. However, there are various views as to *what* students must do. A synthesis of the literature suggests that students should engage academically, socially, or a combination of the two, framed as ‘educationally purposive activities’ (academic) and ‘enriching educational experiences’ (social). Educationally purposive activities include behaviours such as

active learning, involvement in enriching educational experiences, seeking guidance from staff or working collaboratively with other students (Coates 2005:26)

amount of time study[ing], interact[ing] with faculty members and peers related to substantive topics, and [using] institutional resources such as the library and technology (Hu and Kuh 2002:555)

The second aspect, enriching educational experiences, are framed as benefiting student's learning and personal development, and collectively, are one of the NSSE benchmarks.

Enriching educational experiences are

complementary learning opportunities in- and out-of-class [that] augment academic programs[, and] ... teach students valuable things about themselves and others[, ... while providing] opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge. (Kuh 2009:771)

Some examples of these experiences are extracurricular participation (sports, clubs, student governments), internships or co-op placements, studying abroad, and conversations with students of different backgrounds (race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political opinions, personal values). These experiences align with personal and intellectual developments associated with attaining an undergraduate degree.

The above sections highlight how student engagement is a multidimensional concept that includes behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, and refers to the way in which students act within each of these dimensions, both academically and socially. In turn, research has shown how student engagement is a core component of student success, espousing a myriad of benefits gained by students who engage both academically and socially, such as better grades, persistence to graduation, and overall student satisfaction (Kuh et al. 2006). However, a large amount of literature suggests that there is a widespread trend towards students not engaging, something seen as problematic for both the university and students.

2.2.5. *Conceptualizing disengagement.* While canonical literature suggests that engagement is a key component of student success, in that students who are more

academically and socially engaged gain more of the espoused benefits from the undergraduate experience, other research has found that not all students are engaging at levels to gain these benefits. Seen as ‘disengaged’, these students are considered less successful and exhibit problematic behaviours that need to be fixed in order to be more effectively engaged, and thus, successful. As such, disengagement is frequently presented as the antithesis of engagement and something that is undesirable for both students and institutions as it can lead to lower grades and attrition (Côté and Allahar 2011; Kuh 2003; Kuh et al. 2005). The issue of disengagement has become so prevalent that some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that there is a general “culture of disengagement” exhibited by large numbers of both traditional and non-traditional students (Baron and Corbin 2012; Côté and Allahar 2011). However, although there is a consensus that student disengagement is undesirable, there is no clear consensus as to what it means for a student to be disengaged. Like much of the research on student engagement, literature within the disengagement discourse often lacks an explicit conceptualization of the term and is frequently presented as though there is an assumed, shared, universal understanding of the concept.

A common view in the undergraduate experience discourse conceptualizes disengagement as less or non-engagement. This research has roots in the NSSE, where levels of (in)action in educationally purposive activities and enriching educational experiences determine whether a student is engaged or not. Viewed this way, if engagement is what students *do*, disengagement is what students *do not do (or do less of)*, such as not preparing for class, not doing course readings ahead of time, not participating in class, or not completing assignments (Baron and Corbin 2012; Brint and Cantwell 2014; Côté and Allahar 2011;

Flacks et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2012). A key aspect of this conceptualization is time-use, whereby the amount of time a student exerts on educationally purposeful activities dictates students' level of engagement. Specifically, research suggests that there is an ideal amount of time to be spent on studying—two hours in preparation for each hour spent in class, which, for a full-time student in most Ontario universities, requires 15 hours in-class and 30 hours preparing for class, for a total of 45 hours (Côté and Allahar 2011). Students who spend less than this are considered disengaged, with those spending significantly less than this—fewer than five hours—are “hard-core disengaged” (Côté and Allahar 2011:75). Additionally, some researchers have found that, increasingly, students are spending less time on studying compared to previous generational cohorts (Babcock and Marks 2011; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Hersh and Merrow 2005; Neves and Hillman 2019), leaving some pundits to suggest that many students are enrolled full-time but studying part-time (BBC News 2007; Côté and Allahar 2011).

For other researchers, disengagement has been attached to negatively-valued, individual characteristics based on attitudes towards academic pursuits. These disengaged students have been variably characterized as disaffected, detached, indifferent, alienated, resentful and hostile (Trout 1997); “consumerist, uncivil, demanding, preoccupied with work, and as caring more for GPAs and degrees than the life of the mind” (Marchese 1998:4); lacking commitment to their studies by not devoting as much effort to the activities that matter to their education (Kuh 1999); being in a state of unconsciousness and unawareness akin to sleepwalking (Kazmi 2010); and passive participants that lack the discipline to manage their time effectively (Côté and Allahar 2011) or that lack motivation, work habits,

and exertion of effort (Côté and Allahar 2007; Main 2004; Slavin 2008). However, these characterizations problematically conflate both *conceptualizing* disengagement and *causes of* disengagement. In this view, though students may be framed as being disengaged, it is their attitude that leads them to disengage, highlighting the importance of the causes of disengagement.

2.3. *Causes and Predictors of Disengagement*

Much of the disengagement discourse focuses on how it is conceptualized and measured, which, because disengagement is seen as something to be fixed, leads this same research to suggest ways to minimize disengaging behaviours. Yet, these attempts at minimizing disengaging behaviours tend to use assumptive predictors of disengagement or leave out what causes these occurrences altogether, which can be problematic (Baik, Naylor, and Arkoudis 2015). For example, an analytical report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO] noted that findings from studies that measured the impact of student engagement and success initiatives provided “few if any ‘silver bullets’ that clearly improve student performance in individual courses or programs” (Wiggers and Arnold 2011:17). These initiatives aimed at improving or preventing disengaging behaviours were minimally impacting, yet at the same time were only using predictors of disengagement—in most cases—associated with non-traditional students. Other research, however, has looked at what predicts or causes disengagement or leads to disengaging behaviours. Some of this research explains student disengagement according to how the researchers conceptualize and measure disengagement, while other research suggests that certain factors can predict whether a student will be more likely to be disengaged or exhibit disengaging behaviours.

The following focuses on what predicts or causes students to exhibit disengaging behaviours, and is examined from three strata: societal, institutional, and individual. Also, although these are delimited as separate strata, frequently these strata operate in tandem or influence one another, highlighting the complexities behind the causes of disengagement—there is no single explanation for disengagement.

2.3.1. *Societal influences on disengagement.* Research has shown that, at the societal level, human capital theory, massification, and credentialism impact levels of student engagement. The above history of Ontario universities has shown how there has been an increase in the importance of research and knowledge production that has acted as both a push and pull mechanism—a push for training skilled workers by industry and universities, and a pull for individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills to gain entry into these high-paying careers (Clark et al. 2009; Rae 2005). Within the new knowledge economy, knowledge and skills are seen as a form of capital, the accumulation of which is seen as beneficial for the individual. Known as Human Capital Theory (see Becker 1962, 1964), prevailing discourse across OECD countries, including Canada, suggests that university is key to acquiring this human capital (Pizarro Milian et al. 2019; Resnik 2006). Additionally, human capital theory tends to dominate higher education discourse and planning in Ontario policy discourse, as the above brief history has highlighted.

Human capital theory also operates in tandem with another social force—massification. In Ontario, the massification of university that occurred after WWII, due to demographic and societal shifts during the late '80s and early '90s, and as a result of the 2003 double cohort (the year Ontario Academic Credits [OACs] were dropped from the

secondary school system; Clark et al. 2009), has contributed to the transformation of Ontario universities from elite-only institutions to near-universal ones, with over 400,000 undergraduate students enrolled in Ontario universities in 2019 (Government of Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development 2021). Together, human capital theory discourse and massification help to explain the ever-increasing numbers of students graduating with degrees, which is additionally seen through credentialism—increased competition for good jobs by way of accumulating more credentials (Collins 2019; Pizarro Milian et al. 2019), and credential inflation—the devaluing of a credential within the marketplace which creates demand for even higher credentials (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011; Collins 2002). Credentialism and credential inflation are seen by some researchers as causing disengagement, whereby students' motivation for coming to university is steeped in gaining a credential for job access rather than the attainment of an education (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011). As has been suggested,

a large percentage of students are now going to university, not because they have any desire to learn, but only for the credential required for a job. These "disengaged" students do not have the motivation ... to succeed at university. (Slavin 2008:843)

While the combination of the social forces of human capital theory and massification have been shown to contribute to credentialism and credential inflation, the discourse suggesting a connection to a student's motivations for coming to university and their subsequent disengagement is largely assumptive. Few studies have directly asked students about their motivations and reasons for going to university; instead, students are labelled as disengaged credential-seekers who have no interest in acquiring knowledge or other associated benefits attached to attaining an undergraduate degree.

2.3.2. *Institutional influences on disengagement.* At the institutional level, several factors have been identified as impacting levels of student engagement, including structural changes, corporatization of the university, conflicting academic culture, commodification of the degree, and grade inflation. I begin by highlighting massification's impact on institutional structures, which in turn, along with the corporatization of the university, have created an environment of conflicting academic culture.

In Ontario, perpetual underfunding of higher education institutions and massification have created an environment where universities cannot or have not adequately adjusted resource allocation to accommodate expanding enrolments, leading to significant structural changes contributing to or exacerbating disengagement. Structural changes such as increased class sizes, higher student-faculty ratios, and reduced student-faculty contact hours have been connected to increased disengagement (Baron and Corbin 2012; Côté and Allahar 2011). Additionally, with increased class sizes, professors have adjusted their assessment methods, resorting to multiple-choice tests rather than more beneficial essay assignments due to the significant difference in grading time between the two (Côté and Allahar 2011). As a result, students 'check out' due to feeling alienated from the process of learning, which has been identified as disengagement in the literature.

Another aspect that leads to disengagement is the corporatization of the university. As noted, universities have become more business-like, adopting market-like behaviours based on neo-liberal ideologies (Côté and Allahar 2011; Davidson-Harden and Majhanovich 2004; Newfield 2008; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009; Tuchman 2011; Westheimer 2010), with many universities pushing more towards selling the student experience over academics

(Davidson 2015; Pizarro Milian and Davidson 2016). Commensurate with the corporatization of the university is the move towards a more performance-oriented academic culture which has led

some institutions to convey the impression that only successful students are valued, to make and implement rules, policies and structures that are rigid and inflexible and to stress competition and performance-oriented goals. (Baron and Corbin 2012:767)

An outcome of this is higher levels of student disengagement (Inzlicht and Good 2005).

Additionally, this corporatization and emphasis on valuing successful students seem to be at odds with the engagement success narrative. Within this narrative, and as one of the measures of the educationally purposeful activity benchmark in the NSSE, time spent by students with faculty is seen as a positive; yet, as universities become more corporate, there are higher student-faculty ratios, leading to less student-faculty interaction (Baron and Corbin 2012). As a result, these mixed messages are seen to foster disengagement amongst undergraduates (Markwell 2007).

Also stemming from the corporatization of the university, and heavily influenced by credentialism, the commodification of the degree has also been suggested as contributing to student disengagement. As Kaye et al. (2006) have said, education has become “something to be ‘consumed’ rather than ... an activity in which to participate” (85), while consumerism—“the belief that individuals obtain gratification and social standing primarily through their purchase of commodities and consumption of tangible products”—has led to “students [who] will want to see obvious, tangible benefits from their studies, whether in terms of an inherently valuable qualification, or as a route to a particular form of employment” (Kaye et al., 2006, p. 86). For some researchers, this consumerist approach to university has led to disengagement, but more specifically *the disengagement compact* (Côté and Allahar 2007,

2011; Kuh 1999; Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt 1991). Coined by George Kuh, the disengagement compact refers to an unspoken agreement with professors and students framed as

I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone. That is, I won't make you work too hard (read a lot, write a lot) so that I won't have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well. (Kuh 2003:28)

The student side of the disengagement compact, then, is symptomatic of the corporatization of the contemporary university, whereby student-consumers purchase their commodified degrees. This disengagement compact, however, is but one symptom of the corporatization of the university and the commodification of the degree. Another symptom is that of grade inflation and the resultant entitled disengagement.

Grade inflation is framed as when higher marks are awarded for work of a lower standard (Côté and Allahar 2011; Hunt 2008). This can lead to disengagement via lack of challenge, or can be manifest as entitled disengagement when examined in conjunction with the student-consumer effect from the corporatization of the university. It has been suggested that, for some of these 'brighter' students, being able to attain higher grades for less effort has led them to feel unchallenged, making them feel alienated, leading to disengaging behaviours; at the other end of the spectrum, students who do not exert much effort but still attain high grades see no need to exert more effort and stay disengaged (Côté and Allahar 2011). This suggests that there is an affective aspect to students' disengaging behaviours, which is discussed in the next section.

The second way that grade inflation leads to disengagement is in conjunction with the student-consumer mindset that comes part and parcel with the corporatization of the university. Labelled *entitled disengagement*, Côté and Allahar (2011), explain that this occurs when student-consumers feel *entitled* to high grades without the requisite *effort* required to

attain them—‘I’ve paid for my degree, so I am entitled to pass with ‘good’ grades.’ As such, students who feel as though their degree is something to be purchased (because it is a societal necessity for entry to a good job), expect to get good grades and a degree precisely because it has been commodified, which leads to students exhibiting disengaging behaviours.

The institutional influences on disengagement listed above—structural changes, corporatization of the university, conflicting academic culture, commodification of the degree, and grade inflation—highlight the myriad ways that universities have been shown to facilitate student disengagement through suboptimal decision-making, inconsistencies between rhetoric and practice, or problematic policies and practices that, as Baron and Corbin (2012) have suggested, is rife with “incoherence and fragmentation,” with many universities being “inconsistent in their approaches[, ... and] in some ways have actively contributed to a culture of disengagement” (769). Additionally, these factors are often framed through anecdotes or statistical predictions, which, while not necessarily bad in and of themselves, do tend to assume why students disengage based on behaviours that fit with institutional factors, rather than how institutional factors specifically lead to disengaging behaviours—much like putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Other research has examined individual factors that lead to or facilitate disengagement, for example students’ motivation for going to university, which may explain a student’s credentialist mindset. Individual factors are the focus of the following section.

2.3.3. *Individual influences on disengagement.* In addition to societal and institutional influences on disengagement, some research has suggested that individual factors also influence disengagement. This research focuses on individual actions, abilities,

thoughts, and emotions that can lead to disengaging behaviours. In a similar vein, other research has examined individual characteristics such as race, gender, and non-traditional student status to predict disengagement (Hu and Kuh 2002; Kuh 2001, 2003); however, this removes student agency in the process of disengaging, and is therefore outside the scope of this study and not included in this paper. The following are individual influences impacting student's engagement as suggested by the literature: competing time demands and uses, unpreparedness and mental acuity, and psychological and psychosocial factors. These factors intersect with each other and societal and institutional factors in various ways such as influencing each other, influencing other factors, and being influenced by other factors, highlighting the complex and nuanced intermeshing of influences that lead to disengagement—something that is often missing within the dominant discourse.

One of the more commonly mentioned causes of disengagement are competing time demands and uses, such as working while studying, caring for dependents, socializing, extracurricular participation, and commuting. While some research has shown that working while studying leads to more disengagement and lower grades (Brint and Cantwell 2012; James et al. 2009; Krause 2005; see Neyt et al. 2017 for an overview of the literature), there are various reasons why this occurs, ranging from job aspects, individual characteristics, and how the research was conducted and how the outcomes were measured. In Neyt et al.'s (2017) review of the literature, it was found that there is a mainly

negative effect of student employment on educational attainment ..., and hence ... student work appears to be a substitute for education. [And that] student work has a more adverse effect on educational engagement than on educational performance and seems to be more adverse when being done during the academic year (22)

Although these findings suggest that student employment is an influential factor on disengagement, the authors also suggest that other aspects must be taken into consideration. For example, a student's primary orientation—their main focus being towards work rather than studies—may highlight a “disengagement from school that existed before the decision to work was made, rather than a negative effect due to student employment itself” (Neyt et al. 2017:5). This aligns with other research on student identity and disengagement, which suggests that students with less of an ‘academic identity’ (e.g., how much an individual identifies with being a student, as opposed to, in this case, an employee) may struggle to engage academically if competing, non-academic identities such as employment take precedence (Krause and Coates 2008; Lund Dean and Jolly 2012).

Other research has suggested that time spent on socializing and extracurricular participation also leads to academic disengagement based on how students direct their time-use. A study by Brint and Cantwell (2012) measured disengagement through alternative time investments that are in competition with time meant for studying, suggesting that students who spend very high amounts of time on

passive entertainments (watching television and surfing the Internet for fun), campus social life (spending social time with friends and partying), and paid employment ... can be considered academically disengaged insofar as their energies are directed elsewhere. (Brint and Cantwell 2012:3)

Similarly, research conducted by Côté and Allahar (2011) showed a correlation between disengagement and socialization, with ‘hardcore disengaged’ students (those who spent 10 or fewer hours per week on their studies) being more likely than their more engaged peers to socialize heavily (more than 26 hours per week, but especially more than 30 hours). This was especially prevalent with younger, male students.

The above shows how student time use, especially on non-academic activities, is correlated with disengagement; however, his research also suggested that it is only those students who spend *significantly* less time on academics and an extensive amount on non-academic alternatives who are disengaged. Additionally, the suggestion that time spent on extracurricular participation is detrimental to a student's undergraduate experience goes against some of the more salient engagement discourse, including foundational aspects of the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement 2021) and Tinto's (1975, 1987) social integration theory, which suggest that socializing is beneficial for both the student and university via persistence and retention amongst other benefits. Further, research by Côté and Allahar (2011) indicates that, as a whole, behavioural factors such as caring for dependents, working on or off campus, participating in co/extra-curricular activities, socializing, or commuting was not negatively—and in some cases, though the effect was small, was positively—correlated to student engagement patterns, suggesting that there is no displacement effect as other research has found.

Additional individual factors noted as causing disengagement are student unpreparedness and mental acuity. Research done by Kuh (2007) suggests that students who spent less time on educationally purposeful activities in high school (based on results from the High School Survey of Student Engagement [HSSSE]) took these habits with them to university. Disengagement in high school becomes unpreparedness for university and manifests in like fashion for these students in university—disengaged high school students are disengaged university students (Kuh 2007). Other research has confirmed these findings by using 'dropping out' of a course as a proxy for disengagement, connecting this to ill-

prepared students coming from high school (Slavin 2008). Baldwin and Koh (2012) expand on this concept, suggesting that part of the reason students come unprepared from high school is because there is an

incompatibility between the expected learning styles of first year students and those of the university educators. [And that] there is a need for students to rapidly adjust from a method of learning where they are often told what they need to know to one where they must direct their own learning. (115)

This suggests that students who are not cognitively ready for the rigours of university study will tend to employ disengagement tactics or actions. However, these tactics and actions are researcher-defined and often dissimilar from other researcher's definitions or measures, making it difficult to know if disengagement listed by researchers is constituted by or constitutive of the concept or the measure.

When it comes to mental acuity—being smart enough for university studies—some research has shown an unclear correlation to disengagement. Using SAT scores, Côté and Allahar (2011) found that there was little difference between those they considered 'hard-core disengaged' and the mean score of all students. However, they note that this may be due, in part, because the overall mean of their entire sample was below recommendations for college preparedness, with roughly 60% of students being unready for university (Côté and Allahar 2011). In light of these findings, they have suggested that *attitude* is more a more influence than *aptitude* when it comes to student disengagement, something explored below.

Other factors suggested as impacting student levels of engagement are their mental health, attitudes towards the university experience, motivations for attending university, and expectations for being successful at university. However, though research connects these to disengagement, it is often anecdotal or through proximate measures that are used to suggest

that disengagement can be attributed to these outcomes. As such, a large amount of this literature is assumptive or inferential based less on attitude or affect, and more on time use and GPAs. This applies to the few studies that examine undergraduate's mental health and disengagement, which often frame disengagement through the proxies of lower GPAs or program/course withdrawal. For example, Baik et al. (2015) suggest that mental health concerns caused by a variety of factors increased the likelihood of students considering program withdrawal amongst other disengagement behaviours. Similarly, Eisenberg, Golberstein, and Hunt (2009) found a connection between depression and anxiety with lower GPA and higher probability of dropping out. Another study by Keyes et al. (2012) found that students with poorer mental health were more likely to report impaired academic performance, defined as 6 or more days (in the past four weeks) where emotional or mental difficulties hurt academic performance. These studies, taken together, show the complex and varied ways in which researchers have suggested disengagement or disengaging behaviours through proxy measures.

Another individual factor influencing disengagement is a student's motivations for attending university, with research defining and measuring this in different ways. For example, a study by Côté and Levine (1997) examined students' motivations for attending university, human capital acquisition, and academic achievement. Using a typology consisting of five types of motivation as their input variable, and based on Astin's (1991) I-E-O (input, environment, output) model, their statistical analysis indicated that a student's motivation impacted their GPA. Those motivated by personal and intellectual development or humanitarian reasons had higher GPAs, while those who chose to go to university due to

the belief that it was better than pursuing other options had lower GPAs (Côté and Levine 1997). This suggests that students whose motivations were connected to institutional and societal measures of undergraduate success were more likely to have higher grades. However, students had to select their motivations for attending university from a selection of choices based on a pre-constructed typology, with these motivation constructs being used to *predict* higher grades, rather than reasons why their grades are lower—in other words, the study identifies how students' motivations can lead to higher academic outcomes, but does not identify what may cause a student's lower grades, with lower grades acting as a proxy for students being disengaged.

Other research within the motivational discourse suggests that different types of motivation can impact students' engagement levels. Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory [SDT] suggests that humans have an innate desire to learn, which when explored through motivational aspects, highlights supportive or discouraging environments and experiences that influence individual decision-making in their pursuit of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Within this framework, three types of motivation have been identified: intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) define these motivations as such (1) *intrinsic motivation*: doing an activity for the fun, challenge, or inherent satisfaction of gaining something from the action, and not because of external pressures, constraints, or consequences; (2) *extrinsic motivation*: doing an activity due to its instrumental value, as a means to an end, and not due to the enjoyment of the activity itself; and (3) *amotivation*: lacking intention to act due to feeling no value in the activity, feeling a lack of competence to do it, or believing that it will not yield a desired outcome. As such, a

general consensus is that intrinsic motivation results in more desirable outcomes while extrinsic motivation and amotivation result in less or undesirable outcomes.

Further research has connected students' motivational orientations to their academic outcomes. Studies have shown how intrinsically motivated students are more likely to achieve higher GPAs and have greater intentions to persist (Guiffida et al. 2013), as well as have a greater desire to master their educational goals leading to better academic performance (Cerasoli and Ford 2014), while extrinsically motivated students are more focused on the credential to get a job, potentially leading to increased instances of plagiarism and cheating (Callahan 2004), or are more interested in the outcome of their courses (i.e., grades) rather than learning, i.e., they are academically disengaged (Côté and Allahar 2007). These extrinsic behaviours have been aligned with credentialism, whereby students' decision to go to university is more instrumental vocational, in that the goal of university is to gain a credential for a job rather than learning (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Twenge and Donnelly 2016), which has been referred to as *degree purchasing* and has been found to be related to "poor study habits, the use of resistance strategies in classrooms, low positive affect, and poor course performance" (Brotheridge and Lee 2005). Therefore, student motivations for attending university influence students' engagement levels and behaviours, with more intrinsically motivated students being more academically engaged, and extrinsically motivated and amotivated students exhibiting more disengaging behaviours (Côté and Allahar 2011). Further, some research has shown that there has been an increase in extrinsic motivational, and a decrease in anti-extrinsic (intrinsic) motivational, orientations for going to university amongst Generation X (in university in the 1980s–1990s) and Millennials (in

university in the 2000s-2010s) compared to Boomers (in university in the 1960s-1970s; Twenge and Donnelly 2016). This coincides with increased research, emphasis, and reporting on student disengagement (via time use) which aligns with the aforementioned *culture of disengagement*.

Connected to the culture of disengagement is another factor that research has suggested leads to disengagement, that of expectations. More specifically, this discourse focuses on expectations within the undergraduate experience, and usually as a disjuncture between institutional and student expectations. For example, in a study by Larkin and Harrison (2011) there were a number of potential conflicts facing students in the undergraduate experience, including a “fundamental disagreement between what the institution expects of the student in terms of engagement, and what the student expects of the institution in terms of academic support” (75). They also found that part of these conflicts contributed to disengaging behaviours, but they cautioned that the cause of this disengagement was difficult to discern and could be a product of many potential factors, not just a disjuncture in expectations.

Expectations of students by universities are obviously individually defined, but generally, within the institution of higher education in Ontario—and indeed, in many other provinces, states, and countries—there is a trend towards academic and social engagement. These expectations are based on a plethora of literature and the NSSE and are, by and large, measured through time use with the expected outcome being higher grades (Yazedjian et al. 2008), or extracurricular involvement and other enriching educational experiences with participation in these activities as the key measure (Kuh 2009; Kuh et al. 2006). As such,

institutions expect students to be *both* academically and socially engaged in order to be successful and gain the most of the undergraduate experience. However, when looking at academic engagement, it has been found that there are differences in expectations and reality. Using data from the NSSE, Côté and Allahar (2007) lay out the expectations that professors have of students when it comes to time use, finding that most students are not meeting these expectations and can be considered disengaged.

Students can be classified with NSSE research into roughly three groups: the fully engaged who do the full amount of work that professors expect of them (10% or so), the partially engaged (the roughly 40% who do less than what is expected, but enough to get by), and the disengaged (the other 40–50% who do the minimal required to play the system or do nothing at all). (Côté and Allahar 2007:9)

Hence, students that do less than expected are seen as disengaged and problematic, with some observers implying that, rather than students fitting their lives into university, these undergraduates fit university into their already full, complex, and busy lives (Mcinnis and James 1995). Further, some researchers have argued that it is fully reasonable for “educators to expect all students to treat their studies as a full-time endeavour,” and that part-time studies are the solution for those with alternative time demands (Côté and Allahar 2011:118). Accordingly, full-time students who invest less time than is equivalent to a full-time job are considered disengaged.

Other research has posited that students may be more inclined to disengaging behaviours based on their own expectations, which are seen to be at odds with those of the institution. This research maintains that, more recently, students seem to drift through university “with the expectation that simply paying tuition and putting out a minimal effort will have a maximal payoff in terms of grade attainment and eventual occupational success” (Côté and Allahar 2011:124). This infers that more recent cohorts of students expect to gain

more from doing less. Simultaneously, this argument claims that the blame for student disengagement cannot be placed on bad teaching but instead on the students who, in light of the current view of university as job preparation

expect different things from their professors and tend to have few or no demands of themselves. (Côté and Allahar 2011:128)

As such, it is on the students to adjust their expectations to fit within the certain faculties' or universities' view of what is required of undergraduates, whereby failing to do so frames the student as disengaged—it is the student who must always adjust their expectations to fit within the institutional definition and not the other way around.

Relatedly, there is research that indicates that, rather than being disengaged due to mismatched expectations, students may engage more in order to resolve this disjuncture. For example, findings from the 2006 NSSE Annual report highlight how a large number of students responded that they had to work harder than expected in order to meet professors' expectations (National Survey of Student Engagement 2006), indicating that students' expectations did not lead them to disengaging behaviours, rather they had to adapt and engage differently than their initial intentions. Further, additional research found that lecturers and students agreed with the expectation that students should attend and participate in lectures, contrary to research suggesting students found no value in attending class (Hassel and Ridout 2018). These findings, however, are more assertions of students' expectations based on survey questions about student behaviours that were used as correlates of actual expectations; whether students found these concepts important within their own expectations is merely speculative.

Other research has taken an alternative view, suggesting that universities' lack of adjusting to student expectations is at fault for student disengagement. For instance, Baron and Corbin (2012) have suggested that universities "have not only been inconsistent in their approaches to student engagement, but in some ways have actively contributed to a culture of disengagement" (769), the reasons of which can be seen above in the institutional influences on disengagement section. Moreover, it has been suggested that part of the reason for this mismatch between university expectations and student expectations is that institutions frequently focus on the engagement discourse as posited through research and government narratives without considering the student voice (Harper 2007; Harper and Quaye 2009), or that, though the student engagement discourse espouses many benefits and is generally well-meaning, it is often implemented with confusing or contradictory initiatives at the departmental, faculty, or university level (Baron and Corbin 2012). When students are being left out of the conversation, it seems unfair to label them as disengaged.

2.4. Problematizing the Disengagement Narrative

In line with the proliferation of the engagement narrative, the disengagement narrative has also expanded, and it too problematizes aspects of student engagement. Hence, issues identified in the student disengagement discourse are, in most cases, applicable to student engagement also. Main issues within this disengagement narrative are: the characterization of disengagement, approaches to and measures of student motivations, views of student success expectations, institutional responses to student diversity, and the biggest issue, the missing student voice. These issues are the basis of the current study and are used to frame my research questions and objectives presented in the final section of this chapter.

2.4.1. *Characterization of disengagement.* When it comes to the problem of characterizing disengagement, three issues arise: its conceptualization; its static, all-encompassing framing; and its unidimensional measures. A problem that arises with the conceptualization of disengagement, is that the narrow definition employed by educators, institutions, and government policies, as well as how it is measured in Ontario universities through the NSSE, creates a negative view towards students who do not match this definition. As McInnis (2001) has asserted, labelling students as disengaged is problematic because

it implies a deficit in attitudes and values on the part of students, [...] that somewhat misjudges their intentions and, in some respects, devalues the nature of their experience. Taking a deficit view makes it inevitable that [faculty and administrative] responses to the new realities of student expectations and aspirations will be inadequate. (3–4)

Further, when examined through entitled disengagement, there is a feeling that students who choose to engage differently (or not at all) are somehow entitled, as though students who engage according to the typical engagement narrative are not entitled to choose how they engage. This, then, presumes that students' choices in how they participate in university are a privilege rather than a valid aspect of an undergraduate's personal educational trajectory.

Also problematic is the label 'disengaged student'. Researchers often apply this label to students based on a proxy measure of what it means to be engaged or not. This totalizes the student as engaged or disengaged—a single unitary label framing students as unidimensional beings who are either only engaged or disengaged and not complex, agentic beings capable of nuanced approaches to engaging at university. When framed this way, disengagement is considered a character fault of the student, i.e., this student is disengaged—akin to being called lazy, unmotivated, disinterested, and indifferent—which judges the

student as deficient or lacking and inhabiting an all-encompassing title of disengaged. However, conceptualizing disengagement as such problematically negates its complexity, reducing it to a singular, stable trait within students (Hockings et al. 2008). Conflating individual characteristics with disengagement as a stable trait within students is an issue because, as Bryson and Hand (2007) have articulated, “there is a continuum of engagement from disengaged to engaged and a number of levels within which the same student may exhibit different degrees of engagement” (353). Said differently, students may engage differently over time (e.g., between first year and fourth year) and across activities, courses, or subjects (e.g., a student may be disengaged in a methods course, yet be highly engaged in a content course that may not be as ‘dry’). This has also been articulated by Trowler (2010), who, highlights not just behavioural, but also cognitive and emotional engagement (see Table 2.1 above), indicating that students may be positively, negatively, or non-engaged differently across each of these dimensions at the same time. As such, viewing disengagement as a stable trait of undergraduates without considering its complexities is highly problematic (Hockings et al. 2008).

Related to the above characterizations of disengagement is how it is measured. Frequently, engagement is measured through a singular dimension, often through student behaviour, and usually through time use, as this is an easy-to-measure proxy. Yet, as Trowler (2010) notes, there are also emotional and cognitive dimensions to engagement, and students who have been labelled as disengaged based on their behaviours, may actually be engaging in emotionally and cognitively different ways. Further, other research notes that complexities with trying to measure more than one aspect of disengagement, and hence, they tend to

focus on correlations between potential causal variables and a singular outcome variable such as grades, whereby lower grades are seen as symptomatic of being disengaged. Yet, much of this same literature also speaks of grade inflation as a problem that further intensifies disengaging behaviours and attitudes. As such, it seems as though students are framed as disengaged no matter their actions or feelings, since, with grade inflation and *grade compression*—the phenomena whereby the grades from which students are assessed has become highly constricted, with more As and Bs and fewer Ds and Fs being granted—it is “increasingly difficult to distinguish ‘outstanding’ students from merely ‘good’ students, ‘mediocre’ students, and so on” (Côté and Allahar 2007:45). Grades, then, as a key symptom of disengagement, become more questionable as a measure of students’ engagement.

The above highlights how problematic characterizations of disengagement are. Its conceptualization, its all-encompassing labelling, and how it is measured are part of a larger narrative that problematically suggests there is a culture of disengagement within the university that large swaths of singularly-defined disengaged students belong to and perpetuate, and who, by doing so, are losing out on the more beneficial and transformative aspects of an undergraduate education. Additionally, this characterization tends to normalize a certain view of what an undergraduate education is for, and why individuals should be attending, which is discussed in more detail next.

2.4.2. *Approaches to and measures of student motivations.* The second way that disengagement can be problematized is through student motivations. Research explains that students’ motivations for attending university affects their levels of engagement (Ryan and Deci 2000). Most research on students’ motivations for attending university, however,

totalizes students as either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (or amotivated), which facilitates measuring with the similarly-conceptualized unidimensional disengagement. In this view, students are either intrinsically motivated, which leads to higher levels of engagement and more higher grades, or extrinsically motivated (or amotivated) which leads to lower levels of engagement and lower grades. This suggests that, much like disengagement, a student can only have a single, static motivational orientation, either intrinsic or extrinsic (or amotivated), and hence, can only be either engaged or disengaged.

The view that a student is *only* intrinsically or extrinsically motivated unjustly characterizes students as singularly-focused and unidimensional. However, other research maintains that students' motivations for attending university are more complex than this. As Ryan and Deci (2020) have articulated in their SDT, extrinsic motivations are more complex than just being contrasts to intrinsic motivations, with extrinsic motivations consisting of four subtypes—external regulation, introjection, identification, and integration—which range in scale from fully externalized to mostly internalized, respectively. This means that some external motivations may have been internalized enough to seem as though they are intrinsic motivations, such as being motivated by the potential job benefits of a degree; however, according to SDT, this would still be considered an extrinsic motivation, specifically, integrated regulation. With integrated extrinsic motivation

the person not only recognizes and identifies with the value of the activity, but also finds it to be congruent with other core interests and values. [Integrated] extrinsic motivation share[s] with intrinsic motivation the quality of being highly volitional, but differ[s] primarily in that intrinsic motivation is based in interest and enjoyment—people do these behaviors because they find them engaging or even fun, whereas ... *integrated motivations are based on a sense of value—people view the activities as worthwhile, even if not enjoyable.* (emphasis added; Ryan and Deci 2020:3)

Viewed this way, research suggesting that extrinsically motivated students disvalue the traditional benefits and experiences of an undergraduate degree, may be missing the mark. Instead, students may be pursuing their undergraduate degree for many different reasons.

2.4.3. *Views of student success expectations.* Another issue with the student disengagement narrative is that of expectations for being a successful undergraduate. Often there is a prescribed view of what is expected of students while at university—high academic and social engagement, which leads to more successful students via grades, and allows students to gain the most from their undergraduate experience, while low or no academic or social engagement leads to lower grades and dropping out. However, viewing university this way posits that there is a generic, one-size-fits-all student experience that works for everyone. Yet, as research has shown, universities are becoming increasingly diverse, with a similarly diverse set of expectations and experiences (Basit and Tomlinson 2012; Deil-Amen 2011; Lehmann 2009). Therefore, this one-size-fits-all approach likely has detrimental effects on students who are non-traditional and have diverse needs and expectations.

Additionally, a large amount of research on the undergraduate experience presupposes students' expectations, and often as a way to prove the researcher's theories or findings. For example, Côté and Allahar (2011) posit that some disengaged students' expectations are based on credentialist motivations for attending university; yet, there is no explicit proof of this coming from the students themselves—this is merely assumptive and is used to further their assertions about disengaged students. Other research has also presupposed what a student's expectations are, either through assumptions or proxy measures, for example, the NSSE and its faculty-focused counterpart, the Faculty Survey of

Student Engagement [FSSE], where the goal is to match survey results between the NSSE and FSSE to

reveal whether faculty priorities and activities are in sync with the skills and competencies we want students to develop in order to become intentional learners. (Kuh, Laird, and Umbach 2004:27)

As such, these skills and competencies that are provided in the NSSE are presented as though they are what students themselves have as expectations. In fact, this view is even more problematic, as Kuh (2009) has framed students' educational expectations (or objectives) as part of the student engagement narrative. In his article directed at university administration titled *What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know About Student Engagement*, he states that

engagement increases the odds that any student—educational and social background notwithstanding—will attain *his or her educational and personal objectives*, acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century, and enjoy the intellectual and monetary advantages associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree. (emphasis added; Kuh 2009:698)

Hence, students' expectations come across as known and fully aligned with the NSSE survey instrument—specifically engagement—and as though students' objectives are singular across all populations. However, concomitant with the equalization of opportunity mandate of the university, the student population has become increasingly diverse, suggesting that the particular objectives and expectations of these non-traditional students may be just as diverse, requiring more specifically tailored programs and initiatives to be successful.

2.4.4. *Institutional responses to student diversity.* An additional factor adding to the problematization of the disengagement narrative is that of student diversity and the resultant institutional responses. Research has suggested that the undergraduate student population has become increasingly diverse (Basit and Tomlinson 2012; Universities Canada 2019) with

government pushes and institutional pulls for non-traditional students becoming increasingly pervasive. Recently published statistics indicate that approximately 30% of students who earned a bachelor's degree in Canada between 2014 and 2017 were from groups designated as visible minorities, almost two-thirds of which identified as Chinese, South Asian, or Black (Brunet and Galarneau 2022)—non-visible minorities (e.g., LGBTQ2+ and students with non-visible disabilities), however, were not part of these data. Additionally, institutional priority shifts (e.g., increased enrolments through non-traditional revenue streams such as indigenous, first-generation, and international students) and the current inequity zeitgeist and resultant social causes such as Black Lives Matter [BLM], Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman and Girls [MMIWG] and Every Child Matters, have further contributed to the discourse as well as influenced institutional responses.

In response to this increasingly diverse student population, Canadian universities have implemented numerous programs and initiatives aimed at addressing the diverse needs of traditionally under-represented groups. Indeed, building on their *Principles in Indigenous Education* (Universities Canada 2015), Universities Canada (formerly the AUCC—a not-for-profit NGO whose members are presidents of Canadian universities) released the *Inclusive Excellence Principles* (Universities Canada 2017) document that outlines seven principles on equity, diversity, and inclusion [EDI], and acts as the foundation for numerous initiatives and programs implemented across institutions (see the Universities Canada [n.d.] *Equity, diversity and inclusion* priorities webpage for examples). In addition to these EDI-specific initiatives, universities have also “stepped up” their student experience programs, created new senior management roles, developed programs for student's mental health, and implemented

further initiatives directed towards non-traditional, e.g., international, mature, and first-generation, students, with the view that these groups are considered ‘at-risk’ (Côté and Allahar 2011). The crux of these institutional responses is to address specific needs of a range of different students (as well as higher education inequities with regards to representativeness) in order to provide them with tools and skills to successfully navigate their undergraduate experience. However, although a large number of these initiatives are aimed at improving student success, they do so under the guise that undergraduate success is only achieved through engagement, discounting both the diversity of the students and their needs. This is not surprising since many of these student-focused programs frequently do not include the student voice in their design or implementation. This lack of student input and perspective on programs specifically tailored for them is a microcosm of a larger issue facing the undergraduate experience and the student success discourse—the missing student voice.

2.4.5. *The missing student voice.* The biggest issue with the disengagement narrative is that of the missing student voice which encompasses all other aspects of the problematization of student disengagement. While there is a body of educational research that includes student voices, and in particular the student experience (see, for example, Cox 2009, 2016), my research focuses on the *undergraduate experience* as shaped by the NSSE and associated student engagement success research that has become essential in shaping university policies yet leaves out student voices. For example, in her in-depth review of the student engagement literature, Vicki Trowler (2010) found that

While most of the [student engagement] literature discussed – or assumed – the benefits of student engagement, a striking absence was the student voice in the literature on student engagement. Instead, literature was written about students for managers, policy makers, researchers, funders or teachers, with occasional briefing

guides for student leaders, by other managers, policy makers, researchers or teachers. Where student voices appeared, it was as data in the form of quotes to illustrate arguments being made by others about them. (50)

This lack of student voice in the literature is not only problematic within the student disengagement discourse, but is also detrimental to both students and institutions who are so desperately seeking to facilitate and improve student engagement. As Harper (2007) has posited, foregoing qualitative student input in institutional decision-making can create barriers to student achievement and engagement, whereas inviting the least engaged to share their knowledge and experiences is one of the more effective ways of improving student engagement (though, there is an understanding that getting those who are participating the least to actually participate is a challenge in and of itself).

Another problem with the missing student voice comes from the usage of quantitative methods, e.g., surveys such as the NSSE, which articulate students' feelings towards certain aspects of the undergraduate experience, but provide little space for students to express why they are feeling the way they are. Additionally, these presuppositions are presented as one-size-fits-all, negating the individuality of students' voices in their own educational trajectories. Trying to understand the undergraduate experience exclusively through quantitative methods

provides an incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice. More problematic is that students are denied opportunities to reflect on what they learned and the ways that programs, interventions, and people added value to their lives and educational trajectories. (Harper 2007:56)

Denying students a voice in their own educational trajectories is not only detrimental to the individual, but it also negatively impacts institutions that invest time and money on initiatives that may have little or no beneficial impacts on students, and hence, may

exacerbate, rather than mitigate, student disengagement. One-sided, quantitative approaches to the undergraduate experience and expected outcomes denies both the institution and individuals the ability to explain why these outcomes occur, and what, if anything can be done to improve, or indeed, change, these outcomes.

The above assertions highlight that there is a dearth in the student engagement literature that incorporates the student voice, even when there is an amount of research that underscores the importance of including this voice into the engagement discourse. There have been, however, a small number of qualitative studies that investigate this narrative, with most being focused in Australia and North America, though there have been some similar studies conducted in the UK, albeit not specifically focused on disengagement, but still in the same vein. A study by Kennett, Reed, and Lam (2011), for example, asked students at a university in Toronto about their reasons for deciding to attend university, finding that the majority listed five or more reasons, including both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (as distinguished by the researchers). One of their more salient findings was that, although a number of student-defined reasons for attending university were concomitant with other scales used at the time, an additional number of these reasons were not items listed on these same surveys, and further, a number of items from these surveys were not mentioned by the students (Kennett et al. 2011). Hence, understanding students' motivations for attending university from their point of view indicates that their reasonings are more nuanced than is often provided in survey-based research. However, although this research reported findings based on qualitative data, these data were analyzed comparatively to quantitative data.

Other research conducted by Stelnicki, Nordstokke, and Saklofske (2015), studied undergraduates from a university in Western Canada, asking students to provide a list of five words each that impacted their undergraduate experience. This method allowed students to “describe those personal characteristics and external factors that help or hinder them in reaching their goals at university,” which are an “important component in developing a comprehensive model of student success” (Stelnicki et al. 2015:222). Although this research used data from the specific population of interest by providing an outline of what impacted student success, student success itself was never formally defined by the students and can only be inferred. As such, these findings contribute to the student success discourse, but more on an impact level and less on a definition level.

The student experience has also been studied from the point of view of the student. Conducting research at Ambrose University, a small liberal arts university and graduate theological school in Calgary, Wong (2015) compared findings from focus groups on the undergraduate student experience to institutional results from the NSSE and Theological School Survey of Student Engagement [TSSSE]. Using NSSE and TSSSE findings, an interview guide was constructed to examine areas where Ambrose University scored lower on areas of engagement than peer institutions, which was then used for focus groups. Findings from the focus groups were then coded thematically using a grounded theory approach to provide insight into the NSSE and TSSSE findings. According to Wong (2015), this methodological approach provides students with a voice, which in turn helps institutions understand quantitative findings.

Whereas previous studies have used qualitative data simply to triangulate the quantitative data to affirm or disprove a particular NSSE benchmark ... the

qualitative data from the focus groups in the present study provided—in the students’ own words—insight into the “why” of their lived educational experiences. (Wong 2015:78)

Here, the benefits of using the student voice are salient, with explanations as to why certain quantitative findings may occur within the NSSE and TSSSE. These findings underscore the importance of student voices within the undergraduate experience discourse, especially with regards to the dominant student engagement narrative.

The above problematization of the disengagement narrative provides the basis for my research questions and objectives. For this study, I examine the undergraduate experience through the student perspective—more specifically, their choice to attend university and their expectations of the undergraduate experience.

2.5. Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to add to the disengagement discourse by examining student perspectives of their undergraduate experience. Taking my cue from the problematization of the disengagement discourse, I explore the connections between students’ understandings of and perspectives about their undergraduate experience and the disengagement literature in order to more thoroughly understand the logic behind students’ practices towards and within the university. The following are my specific research questions and research objectives.

RQ1: What motivates undergraduates to enrol in university and how does this compare to extant literature on students’ enrolment motivations?

This research question examines the tendency within the dominant engagement narrative to frame undergraduates as having a single, unidimensional motivational

orientation in their decision to attend university. In this manner, I examine the dichotomous framing of students as either intrinsically or extrinsically (or amotivationally) motivated as an influential factor of disengagement.

RQ2: What are students' expectations of the undergraduate experience and how does this compare to the dominant student engagement success narrative?

The objective of this research question is to add to the dominant engagement success narrative through an exploration of students' individual perspectives of the undergraduate experience more generally, and their expectations of undergraduate success and the dominant engagement success narrative more specifically. The additional comparison between students' understandings and assumptions about what is expected of them at university to commonly held views in the student engagement success narrative speaks to the problematization of the disengagement discourse outlined above.

RQ3: Do students experience conflicts within or between their motivations for attending university, their expectations of the undergraduate experience, and the dominant engagement success narrative, and if so, what are the consequences of these conflicts, and how do students negotiate them?

The objective of this research question is to explore potential connections between undergraduates' motivations to attend and expectations of the undergraduate student experience, and how this shapes students' social practices towards and within the university, as analyzed within the disengagement discourse.

Ultimately, the goal of this study is to explore the prescribed and assumptive views of students' motivations for attending, and expectations of engaging at, university, specifically as it has been formulated in the disengagement discourse. Within this discourse, students who do not fit the institutionally-prescribed, socially-accepted, and researcher- and faculty-promoted motivational orientations and engagement expectations are labelled as disillusioned, deficient, and deliberately disengaged, and, ultimately, are considered unsuccessful. Additionally, I add student voices to this discourse to help inform and add nuance to the problematic disengagement narrative that defines and shapes students' educational trajectories without any input from students themselves. Findings from this study can be used by administration to more fully understand the undergraduate student experience from students themselves and not as a collection of findings from survey data. The goal, then, is not to suggest that students may be disengaged, non-engaged, or negatively engaged, rather, I suggest that students may be differently engaged; however, we can only know by talking to them, because, as the student body becomes larger and more diverse, so too may their motivations and expectations. Taking a note from Freire (1996), acting without reflecting on why people are oppressed can lead to further oppression, or in this case, acting without reflecting on how and why students are considered disengaged can lead to further disengagement. Treating students as mere vessels to be filled with knowledge benefits neither the student nor the institution, and rather, students should be treated as co-creators of knowledge, and in the case of this research, as participatory voices in their own educational trajectories.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer my research questions and fulfill my research objectives I used an exploratory qualitative methods research design. Data collection was facilitated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, while data analysis was conducted using a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) approach to qualitative data. All research conducted was primary and had the goal of capturing the diversity of the large, research-intensive case-study university where the study was conducted.

3.1. Ontological and Epistemological Paradigms

To understand a researcher's philosophical assumptions is to understand their rationale and approach to their object of study (Schwandt 2000). In my research, I aim to interpret agents' actions and perspectives within and towards the university, with a particular focus on the constructed disengagement narrative. Thus, my study comes from a constructivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological paradigm with a focus on the *verstehen* (understanding) of undergraduate experiences from the student's point of view, rather than trying to explain (*erklären*) the undergraduate experience through my own understandings. As such,

to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute the action. To say that human action is meaningful is to claim either that it has a certain intentional content that indicates the kind of action it is and/or that what an action means can be grasped only in terms of the system of meanings to which it belongs. ... [Hence,] the same physical movement of raising one's arm can be variously interpreted as voting, hailing a taxi, or asking for permission to speak, depending on the context and intentions of the actor. (Schwandt 2000:191)

Thus, interpreting practices is interconnected with a shared understanding—through co-construction of this same understanding between researcher and research participant—of an actor’s intentionality behind their practices.

To recap, my research questions are as follows: **RQ1:** What motivates undergraduates to enrol in university and how does this compare to extant literature on students’ enrolment motivations; **RQ2:** What are students’ expectations of the undergraduate experience and how does this compare to the dominant student engagement success narrative?; and **RQ3:** Do students experience conflicts within or between their motivations for attending university, their expectations of the undergraduate experience, and the dominant engagement success narrative, and if so, what are the consequences of these conflicts, and how do students negotiate them? In order to answer these questions, I chose a semi-structured, in-depth interview data collection method, with a critical discourse analysis approach to data analysis.

3.2. Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews

To collect the data necessary to answer my research questions, I used a semi-structured, in-depth interviewing technique. In-depth interviewing has the potential to elicit data that focus on depth, detail, vividness, and nuance (Miller and Crabtree 2004)—data that are difficult to attain through questionnaires or surveys. Further, as Seidman (2013) notes, “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (9), which is key to collecting data and fits with my ontological and epistemological philosophy.

To hold the conviction that we know enough already and don’t need to know others’ stories is not only anti-intellectual; it also leaves us, at one extreme, prone to violence to others. (Seidman 2013:9)

Thus, thinking we know others' thoughts and feelings is a form of violence—denying the experiences of others at the behest of enforcing our own understandings and logics of practice is oppressive (violent). Hence, the nature of semi-structured, in-depth interviews allows for a co-construction of deep knowledge that gives voice to the participants, addressing the absence of the student perspective within the engagement success narrative.

3.2.1. *Interview design.* Interviews were chosen as my data collection method because of the ability to gather in-depth data from the students' point of view. As Crotty (1998) notes, it is "Only through dialogue [that] one can become aware of the perceptions, and feeling and attitudes of others and interpret their meaning and intent" (78). Moreover, and in comparison to other methods of data collection, Seidman (2013) suggests that, especially for education,

If the researcher's goal ... is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry. (11)

As such, based on my research questions, the most effective method of gathering data about undergraduate students' perceptions and feelings toward their undergraduate experience is through in-depth interviewing.

Interviews, however, can be conducted with different intentions in mind, which are intertwined with the level of structure given to the interviewing process. In another manner, whether the intension of your research is to *build* a theory or *test* a theory shapes how structured your approach to interviewing will be (Wengraf 2001). Interviews can range from completely unstructured, whereby the interview seems more like a conversation that proceeds with few or no prepared questions, to fully structured, whereby the interview takes a form more similar to a survey or questionnaire with most or all questions being standardized,

closed-ended, and prepared beforehand (Seidman 2013:15). Thus, when *testing* a theory, the more structured your interview will be, whilst, at the opposite end of the spectrum, theory *building* is more connected with unstructured interview formats. Between these two poles, semi-structured interviews range from lightly structured closer to the theory building end of the spectrum, to heavily structured closer to the theory testing end of the spectrum. Figure 3.1, adapted from Wengraf (2001), helps to visualize the interview structure spectrum as related to theory building and testing. As such, with my intension being more aligned with theory building rather than theory testing, my interviews leaned towards the lightly structured end of being semi-structured.

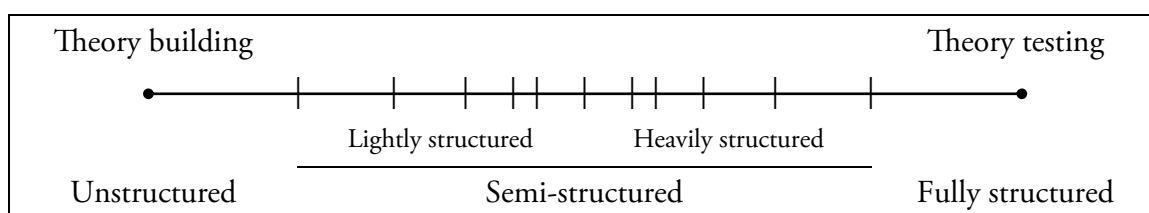


Figure 3.1. Spectrum of level of interviewing structure and relationship to stages of theory development. Adapted from Wengraf (2001:61).

Building from the disengagement literature and my problematization of the undergraduate success narrative, I created a semi-structured interview guide that was both broad enough to allow the students to interpret and respond to the questions as they saw fit, but specific enough to guide students towards discussing topics relevant to this study. The interview guide (Appendix A) consisted of six main sections, each of which had a general overall question, some examples of probe questions, and overall objectives. Main topic sections included: 1. Students' motivations for attending university; 2. Students' attitudes towards the university experience; 3. Students' expectations of the university experience; 4. Students' behaviours while in university; 5. Students' views towards undergraduate

expectations of student success; and 6. Students' general feelings towards the university experience via dichotomous pairs (e.g., like/dislike, most/least favourite). For example, under the first topic section, motivations, the main question was "Why did you come to university," with sample probes such as "Why did you come to university rather than go to college," and "Why did you come to this university rather than go to another university?" The main objective of this section was to answer RQ1, with a focus on students' motivations for attending university. However, due to the semi-structured nature of the interview and conversational flow, sometimes questions were answered in the natural flow of dialogue, whilst others were answered as variations of the main question. As such, the interview guide was just that—a guide to ensure I reached my research objectives.

3.2.2. *Research setting.* This study was conducted at a large research-intensive public university in Southwestern Ontario. Due to concerns about time, access, and ethics at additional institutions, and with particular institutional characteristics such as the student population in mind, a singular institution was chosen for this study. As such, this research can be seen as a case study of a particular type of university with its own history and culture and which should not be seen as representative of all Ontario universities, or indeed, even of other similar large research-based institutions (e.g., the U15 group of Canadian research universities or institutions classified as medical/doctoral institutions according to *Maclean's* university rankings). The university of study has a large range of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, with an equally large student population, and is considered one of the top 300 (or better) schools in the world according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Ranking), QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education

World University Rankings, and the U.S News and World Report. A growing number of international students adds diversity to the large domestic student population. The demographic makeup of the university is highly faculty-specific with regards to both gender and ethnicity; however, overall, there is a larger female than male and other gender population, as well as a larger population of Caucasian and Asian students compared to other ethnicities. This institution is also known to be prestigious and is often considered a “legacy” school where wealthy parents and alumni send their children. I have refrained from citing the above information for the purposes of anonymity.

3.2.3. *Sampling.* My sampling method for this research used a purposeful multistage and convenience approach. The first stage was a stratified sample of all first-entry, non-professional, undergraduate faculties: Arts & Humanities, Music, Engineering, Health Sciences, Information & Media Studies, Science, Social Science, and Medicine and Dentistry. Next was a cluster sample of randomly chosen first to fourth year courses within each faculty. The final stage was asking the entire class, in person, if they wished to participate. As such, the final sample was one of convenience, as I was at the behest of course access and students self-selecting for participation. And, while my goal was to attain a sample that was broadly representative of the student population at the institute of study, examining the large number of characteristics that could be used for representativeness was beyond this research. Hence, this sample can be seen more as a cross-section of students that possess a variety of characteristics including faculty, program, and year of study.

Inclusion criteria for interviewees included being enrolled at the university of study in any of the first-entry, non-professional, undergraduate faculties (as noted above). The only

exclusion criteria were students who were graduate students or who were not enrolled in the university of study or the specified faculties (e.g., Law). An additional layer of criteria was used to distinguish student subtypes to address concerns in the literature about non-traditional students. As such, part of my inclusion criteria—and hence, recruitment strategy—focused on the following student subtypes: mature students (those who had started this university degree after the age of 21, which aligns with institutional definitions), international students (those who pay international fees), first-generation students (those whose parents [both] have not completed university education), and traditional students (those that are the opposite of the previous categories). Mature students were chosen, partly out of personal interest, and partly due to increasing enrolment in universities across Canada (Stechyson 2010). International students were chosen due to pushes for internationalization at a number of Ontario universities (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2014; Taskoh 2020). First-generation students were chosen because of their increased enrolment and perceived (and actual) differences from ‘traditional’ students (Choy 2001; Lehmann 2013). Traditional students were established as a comparison group to the other ‘non-traditional’ students. Together, these student subtypes were used to add nuance and multi-dimensionality to the extant literature that often assumes a unidimensional view of students enrolled in university, specifically with regards to a “culture of disengagement” (see Baron and Corbin 2012; Côté and Allahar 2011).

My final sample size was 33 interviewees (8 faculties x 4-5 interviewees per faculty across different years). Table 3.1. lists interviewee demographic data, including pseudonym, gender, age, year of study, home faculty, and student subgroup status. A summary of the

data in Table 3.1. shows that 27 (82%) of interviewees were female, 21 (64%) were considered traditionally-aged (younger than 21 years old when starting this university degree), 15 (46%) were in their first year, 3 (9%) in their second year, 11 (33%) in their third year, and 4 (12%) in their fourth year or higher. Most interviewees were from the faculty of Social Sciences (18, 55%), while both Arts and Humanities and Health Sciences were the home faculty for 4 (12%) students, Science the home faculty for 3 (9%) students, and Engineering and Medicine and Dentistry being the home faculty for 2 (6%) interviewees each. For student subgroups there were 16 (48%) first-generation students, 14 (42%) mature students, 4 (12%) international students, and 8 (24%) traditional students, with 9 (27%) first-generation students also being mature. Pseudonyms were chosen by interviewees, keeping in line with giving students a voice in this research.

Table 3.1. Interviewee demographic data

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Year of study	Home faculty	Student subgroup
Alberta	Female	29	1	Arts and Humanities	Mature
Alicia	Female	56	4	Social Science	Mature
Aliliana	Female	18	1	Social Science	Traditional
Ana Maria	Female	34	1	Health Sciences	Mature, first generation
Annie	Female	30s ^a	3	Arts and Humanities	Mature, first generation
Apple	Female	22	4	Social Science	First generation
Bryce	Male	44	1	Science	Mature, first generation
Daffodil	Female	35	3	Health Sciences	Mature, first generation
Dave	Male	29	2	Social Science	Mature
Esra	Female	19	1	Health Sciences	Traditional
Fish	Female	22	3	Arts and Humanities	International
Francesca	Female	19	1	Social Science	First generation
Frank	Male	23	3	Social Science	Mature
Helen	Female	19	1	Engineering	International
Isabelle	Female	21	3	Social Science	First generation
Jack	Male	19	1	Social Science	Traditional
Jane Doe	Female	50s ^a	3	Social Science	Mature, first generation
Jermaine	Male	22	3	Science	International
Joy	Female	23	1	Health Sciences	Mature
Kim	Female	22	3	Social Science	International
Lady Gaga	Female	40s ^a	2	Social Science	Mature, first generation
Leslie	Female	22	3	Social Science	First generation
Mabel	Female	21	2	Science	First generation
Mary	Female	51	1	Arts and Humanities	Mature, first generation
Natalie	Female	20	1	Social Science	Traditional
Penelope	Female	21	3	Social Science	First generation
Rebecca	Female	23	1	Social Science	Mature, first generation
Ruth	Female	19	1	Social Science	Traditional
Sarah S.	Female	19	1	Engineering	Traditional
Sarah L.	Female	21	3	Medicine and Dentistry	Traditional
Smurf	Female	22	4	Medicine and Dentistry	Traditional
Walter	Male	19	1	Social Science	First generation
Yvonne	Female	51	4	Social Science	Mature, first generation

^a Interviewees' ages were estimated based on information from individual interviews.

3.2.4. *Recruitment.* Interviewees were recruited through a combination of posters, in-class presentations, and through campus organizations and clubs. Posters (Appendix B) were placed in conspicuous places around campus close to elevators, on bulletin boards, and other areas where students might notice, with instructions to contact me via email or phone.

Emails with the poster attached were also sent to professors, lecturers, and colleagues working as teaching assistants (gatekeepers) asking to give a short in-class presentation about my study. Once access to a class was granted, I gave a 5-10-minute presentation about my study and asked for student participation, highlighting anonymity, confidentiality, and compensation related to interview participation—\$10 CAD for an approximately one hour-long interview. I then left a number of printed posters for students who, if interested in participating, could contact me directly through email or by cell phone/text message. A third recruitment method was through emails or social media posts sent to campus organizations and clubs, where I explained my study and attached my poster with instructions to contact me if interested in participating. In one case, the mature student organization sent out my email and poster to their 3000+ member email list on my behalf, which contributed to a larger number of mature students contacting me and being interviewed. As a result of this recruitment approach, I was able to gain access to a number of classes across disciplines (though, I was not able to gain access to all first-entry, non-professional faculties), year of study, ages and program of study. Interestingly, although I did not gain access to *courses* in all faculties, the nature of students' class choices and schedules, as well as the institution of study's approach to interdisciplinarity, I was able gain access to *individuals* across most faculties. Interview recruitment took place between May and June 2016 and February and March 2017.

The \$10 CAD compensation proved to be key in my recruitment strategy, with a number of interviewees expressing that the compensation was key to their participation. However, though this monetary incentive was a deciding factor for participation as expressed

in some interview responses, based on the topic of study and the subjective nature of the undergraduate experience, there did not seem to be any bias or stretching of the truth, nor was there any assumed reason by the researcher for the students to not be honest during their interview. That being said, interview participation has to be voluntary and those who do voluntarily participate may be swayed by the promise of remuneration. However, as Seidman (2013) has noted about research done with colleagues,

there are other levels of reciprocity that occur in the interview process that can substitute for financial remuneration. Participants have told us that the occasion of their interview was the first time anyone had ever sat down to talk about their work with them. Participants have said that they appreciated being listened to and that participating in the interviews was an important experience for them. (73)

This also occurred within my interviews, with a number of students expressing similar positives, such as being able to talk about certain feelings or issues and have someone listen to them, or being able to express something that they hadn't been able to express to anyone before. This further cements my view that compensation did not impact the interviewees' narrative to the point of unbelievability.

3.2.5. *Interview administration.* Once potential interviewees contacted me, I sent them a letter of information [LOI] (Appendix C) explaining the purpose and procedure of the study, as well as the student's rights and any benefits/risks of the study, all of which aligned with my institutional ethics board's guidelines. Students who agreed to be interviewed were asked bring their signed consent form attached to the LOI to a designated interview room on campus in my home department at a time convenient to the participant. Before the interview, students were again given the LOI and I, again, explained the study. Participants were then remunerated with \$10 CDN for their participation upon agreeing to be interviewed. Interviewees were also offered a snack and drink.

Interviews were semi-structured and used cues from the aforementioned interview guide. As such, interviews flowed more like a conversation and less like a survey, with interviewees discussing a number of different aspects of the study (based on interview guide themes) in no particular order, with only minimal prompting to ensure that all aspects of the interview guide were covered. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes, with most lasting between 45-50 minutes. Keeping in line with my research objective to increase the student voice, and to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym of their choosing. Interviews were audio recorded (with participant consent) and then transcribed into *Microsoft Word*.

3.3. *Data Analysis*

Once interviews were transcribed verbatim into *Microsoft Word*, they were then imported into *NVIVO* qualitative data analysis software for analysis. Data analysis for this research was through thematic critical discourse analysis, which allowed for data to be grouped thematically and then analysed according to a collective discourse from the student point-of-view and as a counternarrative to that found in the disengagement literature.

3.3.1. *Thematic critical discourse analysis.* Two main components constitute thematic critical discourse analysis: themes and discourse analysis. The themes aspect examines data collected according to my research questions, where the discourse analysis aspect examines data collected as it relates to the overall disengagement narrative. Conventionally, thematic analysis is the base of interview data analysis, and can be seen, simply, as the organization of transcript excerpts into categories (Seidman 2013:125). Further, the “process of noting what is interesting, labeling it, and putting it into appropriate files is called ... ‘coding’ data”

(Seidman 2013:125). The process of coding is an iterative one, whereby the researcher starts with, what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call, open coding “The analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data,” (101) which allows the researcher to categorize data “into discrete incidents, ideas, events, and acts [which] are then given a name that represents or stands for these” (105). However, open coding only gives a label to certain events, objects, and happenings, but does not allow for a deeper understanding of what these labels and concepts stand for or mean. Thus, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain,

To discover anything new in data and to gain greater understanding, we must do more of the detailed and discriminate type of analysis that we call “microanalysis.” This form of analysis uses the procedures of comparative analysis, the asking of questions, and makes use of the analytic tools to break the data apart and dig beneath the surface. We want to discern the range of potential meanings contained within the words used by respondents and develop them more fully in terms of their properties and dimensions. (109)

To go beyond the open coding and make sense of the data more deeply, axial coding is used.

Axial coding is the process of going deeper into the data to articulate meaning behind the open coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), axial coding is

The process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed “axial” because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions. (123)

Thus, axial coding can be seen as giving meaning and depth to more general codes, but at the same time, are connected to these general codes—hence the creation of subcodes. For example, within this study, one of the main themes deduced from my interview guide and openly coded, were students’ motivations for attending university (coded as motivation), which, upon further axial analysis uncovered both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, coded as two separate sub categories. These subcategories are useful in helping add more specificity

to the main category via additional information such as when, where, why, and how—more nuanced and particular properties and dimensions of the main open code (Strauss and Corbin 1998:119). Thematic analysis, then, can be seen as the practice of coding interview data which are then further coded into more specific sub-codes.

Critical discourse analysis goes a step further than thematic analysis and is a systematic exploration (analysis) of spoken or written language *use* (discourse) with an aim of examining the relations of power and struggles for power (critical) that reproduce the dominant discourse (Fairclough 1995). Thus, axial coding helps to give meaning from which critical discourse analysis can occur.

The use of thematic critical discourse analysis works well within the scope of this study. According to Fairclough (1995), language is a “social practice” that is “socially and historically situated ... in a dialectical relationship with other faces of ‘the social’,” or viewed differently, language use “is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or *constitutive*” (emphasis in original; 131). As such, critical discourse analysis is a useful method for exploring the tension between the socially shaped and shaping aspects of language use, aligning well with this study’s focus on student voices within the engagement success narrative as part of the undergraduate experience discourse. As Fairclough (1995) acknowledges

The power to control discourse is seen as the power to sustain particular discursive practices with particular ideological investments in dominance over other alternative (including oppositional) practices. (2)

Thus, by taking a critical discourse analysis approach to the data, I can begin to question theses linguistic power structures, in particular, the disengagement narrative, and using the students’ own words, further analyse the disengagement discourse as understood by these same students.

I began my thematic critical discourse analysis using both open coding and deducing categorical themes from my interview guide. The main open codes were motivations, attitudes, expectations, behaviours, student success, and general likes and dislikes about the university experience. From these data, and through re-reading transcripts and going over open codes, I induced more themes, though these did not suit the nature of this study. However, more specific sub themes did come about through axial coding, such as “mental health concerns” as a sub theme of “student success”. Using these axiomatic sub-categories allowed me to place these data within the larger disengagement discourse, where I was able, to critically analyse the dominant narrative, helping to answer my research questions and fulfill my research objectives. These results are presented in the first two findings chapters, with the third findings chapter providing another layer of discursive analysis based on the first two findings chapters.

3.4. Research Ethics

The nature of my research involving students and their feelings, perceptions, and experiences required a thorough research ethics process. Specifically, I worked to ensure that students’ rights were both respected and followed, and that there was a clear understanding that participation was optional and would in no way impact their studies. Following both the Canadian *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2010) and my institutional research ethics board’s guidelines, I designed a research project that ensured there was informed consent, anonymity, and minimal harm for both the participants and

researcher. My research involved no deception and therefore did not include any debriefing. Full ethical approval was granted by my institution for this research (Appendix D).

3.4.1. *Informed consent.* Students who expressed interest in my study by initiating contact with me through an email account specifically created for this study were emailed an LOI explaining various aspects of the study, their rights, and any potential benefits or harms that may occur because of the study. Those who chose to participate in the study upon reading the LOI were asked to bring the signed consent form attached to the LOI to their interview.

At the beginning of the interview consent forms were collected, and then I briefly summarized information on the LOI, highlighting that participants may withdraw from the study at any time during or after the interview. One participant who was known to the researcher asked for their data to be removed from the study after their interview—their information and data are not part of this study. All other participants—33 in total—gave informed consent to participate in this study.

3.4.2. *Anonymity and confidentiality.* Students were also informed that their responses would be anonymous through the use of participant-chosen pseudonyms and confidential in that there would be no connection between the interview data and the interviewee. This was disclosed as part of the LOI and reiterated at the beginning of the interview to ensure that participants felt comfortable that their data would not be used against them or harm their academics in any way.

Further, all email correspondence was through a specifically-created Gmail account to ensure that all contact with participants was kept separate from my personal email

accounts. All identifying information was kept separate from interview data, including transcriptions, consent forms, and proof of remuneration, as well as analytical documents, as a further step to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

3.4.3. *Compensation.* Students were compensated \$10 CAD for their participation in this study, which was approved by my institutional research ethics board. As noted above, this compensation did not seem to invite bias into the interviews, though there is always the potential of this occurring and the researcher not ‘catching’ it (Seidman 2013); however, it should also be noted that there could also be bias in an interview even without remuneration.

3.5. *Standpoint and Reflexivity*

In undertaking this study, I had to be aware of my standpoint—what I brought with me to the study (beyond ontological and epistemological philosophies)—and my positionality as a both a researcher and older graduate student and how these impacted how I came to choose, design, and undertake this research study. I explore my standpoint and positionality reflexively below.

3.5.1. *Background to researcher’s interest in this study.* Much of my interest in this study stems from my experiences as a student. Up until just before high school, I was part of a single parent family with no paternal child support. And, although I would not say we were poor, I would not consider us middle class, either. My mother worked and provided for us, and my brother and I participated in various extracurricular activities, but we never had the latest and greatest toys or games. No one in my immediate—and very few in my extended—family went to college, and none had gone to university. My mom took night courses in college when I was younger and eventually attained her Certified General Accountant [CGA]

designation (now Certified Professional Accountant [CPA]), but not until after I had completed college and enrolled in university.

I graduated high school in Ontario in the late 1990s, completing all 6 Ontario Academic Credits [OACs]—equivalent to Grade 13—which was required for university admission. Although I had the aptitude, and though many of my friends chose to apply, I was not inclined to go—I had no idea what I would do at university. Coming from a single-parent family with no one who had attended university, I felt, as though university was, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) have suggested, “not for the likes of us”. Instead, upon graduating from high school, I elected to attend community college for Advertising and Graphic Design. I completed the program and received my diploma in the year 2000.

Upon graduating from college, I entered the workforce and was employed in various positions related to my diploma for about 5 years, when, at the age of 26, I decided to apply to university to become a high school teacher. I was accepted to university and enrolled in a bilingual (French/English) degree, majoring in English, eventually graduating with a bilingual honours English and Sociology double major and a diploma for teaching English as a second language. During my undergraduate studies, I got involved in many facets of the university experience. I was part of student government, worked on-campus, was a peer-note taker, campus tour guide, and founded, and for a year ran, the outdoors club—the most successful non-academic student club on campus. I also lived in residence for one year, enrolled in an intensive five-week French immersion program at a university in another province, and participated in a one-year exchange in the Netherlands. For me, the undergraduate experience was greatly enhanced by getting involved beyond academics.

My experiences in the French immersion program and the exchange in the Netherlands also provided me with several experiences, albeit slightly different than my home university. The French immersion program was structured so that half of the day would be academic and the other half would be an activity—but all of it was in French, no English was allowed. In the Netherlands, the university was much smaller, and everyone knew everyone. Here, the university promoted a student experience that was divided into eight-hour ‘chunks’ each of rest/sleep/personal activities, academics, and extracurriculars. This was a change from the more open approaches to the undergraduate experience that I had at my other universities. I also got involved in both universities, participating in numerous activities, clubs, and even appearing on local television in the Netherlands for a photographic exhibition that I helped arrange and participated in as part of the university photography club.

During my undergraduate degree, personal issues and circumstantial happenings led me to change my trajectory away from becoming a high school teacher to pursuing a graduate degree with the hopes of eventually becoming a professor. As such, I applied to and enrolled in a one-year Masters of Photography and Urban Cultures degree in the United Kingdom. Here, again, was a very different structure to my previous higher education experiences. Since it was a one-year, applied graduate degree, there was a mix of academic courses, content related activities, and field trips. Additionally, most of my colleagues were, like me, international students. At the same time, due to the 2008 financial crisis, the UK had implemented a significant number of austerity measures which impacted university funding, and hence operations, with my program (and many others at my university) having

a significant shortfall of administrative employees. It was during this time that I started to question the different higher education experiences I had up until that point. One thing that jumped out to me was that many educational decisions impacting students and their educational trajectories were never discussed with students. This bothered me to the point that, within my first few months of study in the UK, I decided to pursue a doctoral degree with a focus on higher education and how different systems dictated different ways of being and doing. However, it was not until after I completed my second Master's degree (in Sociology with a focus on the corporatization of the university; see Davidson 2015) that I was able to fully incorporate student voices into my research.

3.5.2. *From background interest to research focus.* During my doctoral studies, I was fortunate enough to have positions as a research and teaching assistant, both of which contributed to my plan of study. As a research assistant, I gained valuable research skills and was also given the opportunity to work on a book chapter that focused on student typologies (which my advisor and I both eventually withdrew from). This experience led to the initial focus of my dissertation, but upon consultation with my advisor, Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann, and some of my graduate student colleagues, this focus proved to be less of a dissertation topic and more of an aspect of a larger narrative. Thus, my focus moved towards student success based on, what I have called in my literature review, the student engagement success narrative, which has roots in student typologies (see, for example, Hu, Katherine, and Kuh 2011; Hu and McCormick 2012; Kuh, Hu, and Vesper 2000). This pivot proved to be a more tenable direction for my dissertation, and lies at the heart of this study.

My experiences as a teaching assistant [TA] also helped shape part of this study, specifically the student voice aspect. As a TA, I attended most lectures of the course I was TAing for, participating as a class assistant and occasionally delivering a lecture. During this time, I built a good rapport with many students, and because I was on campus most days for extended periods of time and had an open-door policy (which did not seem to bother my office mates, thankfully!), had many fruitful discussions with a number of students about various aspects of their undergraduate experience. Students felt compelled to come to my office and talk about—and seek advice and input on—various personal and academic issues they were experiencing, both related to my course and in the university more generally, and, at times, for guidance about future plans, including entering the work force and applying to graduate school. It was as though students were having trouble navigating their undergraduate experience because they did not know where to look for guidance, did not feel they had any say in what they could or could not do, and as though theirs was a unique experience different from other students, even though they recognized others having similar problems. And it was all types of students, not just those that one would expect to be having these troubles. When compared with my own educational trajectory, it was interesting to see just how much knowledge that impacted a student's educational journey was hidden from us. For me, it felt as though, that, out in the 'ether', there were things that students were supposed to be doing—a set of unspoken rules that everyone, sort of just knew and followed without question; this was amplified to the point where I knew that this was not only *my* experience, rather it was one that was shared amongst *many* individuals, as I found through

my conversations with these students. It was as though students were talking, but few were listening—student voices seemed to exist, but in an echo chamber.

It was these experiences that solidified my interest in the student success discourse, specifically from the view of students. Hearing from students about their undergraduate experiences, their struggles, and concerns about the future, ignited my curiosity—especially compared to my own experiences—what did students themselves think about their own educational trajectories and how did this fit in with the dominant student engagement success narrative? This became the core of my research.

3.5.3. Positionality. As noted, much of my standpoint for conducting this research comes from my experiences in higher education. These experiences, in and of themselves, highlight a certain level of privilege that I had in being able to attend these numerous institutions. Similarly, when conducting my research, I was aware of a number of potentially conflicting characteristics that could lead to a power imbalance between myself and study participants. Being a white, cis-gendered, male, meant that certain privileges were afforded to me that have been seen as contributing to power imbalances, while being a student who was older than a number of my interviewees could also introduce power imbalances. There was also the issue that a small few of my interviewees were known to me as students that I had TAed—and, although I only conducted interviews once I had ceased being their TA, there could still have been some remnants of that power differential felt by students. Thus, I employed a variety of measures to help offset these potential power imbalances.

Since my research was conducted on a one-to-one basis, power imbalances could be more noticeable. As such, before interviews began, I engaged in small-talk with the students

to build rapport and to encourage a more conversational tone during the interview.

Participants were also offered juice and cookies before the interview to help minimize the ‘institutional’ feeling of the space. I also dressed more casually (e.g., ‘smart’ casual) to help minimize interviewer-participant differences—I made an attempt to look as though I, too, could be an undergraduate student, albeit, slightly older than most participants. During interviews, I conducted myself with a casual demeanour, allowing the participant to sit where they liked and then, sitting facing them, treated the experience more as a conversation and less like an interrogation. To keep the flow more conversational, I often used the participants’ chosen pseudonym when asking questions or referring to something they had mentioned earlier, much like a friend might do. Also, although I had my interview guide, notepad, and pen on the table in front of me and available for use, I only briefly glanced at the interview guide, and only took notes once interviews were over to avoid creating a break in the conversation by making notes and to avoid ‘being more like a researcher’ by continually referring to the interview guide.

As is common with more informal conversations, some interviewees delved into difficult topics or revealed experiences that were very personal, and while interesting to my study, I often reminded students that they did not have to go into detail if they wished, that their information was confidential and anonymous, and that, if they decided to, even after the interview was done, they could ask to have their data removed from this study. Similarly, some interviewees asked about being able to say something about a certain professor or the institution in general, or questioned “I’m not sure if I should say this, or not, but...” to which these same reminders were explained to them. Fortunately, interviewees continued

with these anecdotes, providing me with greater depth of understanding of their perspectives, feelings, and overall experiences. I also avoided casting judgement on participants' views by either asking for more detail or changing to a different, but related topic; however, this was not something I had to do frequently.

Another way in which I tried to minimize power imbalances was to use some of my potentially conflicting characteristics as an advantage through relatability. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) suggest, rapport and trust built through relatability between the researcher and interviewee can help reduce power imbalances. This can be facilitated by “ensuring a match between the characteristics of the researcher and the participants (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, language, background, biography etc.)” (Cohen et al. 2018:136). As such, instead of seeing my age, status as first-generation student, being a college graduate—and even in a few interviews, my hometown (go Brampton!)—as potentially problematic, these became biographical points of similarity with some participants, which improved rapport and created spaces for the interviewees to express themselves in different, more relatable ways. For example, many of the first-generation students were able to express aspects of their experience, such as navigating certain unspoken rules about how to ‘be’ or what to do at university that everyone but themselves just knew, that I could then relate to and go more in depth with them about. Similarly, being an older student, I was able to relate certain experiences, such as working and ‘adulting’ to the mature participants in my study. Although this relatability proved excellent in breaking down power imbalances, sometimes there was little relatability to the students; however, this did not seem to be problematic in attaining in-depth and relevant data.

3.5.4. *Reflexivity.* I did not find that I had any problems with interviewing due to the aforementioned strategies to avoid power balances and to increase relatability. However, some interviews did feel as though they were short (and some definitely felt way too long), but the data that were obtained from them highlight the importance of quality over quantity, since some of the longer interviews, although they also had good data, often had much extraneous information. Data analysis was also quite easy at first, with open coding being easy to follow based on my interview guide. Axial coding, however, did take some more time, which due to the nature of reading and re-reading is not surprising.

3.6. *Study Limitations*

This is a small, single-institution study that was conducted pre-COVID-19 pandemic, in a very different educational environment. The study is not meant to be representative, nor a comprehensive overview of all undergraduate student experiences in all Ontario universities, or even the selected institution; rather, it aims to add more nuance to the disengagement narrative through the student perspective. Additionally, though the study was a diverse cross-section of students at the institution it was conducted at, the sample was small, there was a slight bias towards more mature participants, and not all faculties were covered as deeply as I would have liked. Additionally, the research setting was a very particular type of university with a specific reputation as being a ‘party school’—a university known for high levels of school spirit, which may present in different ways in the data. Additionally, the demographics of the university may lack a more diverse representation in the data. However, despite these limitations, the study highlighted a number of aspects of the undergraduate experience that will be familiar to students, faculty, and university

administrators, as well as media and society more generally, and as such, provide a grounding from which further studies can be undertaken.

4. DECIDING TO ATTEND UNIVERSITY

For many people, the decision to attend university is a significant one. Can I afford the time and money? Is it right for me and my future goals? Will I fit in? Much of these concerns are connected to what drives people to enrol in university. However, when it comes to research on students' motivations for enrolling in university, some research reduces and dichotomizes a student's motivations to solely intrinsic or extrinsic, while other research compartmentalizes student motivations as predictive of particular outcomes such as high grades and levels of engagement. In this research, there is a correlation between motivation and academic outcomes, with intrinsic motivation being positively correlated and extrinsic motivation being negatively correlated with grades. Additional research suggests that, increasingly, students are exhibiting extrinsic motivations such as having a credentialist view of the undergraduate experience (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Twenge and Donnelly 2016) resulting in disengaged students (Côté and Allahar 2011). Thus, the literature connects students' motivations for attending university and their engagement behaviours. Yet, reducing a student's motivation to enrol in university to a singular motivational orientation (intrinsic or extrinsic) or to survey variables for statistical predictions, decouples the voice of students from their lived experience and the greater student engagement success discourse, minimizing their voice in their own educational trajectories and denying researchers and institutions a more nuanced look into *why* students are motivated to go to university. As such, and in order to answer **RQ1**: *What motivates undergraduates to enrol in university and how does this compare to extant literature on students' enrolment motivations*—this chapter examines students' decision to attend university from their perspective, with the aim of

understanding how students come to this decision and how this decision compares to extant literature on students' university enrolment motivations.

Asking undergraduate students about their decision to go to university reveals the complex and nuanced process leading to their decision to enrol. To understand what drove students to pursue an undergraduate degree, interviewees were asked about their decision to attend university. Questions about what motivated students to come to university in general were used in conjunction with probes about who or what contributed to this decision and why. Additionally, some students also noted reasons for attending their specific university, which, in some cases (e.g., going to a specific university away from home in order to grow as a person), could be applied to motivations for attending university more generally; these are also included here. However, it must be noted that the rationalizations students provided to account for their decisions, especially a posteriori to making that decision, may skew the student's true motivations. As Giddens (1991) notes:

Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent. (53)

Viewed in the context of this research, how students retroactively interpret their past experiences is shaped by their current experiences, which in turn, may alter certain aspects of those past experiences. However, the commonality of responses across participants, and the ability to thematically organize data suggests that there is an internal consistency and reliability to the findings, and that any misrecognized or misremembered experiences had minimal if any impact on the validity of these findings.

Interview data were transcribed and inductively coded to uncover themes from the students' perspective, with two main aggregate themes emerging: norms, pressures, and influences; and personal motivations—each with their own specific subthemes. In this research, norms, pressures, and influences are categorized as external forces shaping an individual's decision (extrinsic motivations), while personal motivations refer to an individual's internal expectations (intrinsic motivations). For example, under norms, pressures, and influences is the subtheme familial pressure, while self-actualization, including personal growth and self-fulfillment, is a subtheme of personal motivations. Interviewees additionally mentioned potential job and career prospects shaping their decision. This is discussed separately from other extrinsic motivations due to the importance students attributed to this motivation, as well as its similarity to intrinsic motivations (see the discussion on integrated regulation in Chapter 2). Findings are discussed as general descriptive trends and include student subgroup differences (mature, first generation, international, and traditional) as applicable.

Deeper analysis of these descriptive trends allows for a further, more specifically contextualized, understanding of what drives students to enrol in university, which is then compared to extant literature on student's university enrolment motivations. Analysis of the data uncovered two further aspects of student's university enrolment motivations, which, when contextualized within the problematization of the disengagement discourse, amplify some of the noted motivation-specific issues within extant literature. The first analytical finding—multi-motivational orientations—provides the foundation for the second analytical

finding—motivational tensions, both of which are explored following the descriptive findings that are presented next.

4.1. Norms, Pressures, and Influences

For many interviewees, external factors played a significant role in their decision to attend university. Here, I use ‘external’ to refer to aspects outside of a student’s individual wants and expectations of university, but that still influenced their decision to enrol in university. For example, the common social expectation to go to university after high school is considered an external push mechanism influencing a student’s decision to attend. More specifically, this would fit under the subtheme of *social norms and pressures*. Another subtheme, *familial pressures and influences*, covers the other external factors interviewees mentioned. Together, these were mentioned by approximately three quarters of all interviewees and by all student subgroups, but most frequently by traditional and international students.

4.1.1. Social norms and pressures. Social norms and pressures were mentioned by half of all interviewees, and were variations on “it’s what you do after high school,” “it’s the next logical step,” and “you have to go—there are no other choices.” These were mentioned by almost all traditional and international and a handful of first-generation student interviewees, and only by those 23 years of age or younger—essentially, recent high school graduates. Many students had internalized university as a socially normative pursuit—that going to university is what everyone does, especially right after high school. Sarah L., for example, had internalized social norms to attend university to the point of equating it to an automatic action similar to that of a morning routine:

It was never really... it never really even crossed my mind, not to go to university. It was [...] Like, it was just an obvious thing. It's kind of like, you know, you don't think about using the bathroom when you wake up, right. It's kind of, like, something you do. [Sarah L., 21, traditional, third year]

As Sarah L. notes, attending university has been internalized as normative, yet, this discourse goes unquestioned and perpetuates the idea that going to university is the obvious trajectory for students to follow right out of high school.

Other students further intimated that, more specifically, high school experiences and peers were part of normalizing the pursuit of a university education. Both Aliliana and Penelope had normalized university as what you do after high school, but indicated that this was due in part to general secondary school experiences and through friends. They said:

It's just one of those things. Like, I always knew I was going to university. [...] I was in all the university courses in high school—like, streamlined for university. I just never thought about doing anything else really. [...] I was surrounded by a lot of people that were also going to university, too. So, it wasn't like I was branching out from the norm or anything. [...] I don't know, it was just something, like, very normative, I guess. [Aliliana, 18, traditional, first year]

Because [going to university is] what everyone does. [...] Yeah. It was just the next logical step. [...] On top of that, I feel like, my high school—and most high schools—only talked about university. Like, they made an effort to, like, college is an option. But it was, one of those things that's stated, but not actually explored ... everyone just talks about university. [...] It's just like, there were so many university presentations every day at lunch, or everyone would just talk about university. [Penelope, 21, first generation, third year]

For many students, the social norm of attending university was amplified by their schooling, which pushed attending university over the alternatives (e.g., college, trades, employment), but also by their peers who, though they were not explicitly pushing their friends to go, certainly reified the idea that university is the most preferred trajectory after high school.

Although some students had internalized attending university as normative, some noted that, not only was attending university the norm, but that there was a significant social

pressure to attend as well. Kim, an international student from China, contextualized the social pressure to go to university based on experiences in her home country:

[Going to university is] like, assumed ... the only option after high school. [...] It's like, every child who has the economic background ... as long as you have a sufficient amount of money, you have to go to university. [Kim, 22, international, third year]

Similar to Kim, Smurf suggested that there was no other choice—you had to go to university because of the social pressure to do so.

I didn't really see myself as having another choice. Like, you know how, you're kind of just told to go to school. And then you're told to go to university. Like, that was just kind of the mindset that I had. [...] Like, everyone in high school was applying to university, so I did too, you know. [Smurf, 22, traditional, fourth year]

For Kim, the social pressure to go to university was attached to all graduating high school students, while for Smurf, the social pressure was internalized; however, both students acknowledged that, not only was there a normative expectation to go to university, there was also pressure to go—there were *no other options* for them, they were *told* to go. These pressures to attend university have permeated the discourse to the point that they are promoted by parents and families as well, which is discussed next.

4.1.2. Familial pressures and influences. Similar to social norms and pressures, familial pressures and influences were one of the most commonly mentioned factors in students' decision to attend university, with just over half of all interviewees noting this. These were mentioned across all student subgroups, but mostly by international and traditional students; however, there were differences when disaggregating by pressures and influences. Pressures and influences both refer to external forces shaping an individual's decision to attend university but are differentiated by feeling that there is a *need or external expectation* to do something (pressure) versus there being a *want* to do something based on

an external factor (influence). For students under 23 years of age, familial *pressures* were more frequently mentioned, while older students more frequently mentioned familial *influences*.

When it came to familial pressures, some students mentioned a general parental pressure that factored into their decision to go to university. For example, Penelope and Fish remembered parental pressures as influencing their post-secondary trajectories.

[My parents] were obviously very adamant about me going to university, just 'cause they kind of regret not going—especially my dad. And, not the just the school aspect of it, but the social aspect. ... But, if I came to them and said, I don't want to go, or I want to do something else, they would have supported that too. [Penelope, 21, first generation, third year]

[My mom] always pushed that, like, you know what, if you at least have the education and you should go for a job, you have that education to say, I can get there eventually. But if you go with nothing, then you can expect nothing from it. [...]
[My mom pressures me] in a way that's just, like, you know, you can do what you want, but if you don't do it, I will be disappointed. [...] There's nothing worse than the parent's disappointment. So... it plays very hard on the shoulders. [Fish, 22, international, third year]

Although both Penelope and Fish experienced parental pressure to go to university, Penelope expressed that her parents would have supported alternative trajectories, while Fish emoted that the pressure to not disappoint her parents weighed heavily on her shoulders. These different parental expectations as to why their offspring should go to university—Penelope's parents focused on academics and social experiences, while Fish's parents emphasized job and career preparation—further highlight the pervasiveness of the high school to university educational trajectory.

While some students felt general familial pressure in their decision to attend university, others, specifically students from immigrant families, also specified that some of the pressure was interconnected with their parents' cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Frank and Jack, whose parents immigrated to Canada, explain:

I think from the cultural background that I come from, where, you know, in most East Asian cultures, the parents would, sort of, emphasize hard work—they value hard work—sort of, the value of education. Not just any education, but higher education. Education past high school. ... So, I guess my parents taught me that ... instilled that in me when I was still very young. [Frank, 23, mature, third year]

My parents taught me you should also go to university. [...] Like, my parents are very not Westernized. [...] They're very still traditional. So, they want me to do very well in school, and they're like, education over anything, pretty much. And that's one of the reasons why they brought me over to Canada—they wanted me to get a better education. [...] Well, also, it's my decision too, but my parents were like, you have to go to university—we won't settle for anything less. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

Other students with immigrant backgrounds also noted parental pressure to attend university—frequently connecting this pressure back to their parents' cultural background or conscious choice to come to Canada for better opportunities for their offspring—often with university as a significant part of this choice.

There were also some students who mentioned familial pressure, which they had internalized from comparisons to other, extended, family members—almost like a competition. For Ruth, part of her decision to attend university stems from parental pressures, who as immigrants, came to Canada for her education—much like Frank and Jack above—but also from internalized expectations that she must follow the same trajectory as her extended family, many of whom had also attained higher education credentials.

My parents came from Oman to Canada, just for me to, you know, to get a better education, better life. So, it was always expected of me, just to go to university. [...] [And,] well, everyone... I guess, like, everyone around me, went to university—they're highly educated. ... All of my cousins are doctors, engineers. Like that's what's expected of us. So, I don't really know anything aside from ... going to university. ... It's just what everyone does. [Ruth, 19, traditional, first year]

Similar to Ruth, both Kim and Sarah S. felt pressure from their extended families to attend university, going so far as to call it a competition between cousins. Kim and Sarah S. explain:

[I was motivated to go to university, because] reputation wise, because all of my other family members, like my cousins, they are heading into universities. There's no reason you don't go there. It's like a shame to your parents. Yeah. [...] And you better go to a best university, or top university, because my cousins are really top students at home [in China]. So, I have always been pressured, throughout my childhood, to compete with them. [Kim, 22, international, third year]

[University is] something, like, all my family has done. Like, on my mom's side, all of them have gone to university, so it just has to be done, kind of thing. [...] I kind of felt the pressure from everyone [...] yeah, the family thing. I don't know. There's a lot of, like, I guess, competition between my cousins and I. So, you kind of want to go big or go home. [Sarah S., 19, traditional, first year]

Familial pressure was a big influence for many students in their motivations to attend university, to the point where many interviewees felt as though it was a competition with other family members.

Whereas many of the younger students noted that they felt pressures to attend university from parents and family, mature students mentioned that parents and family were more of an *influence* than a *pressure* in their decision to attend. Both Ana Maria and Alicia recognized the influence that their parents had on their decision to attend university. Ana Maria had mentioned earlier in the interview that she was inspired by her mother's push to educate not only her own children but also her nieces and nephews, which also made Ana Maria want to go beyond the learning and personal growth aspects of a university education, and make her parents proud by successfully completing her studies.

I thought, I really want to do something ... I want to make proud my parents. They're very proud already, even though that it's another story about grades. ... But you know... My parents are... I, I know that they are already proud, but I don't want to start something and just leave it. I wanna finish. [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

Alicia, was also influenced by her family, but more so because she wanted to have the same credentials that they had.

I don't know, I just thought, you know what, I want to get a university degree. Both my parents have one. My whole family, comes from very educated fields. Like, my cousins are lawyers and teachers and engineers and... I thought, you know, I'm the only one that's not doing that, so, I want to do that. [Alicia, 56, mature, fourth year]

Ana Maria and Alicia were both influenced by their families, with Ana Maria being influenced by doing something *for her parents*, while Alicia was influenced to do something *because of her parents*. For both, there was the want rather than the pressure to attend university that motivated them.

Other students expressed being influenced, not by their parents, but rather, by being parents themselves. In this case, it was mothers who noted immediate familial compassionateness—in particular, setting an example for their children—as part of their decision to attend university. Mary, Ana Maria, and Lady Gaga explain how their decision to attend university was influenced, in part, by their offspring:

So, my parents, my mom... my dad [...] just, whatever, supported what mom said. But mom's like "No, you need to do something—it's important." And so, I want to instill that in my children, because I say post-secondary is not an option. So, you choose—whether you choose university or college—but it's not an option. So, kind of carrying that on... [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

I'm aiming to get a university degree, so, probably the next generation—my son—can see that ... we can do it. It's going to be easier for, for him, or for the next generations, right. To get a degree. [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

I have two children. At some point, they're going to be going [to university], and I'm going to have knowledge for them. I also want them to see me going to university, because I have a goal in mind. ... They may not need to go to university, but they're watching me pursue something. [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

For mature students with children, there was an understanding of the importance of going to university, not only for themselves, but also as a way to model behaviours that they were also promoting to their children. This finding also speaks towards the notion that higher

education, specifically university, is part of the larger discourse surrounding post-secondary schooling trajectories, to the point that parents are attending university in an effort to encourage their children to do the same.

4.2. Job and Career Motivations

Job and career motivations were the most common reason for interviewees deciding to come to university, with almost three quarters of all respondents mentioning this. While these motivations were mentioned across all student subgroups, there were differences between the two subthemes—potential job/career opportunities and current/previous job experience.

4.2.1. Potential job or career opportunities. For most students, the potential of attaining a good job or career based on university credentials was key in their decision to attend university. Potential job/career opportunities were mentioned by more than half of all respondents and by all student subgroups, but marginally less so by mature students. All but two students who mentioned this were aged 23 or younger. Mature students that mentioned potential job/career opportunities also had previous college or university experience.

For many interviewees, the decision to attend university because of potential job opportunities was tied to a more general idea of credentialism—the need for a degree merely as a starting point to get into the workforce. As Francesca and Helen explain:

Well, I knew that I wanted to do something. Like, I didn't just want to stop after high school. Because, now it's so hard to attain a job—if you're not in the trades—if you don't go to university. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

You have a lot more options if you go to university. [...] Like, jobs. Job options. [...] Mostly, [I'm motivated to go to university] to get a job that I like. That's mostly it. [Helen, 19, international, first year]

For Francesca and Helen, attaining a university degree was necessary for entry into the workforce, even at the basest level, and was key in their decision to go to university.

Other students, however, were more explicit about potential job opportunities being related to better or higher-paying jobs. Isabelle for example, recognized that part of her decision to go to university was shaped by the belief that a degree is essential for ‘better’ job opportunities, which she found were not available to her non-university-educated parents.

I kind of wanted to go to university just because... I feel like it's better job opportunities. And right now, both my parents are working—like, they don't have university education, and they were both refugees—so, they don't have the education to get higher-paying jobs. [Isabelle, 21, first generation, third year]

Similarly, Natalie and Sarah S. both indicated that part of their decision to attend university was connected to attaining better jobs; although, unlike Isabelle, their families had higher education credentials. Natalie and Sarah S. were motivated to attend university because:

... of the realization that, I'm not going to be able to have the life that I want to have, if I don't go to university, because, basically, capitalism. And ... because I don't want to work minimum wage jobs for the rest of my life, and still not be able to make ends meet, or do anything. [Natalie, 20, traditional, first year]

... I think nowadays, you have to have a degree to get a real job. Not a real job, but [... a] high paying [job]. Like, enough to support me, and, I guess, a family in the future. [Sarah S., 19, traditional, first year]

Although most students understood the credentialism aspect of pursuing a university degree for a job, others went a step further and indicated that it was more than just generic job/career opportunities, it was *good* or *better* job or career opportunities.

Besides being motivated by the prospect of attaining a good or better job, some students had specific job opportunities in mind when deciding to apply to university. For example, Daffodil and Dave, who both had previous post-secondary credentials, mentioned

being motivated to attend university for specific job opportunities. For Daffodil, her choice to go into nursing was tied to more and better job opportunities:

Nursing was something that I came [from] ... I've been with patients. I've been in healthcare. And that's a good chance for me to kind of ... can boost up my financial status, and then go further. [Daffodil, 35, mature, first generation, third year]

Dave was also motivated to re-enrol in university due to a specific job opportunity, with his choice predicated on the fact that he had to get a specific degree to become part of the family law business.

It was [a] family offer, I guess you could call it. We own a law firm. So, my sister was offered the chance to take over control of it upon her graduation. And I'm thinking, well, why aren't I getting that offer? [...] And I was like, well, her degree, when she finishes, is going to be more closely associated with that. So, she actually took a job in an embassy doing translation, instead. So, the offer became open. And I was like, oh, I'm going to jump on that. But in order to take advantage of it, I have to do 6 more years of school. [Dave, 29, mature, second year]

For Daffodil and Dave, they had specific job opportunities in mind when they decided to come back to university. The lure of more and better job opportunities was a main draw for most students in their decision to attend university, with mature students being much more direct in their motivations compared to younger students.

4.2.2. Current or previous job experiences. The other job/career motivation noted by students was current or previous job experiences. Although similar to potential job opportunities, the respondents who mentioned current or previous job experiences as part of their decision to attend university were all mature students who were either currently employed and studying part-time, or had previously been in the workforce and were now enrolled in university full-time. These current or previous experiences had left many of the mature students, most of whom had little prior post-secondary education, looking to either upgrade their credentials in a more credentialed and competitive work environment

(regardless of their experience and tenure at current/previous jobs) or to switch to completely different careers. Some interviewees even revealed that their current employers required them to complete the degrees that they had started before joining their current place of work. For example, both Alicia and Lady Gaga had started their degrees before finding new jobs, but both of their new employers made it a requirement to finish their degrees in order to keep their jobs. Alicia explained that part of her decision to attend university was to upgrade her credentials, which in turn, became a requirement of her new job:

I know people don't get positions because they don't have that credential. Like, the position I'm in now, I wouldn't have it if I wasn't doing my degree. [... Part of the conditions of my new job was] that I get my degree. [Alicia, 56, mature, fourth year]

Lady Gaga, who, similar to Alicia, was required by her current employer to finish her degree, had also started university with the intention of keeping herself competitive in the job market:

I was working in a job ... and I didn't—I don't have a degree. And I wanted to further myself, or make myself, in a sense, more marketable, because the younger generation coming in is coming in with degrees. ... So, my thoughts were that, if I were to want to advance in the company I was in, I may lose that opportunity. [...] Now I'm required to finish [my degree] by my current job. [...] They knew I was currently enrolled and actively pursuing a degree [when they hired me]. So, they made it a requirement that I finish. [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

For some of the mature interviewees who lacked previous credentials, their decision to attend university started steeped in credentialism, but they found that, once new employers found out about their higher education pursuits, they required them to complete their degrees as part of their employment contract. This highlights the level of credentialism that both employers and employees have normalized as necessary for employability—even when employees have been hired for new jobs based on previous, non-credentialed skills and jobs.

Other mature students also noted how their lack of credentials had impacted their employability and they had become dissatisfied with their current or past jobs, motivating them to attend university. Both Ana Maria's and Annie's job experiences played a role in their decision to attend university. Ana Maria was not satisfied with her current position and was attending university in the hopes that she could change careers, whereas Annie felt as though she had hit a glass ceiling from not having a credential and decided to come university in the hopes of changing careers and breaking through that glass ceiling.

Working as a caretaker... I knew that I wanted to do something else. I knew that I wanted to learn more... I was hungry of... getting something, and I wasn't very satisfied with what I was doing. So, I decided to take courses [at university]. [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

I was very fortunate to get a lot of great jobs, and always found that I peaked and couldn't go further without having that nice piece of paper that said I had a degree. [I: So, you hit a glass ceiling?] Lots. [...] And, I wanted ... to change careers, too, is another reason. [Annie, 30s, mature, first generation, third year]

Students' current or previous job experiences were key deciding factors in them choosing to pursue university studies. For some students there was a requirement for current jobs, while for other students, previous job experiences made them feel as though a credential and career change were needed and that attaining a university degree would facilitate that.

4.3. *Personal Motivations*

For most interviewees, part of their decision to attend university included personal motivations—specific reasons that were not normative or pressure-based. Personal motivations were noted by just under three quarters of respondents and by all student subgroups. Included in personal motivations are the subthemes of *self-actualization*, and *academic and intellectual pursuits*, with each having different student subgroup differences.

4.3.1. *Self-actualization.* The most frequently cited personal motivation to attend university was self-actualization, which was mentioned by just over half of all respondents from all student subgroups. Included in self-actualization is personal growth, which was more frequently specified by younger students, and self-fulfillment, which was only cited by mature students.

For some students, there was a conscious choice in deciding to *go away* to university in order to experience personal growth, which they felt could not have happened if they attended an institution closer to home. For example, Aliliana and Ruth both decided to attend university away from home to experience personal growth outside the comforts of their friends and family.

[A] lot of people were going to [the local university]—including my best friend. And not that, like, I wanted to cut ties from them or anything, but I knew that it'd be a lot easier to go into university using them as a safety blanket, and I didn't want to use that. I wanted to go out on my own and really get myself out of my comfort zone to make the most of it. [...] It wasn't so much I wanted to get away. It was just kind of, like, I wanted to broaden my horizons. [Aliliana, 18, traditional, first year]

I just needed ... somewhere I could just grow. Like, I knew that if I stayed home, I would always be confined to [my parents'] way of thinking. [...] My views were shifting from my parents. So, my parents had a strict ... their ideals and their views of the world—mine's just different. ... It's just that, like, politically and everything, we just had different views. And it would just always cause friction. ... I need[ed] somewhere where I [could] grow. I can't be forced into that little bubble. So, I moved away so I could grow. [Ruth, 19, traditional, first year]

Although both Aliliana's and Ruth's decision to attend university was tied to specific institutions away from home, this was consciously done with the hopes of personal growth outside the comforts and confines of friends and family. This also highlights how some students' choice to attend university, although it was personally motivated, was also to get away from something that could hinder this personal growth.

Another aspect of self-actualization that respondents mentioned in their decision to attend university was self-fulfillment, including proving to oneself and others that they could succeed at university, and reaching their full potential. Self-fulfillment was only mentioned by mature students. As interviewees Rebecca and Alicia explain, part of their motivation to attend university was to prove to themselves that they could do it. Rebecca, who had previously attended community college directly out of high school, wanted to see if she could translate her success at college to success at university.

I wanted to challenge myself, because in high school I didn't try obviously as hard as I should have, or else I would have been in university first. But I knew that it would be a challenge. And I did really well in college. Like, President's honour roll every semester. So, I wanted to see if I was smart enough for university. [Rebecca, 23, mature, first generation, first year]

Similar to Rebecca, Alicia wanted to prove to herself that she could be successful at university after years of feeling she might not be able to do it.

I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I just knew I wanted to get a degree. ... I didn't think that I was really smart enough to go to university. University just seemed like this ... thing. That maybe I wasn't the smartest student—I may not be able to do it. But then, once my children grew up and I had time on my hands, then—I don't know if it was a pressure [from] my family—but definitely deep inside, I wanted it. It was self-fulfillment. It was mostly that. [Alicia, 56, mature, fourth year]

Both Rebecca and Alicia were motivated to attend university to prove to themselves that they could do it; being successful was self-fulfilling for them. These students were drawn toward university in order to get something that would make them feel good about themselves.

Like Rebecca and Alicia, mature student Daffodil was motivated to attend university through self-fulfillment—specifically wanting to reach her full potential. Daffodil, who had come from Iran to better her life, found that, for her, university was the way to help her reach her full potential.

Once I came to Canada, I started working at Tim Hortons, and it was a full-time good paying job. I could pay my rent. But at the end of each shift, I was asking myself... am I getting what I wanted from my coming to Canada—as a person? ... I wanted to explore so many different dimensions of my personality—my potential. Who am I really? ... So, once I start working at Tim Hortons, it's like, you know, that's not what I want, because this is not a place that let me grow fully, who I am. So, I applied for three universities. [Daffodil, 35, mature, first generation, third year]

Although Daffodil had already graduated from university and worked in Iran, she wanted to reach her full potential by coming to Canada and getting a university degree here—self-fulfillment played a large role in Daffodil's decision to attend university.

4.3.2. *Academic and intellectual pursuits.* Just under half of all interviewees listed academic and intellectual pursuits in their decision to attend university, which includes the general pursuit of knowledge/love of learning, and acquiring knowledge in a specific field or program. Although all student subgroups noted academic/intellectual pursuits, these were much more frequently mentioned by mature and first-generation students.

For some students who had completed community college, university represented a space to acquire new, deeper knowledge that was absent in their diploma programs. Mature student Joy had completed college and was working as a personal trainer when she decided to enrol in university.

I started to do my own research on physiology and biomechanics and things like that, that they didn't get into depth in my college program. And I realized, like, I'm really interested in this. I worked for two years. I had a lot of money saved up. And I just felt, like, for whatever reason ... I just felt like, I kind of want to learn more. And I just really want to go back to school, and I'm ready to go to university and succeed and see where that goes. [Joy, 23, mature, first year]

Similar to Joy, Rebecca had also completed college, and as mentioned, did not think that she was smart enough for university right out of high school; however, her college experience left her wanting to acquire more knowledge, with university being the way to do so.

I wanted to expand on my knowledge of what I already learned from college. So, college and university teach very different, as I already knew. But [...] college is more hands-on. ... University expects you to be responsible enough to read the textbook fully and sort of comprehend it yourself. [...] I wanted both perspectives. I knew that I would learn a different way in university. [Rebecca, 23, mature, first generation, first year]

Both Joy's and Rebecca's decisions to attend university extended from their college experiences, where they felt that the difference in educational styles between the two-types of post-secondary institutions could provide them with different knowledges.

Other students highlighted that part of their decision to attend university was shaped by their love of learning. Both Jane Doe and Apple stated that they enjoyed intellectual pursuits and that university was able to provide them with this opportunity. Jane Doe, who was studying part time at the university where she was working full-time, discussed being a life-long learner who finds learning fun.

I just, I love taking classes. The fact that I did my college diploma, and most of my second college diploma, and my accounting designation, and now I'm in my third year of university—my entire adult life I've been taking classes part-time. And I really—especially the psychology classes—it doesn't feel like work, it doesn't feel like school, it's interesting and it's fun. [...] For me, it's very loving learning. I mean, it's a crap shoot whether I'll retire or graduate first ... because it's never been about getting the degree. [Jane Doe, 50s, mature, first generation, third year]

Apple, who entered university straight out of high school, was also motivated to continue learning, though she was closer to the beginning of her journey as a life-long learner.

I always knew I wanted to come to university—I really like learning. I love being exposed to different perspectives, and different people's opinions, and kinda just, like, a broad range of things, especially considering the fact that I only ever took Science and Math in high school, and now here I am in Crim. and Psychology [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

For both Jane Doe and Apple, the choice to attend university stemmed, in part, from their love of learning, which they both suggest the university provides for them through fun and

interesting courses and different perspectives and opinions. Jane Doe even expressed that her love of learning outweighed her desire to attain a degree.

Some students' choice to attend university was more aligned to specific topics they wanted to study—material specific to university, but broadly defined. Both Esra and Alberta explained that they were motivated to attend university in order to gain knowledge in a particular subject matter. For Esra, she knew she had to come to university to pursue studies that aligned with her future career plans of being a pediatrician, whereas for Alberta, she had aimed to become a teacher.

I just knew I had to go, because of, like, what I want to do. [...] Well, originally, I wanted to be a pediatrician. Like, I keep changing my mind. ... But, I want to be in the health field. So, I like health sciences. [Esra, 19, traditional, first year]

When I was in college, I didn't necessarily like when I went to school for, but I really loved the academic environment. So, I decided that... I'm going to come to university. And I was planning to pursue teaching, which is why I went the university route. [Alberta, 29, mature, first year]

For some students, the knowledge that university offered was more aligned with their future goals and career aspirations, and in Esra's and Alberta's cases, they understood that the knowledge they needed for their future plans was only available through university.

The above findings highlight student's motivations for enrolling in university and factors that impact those motivations, including social and familial norms, pressures, and influences and interviewees' personal motivations. Further analysis of the above findings highlighted two further aspects of students' motivations in their decision to attend university, including multi-motivational orientations and the connected tensions within and between these motivations. Findings from these analyses are presented below and contribute to answering RQ1 and informing aspects of RQ3.

4.4. *Multi-Motivational Orientations*

In Chapter 2, I explained that the disengagement literature has a tendency to label undergraduates as having a single, unidimensional motivational orientation in their decision to attend university, leading me to formulate **RQ1**: *what motivates undergraduates to enrol in university and how does this compare to extant literature on students' enrolment motivations?* A deeper analysis of the findings finds that only a minimum number of interviewees were singularly motivated in their decision to attend university—the vast majority had multiple motivational orientations shaping their decision to enrol. Students' multi-motivational orientations frequently combined different and numerous aspects of the themes noted above (i.e., norms, pressures, influences; job motivations; and personal motivations). Younger students were more likely to list different aspects across at least two, and often all three, of the identified motivational themes, while older, mature students seldom mentioned normative or pressure motivations, and instead spoke more of personal motivations, previous job experiences, and familial influences. As such, although most students had multi-motivational orientations in their decision to enrol in university, different student subgroups tended to express particular motivational orientations. These differences in motivational orientations highlights the nuanced and complex nature of student motivations, challenges extant literature, and highlights the importance of including student voices in the motivational discourse. The passages below encapsulate students' multi-motivational orientations in their decision to enrol in university, with student subgroups used to categorize trends.

Generally, younger students trended towards a combination of social norms and potential job opportunities, with other pressures, influences, and personal motivations also appearing in interviewee responses, though with less frequency. For example, 21-year-old, first-generation student Penelope listed the following as informing her decision to attend university—a combination of social norms and pressures, familial pressures, and intellectual pursuits.

[going to university is] what everyone does ... if you want to get a job and exist in the social and work world when you're older [...] It was just the next logical step

[My parents] were obviously very adamant about me going to university

I want to go into social work, and for that, you need a decent amount of education
[Penelope, 21, first generation, third year]

Similarly, 22-year-old, traditional student Smurf also had numerous factors influencing her decision to attend university, including:

I didn't really see myself as having another choice. ... You're told to go to university [...] That's what you do. Like, everyone in high school was applying to university, so I did too, you know

It wasn't really a question of, oh, am I going to go, or am I not going to go [to university]. It was more of a question of where exactly am I going to go.

I knew I wanted to go to a university that was far away from home, but not too far [...] I kind of wanted the independence of living on my own, 'cause I've never done that before. [Smurf, 22, traditional, fourth year]

This highlights the mix of social norms, pressures, and personal growth that impacted her decision to attend university.

Older interviewees, however, were less likely to speak of social norms or pressures, and instead trended towards speaking of a combination of personal motivations and job experiences and opportunities, and/or familial influence. 34-year-old, mature interviewee Ana

Maria, for instance, spoke of being influenced by her family—both her mom and son—to impress and encourage them (respectively), but also by self-fulfillment and potential job opportunities in her decision to attend university.

I'm aiming to get a university degree, so ... my son can see that ... we can do it

I want to make proud my parents

I wanted to demonstrate that, even though people say 'you cannot do it,' [I can do it]

At this stage, I want to learn. ... I want to get a degree. ... I want to do something I really enjoy. I don't like pushing the broom

Working as a caretaker ... I knew that I wanted to do something else. I knew that I wanted to learn more ... I wasn't very satisfied with what I was doing [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

For Ana Maria, her decision to attend university was a complex arrangement of, and as will be shown below, at times conflicting, motivations shaping her decision to attend university—missing are social norms and pressure, and more prevalent are intrinsic motivations self-fulfillment and familial influences. Both Mary and Yvonne further highlight the prevalence of more intrinsic motivations in older students' decision to enrol in university.

I need to set an example for my children

It's something that, just ... why am I not pursuing this [when it is one of my employer benefits]? ... My kids are old enough and I need to do something for me. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

It was just time for me to do something with my brain again. [...] I wanted to do something where I have to think

Anthropology was something that I always wanted to study

I really was very keen on finishing a university degree. ... Because I had started something back in Germany [and did not finish]. ... And it was something that was really important to me. [Yvonne, 51, mature, first generation, fourth year]

Here, familial influence and self-fulfillment shaped Mary's decision to enroll, while for Yvonne, intellectual pursuits influenced her decision along with self-fulfillment.

Other student subgroups also had multiple motivations for attending university, but tended to have slightly different trends impacting their decision. For instance, students from immigrant families and international students had multi-motivational orientations that included familial pressures, social norms and pressures, and personal growth, yet seldom included intellectual pursuits. For first-generation students, their multi-motivational orientations included social norms, familial pressures, potential job opportunities, and intellectual pursuits, with few other motivations being mentioned. Key, however, is the overall finding that the decision to attend university is significantly more complex and nuanced than is presented in the literature, with different student subgroups exhibiting different trends in their decision to attend university.

In addition to interviewees identifying multiple factors influencing their decision to attend university, a number of them also noted that these numerous motivational orientations were, at times, conflicting, which influence students' educational trajectories, impacting their views and expectations of the undergraduate experience (Chapter 5), and often with negative consequences (Chapter 6). The following section focuses on motivational tensions experienced and noted by interviewees.

4.5. Motivational Tensions

As noted above, students often mentioned an amalgam of pressures, influences, and motivations that comprised their decision to attend university. However, some of these students also expressed that there were conflicts or tensions between different reasons in this

decision. Roughly one quarter of interviewees noted motivational tensions, with each being 23 years of age or younger, and either traditional or first-generation students. Only one mature student mentioned this, but they were younger and had enrolled in university shortly after completing college.

Tensions listed by students most frequently included jobs, costs, and learning. For example, some students felt that though they had to graduate university in order to get a job, regardless if the degree was related to the job or not. Mature student Joy, who had graduated college and was working for a short time before deciding to attend university, expressed that, though she came to university to learn, it did not matter what field her degree was in when it comes to getting a job, hinting at tensions that may arise from this.

I'm getting my degree now, in what I'm interested in, what I'm doing well in. And hopefully, because apparently, you just need schooling, it doesn't matter what the hell it's in these days, you'll get a job. So, definitely I'm here to get a job. Like, I think everyone is, right. But, like I said, I'm also here just to learn, because I love learning [Joy, 23, mature, first year]

Although Joy had come to university for intellectual pursuits, she felt that, the fact that a degree was a necessary prerequisite for a job regardless of discipline, was somewhat irksome.

The tension that some students experienced in deciding to enroll becomes more apparent when looking at how high school experiences shaped students' expectations to attend university. For example, first-generation student Francesca highlighted tensions between jobs, college, and university that were presented to her while in high school.

Going through high school, I was always pushed that, if you want a job right after [high school] you go to college. But if you don't want a job right out, you just want a degree and you want to further your education, you go to university. ... In high school, they push you more to go to university than they do to college. ... University's where it's at. But at the same time, they're telling you, but you're not going to get a job right out of university ... I'm kind of expecting university... like,

get my degree and then go from there—see where that takes me. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

Francesca expressed that, although university is pushed as the preferred educational trajectory out of high school, attaining a university degree does not actually guarantee that you will get a job. This created tension, and highlights a sense of begrudging acceptance, where Francesca states that she will “get my degree and then go from there.”

Other students were more explicit about tensions between their personal motivations and external expectations. Both Apple and Ruth noted that the expectation to get a university degree in order to secure a job was in conflict with their personal motivations, specifically due to the associated costs of attending university. When asked why they decided to attend university, Apple and Ruth said:

I wanted an education. Personal bias, I like learning, but it's too expensive to come here just to learn, so [I need] to be getting something bigger out of it. So, I wanted to get a job, and I thought university would kind of provide me with a better chance of getting that job. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

Well, for me personally, it is really to grow. ... I really don't know what I'm doing. I'm just trying to figure everything out. [...] So, for me [university is] a place where I can just find myself and grow. But then I also have to be realistic as in it cost a lot of money for me to grow. Like, this is costing me so much money. In my head it's like a conflict always, because I know realistically, I can't just always follow my dreams and do what I want, because, like, I have to pay the bills. ... So, I need to get a job, but I also want to grow as a person. I feel like there's so much I need to know about the world and who I am. [Ruth, 19, traditional, first year]

Students noted that, although they wished to learn or follow their dreams while in university, the exorbitant expense of attaining a degree led them to a more utilitarian approach in their decision to attend—attaining a job, which aligns with social norms and expectations that university is the preferred gateway to a ‘good’ job. As such, both Apple and Ruth felt that

they just had to go through the motions and get the degree to get a job rather than being able to pursue higher education for its intrinsic value of learning.

Extending from this, some students expressed that the expectation that you go to university because it is needed for basic entry into a middle-class lifestyle through the attainment of a good job was also contentious. Walter and Jack explained:

Because there's such an expectation that, to advance in society, to move up that ladder, to have that mobility, you need to have a university degree now. And, I mean, a university degree is the new high school diploma ... which is unfortunate, because I don't think that university should be for everyone, because it's not ... what you need to get a job. [...] But university was just something that we were—I was—expected to do, and it was never something I questioned until I got here. [Walter, 19, first generation, first year]

That's what the reality is [—to come to university for the potential job outcomes]. Like truthfully. But I want to say I want to come university for more than just a job at the end of the line. [...] 'Cause, like, university just seems like a wasted potential if you just go to university and graduate with a degree to get a job. There's so much more to university. You can explore the people ... like, stuff they teach, and the clubs, and everything is so ... it gives you so much knowledge that doesn't relate to a job, but it's still good to have. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

The expectation that a university degree was necessary for attaining a good job was problematic for some students—Walter equated an undergraduate degree with being a high school diploma, but conveyed that this is an issue since a degree should not be a necessity to secure a job, while Jack said that only focussing on going to university to get a job would be 'wasted potential,' possibly negating the other benefits that a university can offer.

The tensions that students felt in their decision to attend university revealed conflicts behind why students decided to attend university. Highlighted were tensions between students' personal motivations and external expectations (through norms and pressures), and between various external expectations. Of note, was the fact that these tensions and conflicts were only mentioned by younger, traditional and first-generation students.

Whereas younger students expressed feeling tensions in their decision to attend university, there was a noticeable lack of tensions expressed by mature students. Often, mature students framed their decision to attend university in comparison to younger students (and sometimes their own children), saying they made a conscious choice and wanted to attend university whereas their younger colleagues have less choice and may have been pressured to attend. For example, Lady Gaga who previously mentioned that part of her decision to attend university was influenced by being a good example for her children, articulated, as though speaking to her own children:

... you know, you're in school, and you don't like it. But there's a benefit to it. I'm actually choosing to do it. [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

Similar to Lady Gaga, Mary also compared her experience to what her children's might look like, which she then generalized to younger students coming from high school. When asked about how her experience and her children's experience are different in the decision to attend, Mary replied:

Oh. It'll be totally different. [...] Because I, I'm just going to say it, I want to be here. [...] I'm trying to think back [to] when I was in school... you know, you're in school for so many years, I just want to get a job. I just want to go to the next stage, right—as opposed to continuing education. So, a lot of students might get to university, and they're just, like “ugghhh, more of whatever.” And it's a lot harder. So, I think that it's different, because when you're a mature student, you have a different appreciation because you've been out in the workforce. People coming straight from high school— yeah, high school's hard, university's harder—but it's different than being in the workforce. So, going out and then coming back, you have a different appreciation for school. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

Whereas Mary expressed that younger students may not want to be at university, mature student Yvonne goes a step further and suggests that younger students may feel pressured as though they *have to go* to university:

And it's... like, maybe that's because I'm a mature student... [...] For me, it's... you know, I [chose to go to university] because I want[ed] to do it. It's not because I have to do it, because my parents say, you know, you better go to university. So, my approach—I find that it's a little bit different. [Yvonne, 51, mature, first generation, fourth year]

Some mature students did not express feeling tensions in their decision to attend university because they chose and wanted to go, but suggested that younger students may feel tension because they may not want to be at university and may feel pressured to go.

Although some students internalized normative expectations for attending university, the findings presented in this chapter highlight that this comes at a cost, especially for traditionally-aged students. In their interviews, these younger students spoke of conflicts and tensions between attending university to learn and grow, and the need to get a good job or career. Mature students, however, did not speak about these conflicts and tensions as applicable to themselves, yet highlighted how younger students may be conflicted between wanting to attend and feeling as though going to university was a necessity. The conflicts and tensions that students face have been discussed as points of concern before (AUCC 2011a), and these data show that there is still much work to do to address these issues.

Knowing why undergraduates decide to go to university, understanding how that decision is made, and identifying how competing factors are dealt with is but one part of a larger story. As can be expected and as has been shown (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), students' time at university is also transformative. And, much like expectations to attend university, these transformative experiences while at university are also prone to conflicting demands and tensions for students—not only tensions set out above, but new and different ones as well. The next chapter explores students' perspectives on the undergraduate

experience, their expectations of this transformative time, and comparisons to the dominant engagement success narrative.

5. STUDENT SUCCESS, STUDENT EXPECTATIONS, AND THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

In Chapter 4, I highlighted the various factors influencing undergraduates' decisions to attend university, noting that an amalgam of norms, pressures, influences, and personal motivations shaped their decision to enrol, which, for some interviewees, were in conflict with each other. These findings amplified the problematization of the student motivation discourse outlined in Chapter 2. Additionally, in Chapter 2 I also highlighted how research has connected students' motivations for attending university with students' engagement levels, which I also problematized through the characterization of disengagement, approaches to and measures of student motivations, views of student success expectations, institutional responses to student diversity, and the missing student voice. As such, and in order to answer **RQ2: *What are students' expectations of the undergraduate experience and how does this compare to the dominant student engagement success narrative***—this chapter examines students' perspectives on and expectations of the undergraduate experience and the dominant engagement success discourse. An additional goal of this chapter is to highlight any connections between interviewees' motivations for attending university and their views of being a successful undergraduate.

In order to compare student perspectives to the dominant engagement success narrative, interviewees were asked about their expectations and views of undergraduate success, the undergraduate experience, and the student engagement success narrative, where students were also asked to define a successful undergraduate or ways of measuring success as an undergraduate. Responses were thematically coded and provided the student perspective

on undergraduate success, additionally highlighting connections to students' motivations for attending university. To understand students' perspectives on the engagement success narrative, interviewees were given an explanation of this narrative and then asked their opinions of it. The dominant engagement success narrative was defined and based on the current discourse that says undergraduate success can be measured through a student's academic and extracurricular engagement within the undergraduate experience—and usually through time-use or participation (Kuh et al. 2006). And, although other research has suggested that other, less conspicuous expectations have grown within the undergraduate experience to further include making friends and building social networks, volunteering and/or working, and having the time of their life (Norton and Martini 2017), these non-academic, and quite diverse expectations are generally grouped together under *enriching educational experiences* in the NSSE and related literature, or are left out of or minimized in the dominant engagement success discourse. As such, the narrative was presented to interviewees summarily and generally as “getting high grades” and “getting involved on campus/extracurricular participation,” with examples (e.g., student government, going to the gym, joining clubs, playing sports/intramurals, being on the rowing team) and further information provided to interviewees as required for probing and/or interviewee understanding.

To more thoroughly understand expectations of the undergraduate experience from the student point of view, interviewee perspectives on the dominant success narrative and their own expectations of the undergraduate experience were analyzed together. Additionally, although questions were framed to elicit responses more applicable to a general

undergraduate student population, some interviewees contextualized their responses either as more applicable to themselves or to other students more generally—all such responses are included here. Interviewee responses were coded inductively with analysis uncovering three dominant themes: internalized norms, expectational tensions, and rethinking expectations of the undergraduate experience. The following presents these themes and the related subthemes and includes student subgroup differences and connections to interviewees' motivations where applicable.

This chapter thus seeks to add to the engagement success narrative by adding much-needed student voices. Asking students about their expectations of the undergraduate experience and understanding their perspectives on student success highlights what they identify as important, which, in turn, helps shape their decisions about participation in university. Together, students' motivations for attending university and their expectations of the undergraduate experience directly contribute to a better understanding of the “disengaged student” narrative by identifying a student's choice to engage or not and what shapes this choice. The following highlights students' perspectives and expectations of the undergraduate experience more generally and on student success in particular.

5.1. Internalized Norms: Grades and Extracurriculars

Overall, most interviewees, either in the context of the dominant narrative or their own views of the undergraduate experience, articulated that academic and extracurricular engagement were foundational to a successful university experience. For example, interviewees Jermaine and Aliliana both spoke of these aspects of undergraduate success, with

Jermaine's response articulated in context of the engagement success narrative and Aliliana's response framed through her personal perspective on being a successful undergraduate.

I think that [grades and extracurricular involvement] is a perfect example ... I feel it is, like, a true [...] the base for [undergraduate] success. Because if you can mix both, combine both, and doing them both, then that's really amazing. [Jermaine, 22, international, third year]

[An undergraduate student's success is based on] I think, like, how high their GPA is, type thing. Also, how well-built their resume is. [...] Just, kind of, they've done a lot of ... experienced a lot of things [...] like, extracurriculars, clubs. Been involved. Had leadership positions. [Aliliana, 18, traditional, first year]

Similar to Jermaine and Aliliana, many other interviewees also either agreed with, or expressed the importance of, grades and extracurricular participation as part of undergraduate success. Additionally, further analysis of interviewee responses suggests a deeper connection between students' motivations for attending university and *how* and *why* grades and extracurricular participation were important to undergraduate success for some students.

5.1.1. The importance of grades. With most interviewees noting the importance of grades and extracurricular participation to undergraduate success, it was also interesting to see *how* they were important to students. Although both were mentioned by interviewees, grades were noted more frequently, with their importance being shaped by a combination of students' motivations for attending and their expectations of the undergraduate experience. Although many interviewees indicated that high grades were a key measure of undergraduate success, others suggested that passing grades that students had to work hard for were a better measure. Interestingly, for some of these interviewees, it was suggested that success at university was not necessarily about attaining the *highest* grades but more about students achieving grades according to the *best of their abilities*, which they applied to other

students—interviewees still felt pressured themselves to attain high grades. How interviewees framed the importance of grades was connected to what they felt grades were indicative of or necessary for, which was also influenced by their motivations to attend university. For some interviewees the importance of grades was articulated through an access narrative where higher grades granted more and better access to prestigious departments and programs or graduate studies, while other students viewed grades as a measure of ability or competence—a self-validation of sorts. Generally, younger students emphasized the importance of grades through the access narrative, while older, and some first-generation students emphasized the importance of grades with self-validation.

For some younger interviewees, the importance of high grades was articulated through an access narrative. Specifically, students framed attaining higher grades as increasing access to prestigious departments, programs, or graduate studies. For example, 19-year-old Jack had explained that “grades are just numbers. Some people might be failing, but they are not stupid people.” Yet, he wished his own mid- to high-seventies GPA was higher because of “the pressure from [the university’s prestigious business program].” The importance of grades to Jack then, was to gain access to this particular program.

Like Jack, 21-year-old Sarah L. also attached the importance of grades to that of access, with her goal being medical school. Sarah L. was also cognizant that grades could be more individually defined, but that, due to the nature of the program she hoped to gain access to, her grades needed to be especially high:

I think it’s [what constitutes high grades] up to that person’s own definition of high grades. And what they want or need. I think that if my goal or dream wasn’t medical school—if I wanted to do something else—then I would have a different set of—a

different cut-off grade that I needed to get, in order to feel like I was a successful student. [Sarah L., 21, traditional, third year]

Sarah L., who had previously noted that there was pressure from her family to go to university, also noted she was part of the Advanced Placement program in high school—a program that is equivalent to first year university level studies, both of which, she said, impacted her expectations of university, and consequently her views of undergraduate success.

For other interviewees, generally mature and first-generation students, the importance of grades was more aligned with self-validation. In this case, interviewees noted how attaining high or above average grades was success for them, validating their abilities and indicating that they had the capacity for university studies. Mature student Jane Doe framed undergraduate success through a student's marks and their effort towards, and happiness with, those marks—"It, doesn't have to be an honors mark, it doesn't have to be an A. It could be a really tough C, but [they] made it through". However, she viewed undergraduate success differently for herself, which she related back to one of her motivations for enrolling in university.

I'm very concerned about marks, which my husband always points out, is a kind of hypocritical if I'm just there for the love of learning. But I've always been on the Dean's List. [...] It just matters to me. [I: To validate yourself?] Yeah. [Jane Doe, 50s, mature, first generation, third year]

Jane Doe had also mentioned earlier that her decision to enrol in university was a combination of many factors, including feeling like "a little bit of a second-class citizen, not having [her] degree" while working at the university, as well as genuinely "lov[ing] taking classes [...] and loving learning." Thus, although Jane Doe articulated that the achievement of a good grade through effort could be considered successful, her own expectations of the

undergraduate experience made grades important to her through self-validation—an indication to her that she had learned and understood the material.

Mature student Alicia, also expressed that grades were important to her, especially compared to the class average. She had mentioned that, when she was younger, she felt as though she maybe “wasn’t the smartest student” and that she might “not be able to do [university],” and her eventually choosing to enrol in university “was self-fulfillment,” the influence of which can be seen in the importance she placed on grades.

I like to know my mark, but I like to know what the class average is. [...] It’s a big thing for me. ... How did I do compared to others? Because, like I told you, I work so hard. And a lot of times, I’m very much higher than the class average. So, it makes me feel like, you know what, all that hard work I did, it paid off. [Alicia, 56, mature, fourth year]

For Alicia, part of her motivations for enrolling in university—self-fulfillment—influenced her expectation of attaining higher-than-average grades, whereby grades acted as a self-validation mechanism, indicating that she can, indeed, succeed at university.

Some first-generation student interviewees also connected attaining high grades to self-validation. For instance, both Apple and Francesca expressed that grades validated their ability to succeed at university. Apple, who was in her final year of studies, reflected that, for her, the importance of grades was connected both to self-validation, as well as validation through that of her professors.

I personally always joke that, “as long as I pass, it’s ok,” but realistically, I try to make the honours list every year. Sometimes I don’t, sometimes I do. Sometimes life kinda gets in the way. I think success as a student would be ... trying to get honours list and trying to actually get the best grades I can get in every class. I like to prove to myself and prove to my profs [that I can do it/am capable/smart enough]. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

Similarly, Francesca connected grades to validating her abilities, going so far as to suggest that a degree is something you are rewarded with. Although Francesca had said earlier in the interview that undergraduates “don’t ... have to get 90s ... to be deemed successful,” when it came to her own grades, she attached more importance to them, connecting them to a sense of pride:

I’m here to get good grades. ... Like, it’s not just the degree that I’m here to get. I want to kind of be proud of getting my degree. And not “I just slid by and got a degree.” I want it to be, I worked and I got the grades that I hoped to get. And in doing that, I was *rewarded* with the degree. [...] I feel like it gives more satisfaction. And it gives me something to be proud of and I got my degree. [...] So, in my eyes, it can be somewhat, like, a waste of money, just to slide by, have poor grades, and have a poor average, to get a piece of paper. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

Both Apple and Francesca had attached self-validation to the attainment of high grades; however, for some interviewees, grades were but one part of undergraduate success—many students also spoke of the importance of extracurricular participation, discussed next.

5.1.2. The importance of extracurriculars. While fewer interviewees noted the importance of extracurriculars compared to grades as part of a successful undergraduate experience, there were still, mostly younger, students who expressed the importance of participating in them. Generally, these younger interviewees understood that extracurricular engagement was an important aspect of undergraduate success, and often based on the benefits gained from extracurricular participation, e.g., networking, stress relief, physical health, and the acquisition of soft/transferable and job-specific skills. Again, 19-year-old Jack provides an example. Although Jack was partly motivated to go to university for a job at the end, he also understood that there was more to the undergraduate experience, much of which aligns with extracurricular engagement and its associated benefits.

I want to say I want to come university for more than just a job at the end of the line. [...] 'Cause, university just seems like a wasted potential if you just go to university, and graduate with a degree to get a job. There's so much more to university. You can explore the people, stuff they teach, and the clubs. And like, everything ... gives you so much knowledge that doesn't relate to a job, but it's still good to have. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

Jack also said that he expected to gain certain aspects from his undergraduate experience, much of which can be seen in his motivations for enrolling in university:

A degree would be nice. And, just, life skills, I guess. And friends ... that I can talk to until I die, or something like that. And just ... I don't know how to put it into words, but the experience of university. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

These expectations then became part of how Jack defined being a successful undergraduate:

For me, a successful undergraduate student would be someone who achieves what is required to advance in university. ... And also, gaining new life experiences, and new experiences you wouldn't have learned back at home. [...] Yeah. Meeting new friends to have new experiences, that you didn't have before. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

Part of Jack's motivation for coming to university and what he expected from his undergraduate experience directly translated into his views of undergraduate success, with extracurricular engagement and the associated benefits playing a key role in this view.

23-year-old Rebecca also felt that, along with high grades making you a successful undergraduate, extracurricular involvement gives students a host of benefits that she also found to be important.

I think high grades are definitely, they definitely make you successful. For sure. And the other one was, and get, like [...] I think you learn a lot of traits and you learn a lot of new things by being involved. I think that's important too. And, obviously, it looks good on the résumé, right. Like, it looks good to employers, and stuff like that. [Rebecca, 23, mature, first generation, first year]

Rebecca, who had enrolled in university after graduating from college, noted that she was motivated to attend university because she "wanted both perspectives," and that she "knew that [she] would learn a different way in university," but also because "it would probably get

[her] farther ... in her career.” These expectations connect to how she defined undergraduate success—through the importance she placed on grades and extracurricular involvement.

As I will show below, other interviewees, however, had different views on the importance of extracurricular engagement, with some framing it as only applicable to other students and not part of their own views of undergraduate success, while others challenged the importance of extracurricular engagement altogether, especially if it conflicted with the attainment of high grades. As such, although interviewee responses indicated that there has been an internalization of normative expectations of attaining high grades and participating in extracurriculars, why and how these are important to students varies. And, as will be shown next, although there has been an internalization of the dominant narrative, interviewees problematize these measures of undergraduate success, which, along with interviewees’ individual expectations of a successful undergraduate experience, form the basis for a number of expectational tensions that further impact individual educational trajectories.

5.2. *Expectational Tensions*

Although many interviewees accepted grades and extracurricular engagement as part of their expectations for undergraduate success, a number of interviewees expressed concerns with this dominant narrative. Some interviewees challenged the more general narrative, including both grades and extracurriculars, while others took issue with either of these separately. Each of these main themes—engagement success narrative tensions, grades and assessment tensions, extracurricular participation tensions, and multi-expectational tensions—explain key issues that students had with undergraduate success expectations, both

their own and those internalized as normative from the dominant engagement success narrative.

When highlighting some of the tensions with the dominant narrative, students also highlighted some of their own expectations of being a successful undergraduate, which created further tensions for some interviewees. In this manner, not only was the dominant narrative a source of tension for students, so too was the interplay between the various normative and personal expectations of undergraduate success that interviewees had. The headings below highlight both tensions with the dominant narrative and tensions within and between the dominant narrative and interviewees' individual expectations of undergraduate success. Additionally, although the key focus of the dominant engagement success narrative is about articulating indicators of being a successful undergraduate, these can be framed as what is expected of students to be successful, and as such, *expectations* will be used more broadly to describe what students must do to be considered successful.

5.2.1. *Engagement success narrative tensions.* Some interviewees, including those who accepted the dominant engagement success narrative, challenged this narrative, highlighting a number of ways that it could be problematic. Interviewees challenged both the narrative itself and the narrative's role within students' individual educational trajectory. For example, some interviewees suggested that, although getting good grades and extracurricular participation are good baseline measures of undergraduate success, these might not be accomplishable—or wanted—by all students as part of their undergraduate experience. For instance, Jermaine, who earlier said that high grades and campus extracurricular engagement

were a “perfect example” of undergraduate success, further suggested that this was more of an ideal to strive towards rather than something that all students could achieve.

If you show me, and you say this person does well in school, and also does well ... in extracurricular activities. You’d be like, wow, that person is not human, and all of that. ... I think everyone should aspire for that, but I don’t think everyone will get that. [Jermaine, 22, international, third year]

Like Jermaine, first-generation student Isabelle also suggested that the dominant narrative could be viewed as the universal understanding of success, and although not all students could achieve it, students should still strive for it.

I feel like that’s ... every person’s goal. ... Everyone who goes into undergrad, tries to get good grades, and be involved, and meet a lot of people. I feel like that’s kind of the universal understanding of success. But not everyone can achieve that. So, it’s kind of like, the process of aiming towards that. [Isabelle, 21, first generation, third year]

For Jermaine and Isabelle, there was nothing wrong with determining undergraduate success as measured by the dominant narrative, but there was also a caveat attached—not everyone might be able to achieve it.

For other interviewees, there was a question as to whether the dominant narrative of attaining high grades and participating in extracurriculars was aligned with student’s individual expectations of university, specifically whether or not the student wanted or valued those things. Both Leslie and Lady Gaga questioned the dominant narrative as being the *best* way to measure undergraduate success, especially if this was different than a student’s own views. When asked if a successful undergraduate student could be measured by their grades and extracurricular participation, Leslie and Lady Gaga replied:

No. Because, is that what they want? Like, you can be successful in someone else’s eyes, but are you successful in your own? [...] And I think this goes to dominant ideologies, like, what people hold as a standard of success. And if you meet that, then you are successful to the greater population. However, I think self-success is more

important because you need to attain what *you* want. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

I would ask if it's what they wanted. [...] I've seen people go through university and at the end of it be like, ick, and dump it. [...] Because their parents made them do it. They have the ability to do it, so they did it. [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

For some students, high grades and extracurricular participation as a measure of undergraduate success was not necessarily problematic in and of itself, rather, it was only applicable if students had the same expectations. And, although it was noted that a student could be seen as successful according to these measures, in order for them to be truly successful, they had to fulfill their own expectations.

While some students challenged the dominant narrative's applicability if it did not align with the student's expectations, others suggested that defining undergraduate success through the dominant narrative was but one way from which to measure success—students may have other ways of measuring undergraduate success according to their own motivations and expectations. This was mentioned most frequently by first-generation student interviewees. Both Yvonne and Mabel agreed that grades and extracurricular engagement were good measures of undergraduate success, yet, they were quick to add that there was more to the story than that.

I think that's a good definition, but I don't think that it's ... it's not a fit for everybody. [Yvonne, 51, mature, first generation, fourth year]

I don't think those [grades and extracurriculars] are bad things. But I think there's more areas that could be deemed successful. I don't think it's just about being the smartest, or being the most athletic. I think there's more than one way to measure success. I don't think those things should be undervalued, just because we want to value other things. [Mabel, 21, first generation, second year]

Although there was a general acceptance of the dominant narrative, for these interviewees, individual educational trajectories shaped how students understood and adjusted their expectations to be a successful undergraduate. More importantly, as Mabel said, hierarchizing expectations for undergraduate success devalues individual success when compared to the dominant narrative.

21-year-old, first-generation student Penelope more explicitly suggested that undergraduate success is very subjective and individualized to a student's particular circumstances, and that it could mean different things to different students, even when taking into account the dominant narrative.

I think that success is just so, individually defined. So subjective. If I'm getting a 70, but I work a lot of hours ... and that's what I need to get through school. Like, I would only need a 73 average, technically, to get into my Master's—73 average is definitely not good for everyone. But if I was happy with that, and I was working a lot of hours ... because I had to pay my way through university, then I would be like, this is successful to me. But that wouldn't be what's successful to everyone. ... So, I think it's very subjective. And there's definitely this ideal type. [Penelope, 21, first generation, third year]

For some students, the dominant narrative was seen more as an ideal, with a student's individual educational trajectory being equally as important in shaping their views of undergraduate success.

First-generation student Francesca, however, went a step further and suggested that, although grades are an important aspect of undergraduate success, the overall narrative including extracurricular participation should not be forced on undergraduates as it could negatively impact a student's individual educational trajectory. When asked if high grades and getting involved on campus are a good way to define a successful student, Francesca said:

No. I don't think so. [...] Okay. The high grades, I feel like, kind of. ... I feel like no person is going to say they succeeded if they've failed university. [...] I don't think

you have to get 90s and I don't think that you have to be active within the university community—I don't think that's something that's necessary, and I don't think that should be pushed upon people, or people should be forced to do in order to be deemed as successful. [...] I feel like some people just don't function in that way. Some people just don't want to do that stuff. ... Forcing people or giving people the idea that that's how they have to be successful—it might not only discourage them, but it might prevent them from being as successful as they could be. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

For Francesca, not only are grades and engagement not the best measure of undergraduate success, but forcing these measures on students has potential negative impacts on their own expectations of the undergraduate experience, highlighting expectational tensions between the dominant narrative and individual expectations.

One of the more salient findings was noted specifically by mature interviewees and framed the dominant narrative of attaining high grades and participating in extracurriculars as a good measure of undergraduate success for younger students, but not for themselves. For example, mature student Bryce explained that the entire undergraduate experience—including the dominant narrative—is directed more towards younger students, which made navigating the undergraduate experience more difficult for him as an older student. When asked if high grades and extracurricular participation were effective ways of measuring undergraduate success, Bryce replied:

I would say so. Yeah. Especially for a younger student. [...] I feel like it's more applicable to young students. I don't think the [university] environment is conducive to mature students. [...] I find it harder to make my way through the undergraduate process as a mature student than it is as a younger student. [Bryce, 44, mature, first generation, first year]

Bryce, who had earned a university degree when he was younger, found that, as a mature student, the dominant narrative, as well as the majority of the undergraduate experience, was

less directed towards older students, and as such, he had more difficulty navigating his time at university in this degree compared to his first degree.

Interviewee Mary further highlighted this differentiation between older and younger students and explained how her undergraduate experience will be different than her children's due to her *wanting* to be at university, compared to younger students, who, as Mary alludes, are going to university less out of want and more out of necessity.

I'm just going to say it, I want to be here. [...] You're in school for so many years—I just want to get a job. I just want to go to the next stage, right—as opposed to continuing education. So, a lot of students might get to university, and they're just, like “ugghhh, more of whatever.” ... So, I think that it's different, because when you're a mature student, you have a different appreciation because you've been out in the workforce. People coming straight from high school—yeah, high school's hard, university's harder—but it's different than being in the workforce. So, going out and then coming back, you have a different appreciation for school. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

For Mary, her age-related experiences shaped her undergraduate expectations so that, although, as she mentioned elsewhere in the interview, she understands the importance of the dominant engagement success narrative because “there has to be some sort of benchmark,” she also said “that's somebody else's definition” and that

If you want to be successful, yes, participate in clubs that are of interest to you—if that's your thing. Do what's required of you to ... because university is about the education, and it is also about the relationships—I get that—but, I'm a mature student. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

As such, Mary rejected the dominant narrative for herself and redefined undergraduate success in a way that aligned with her motivations for coming to university, which in turn shaped her expectations of the undergraduate experience. Yet, at the same time, she acknowledged that younger students may not have the same expectations of their

undergraduate experience that she or other older students may have, and younger students' expectations may include aspects of the dominant engagement narrative.

Further, as mature students Lady Gaga and Mary articulated, as a result of their expectations of undergraduate success being different than the dominant narrative, when they achieved a low grade—something seen as unsuccessful according to the dominant narrative—it did not impact their individual expectations of undergraduate success.

Coming back into a school environment after 20 years and getting 80s—I've never even taken a university exam—was a very good feeling for me. That was a successful feeling for me. But when I didn't do that well in anthropology, I didn't feel like I was unsuccessful. I felt like I had realized that won't be part of my goal. So, I think it's maybe shaping your goal, and getting to that goal on some level. [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

[Last year, I took on more than I could handle] and it brought my average down. But, you know, I had always aspired to having that asterisk [graduating with distinction/honours] beside my name, because that meant something to me too. But knowing that I've got two kids that are busy, and a very busy job, I just went, you know what, I need to be happy with just learning what I'm learning and getting that degree. And if I get that asterisk—it's still my goal—but to not be disappointed if I don't. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

As Lady Gaga and Mary noted earlier, self-fulfillment was part of their decisions to enrol in university and by framing undergraduate success in their own terms—as gaining new knowledge and getting a degree—they were able to reduce tensions within and between their expectations of undergraduate success. Viewed together, the above underscores how, due to their individual motivations and expectations of undergraduate success, mature students redefine success in their own terms, often with less, or different, importance placed on the constituent aspects of the dominant narrative. Consequently, while mature students problematized the various expectations of undergraduate success, they reframed undergraduate success in their own terms, and refocused the narrative on their own

expectations, which were more aligned with intrinsic motivations, resulting in less or no tensions for them.

As shown, most interviewees had internalized the normative discourse of attaining high grades and participating in extracurriculars as expectations for being a successful undergraduate; however, many also problematized this same discourse. For some younger interviewees, this resulted in tensions, while for older interviewees, redefining expectations of undergraduate success in their own way allowed them to problematize the dominant engagement success narrative and suggest that this could result in tensions for younger students, but not themselves. Viewed differently, while younger students tended to fit their individual expectations around those of the dominant narrative, older students' individual expectations took precedence, resulting in a refocusing of the importance, or removal of, different aspects of the dominant narrative in their individual educational trajectories. These individual aspects of the dominant narrative were also problematized, which is explored next.

5.2.2. *Grades and assessment tensions.* When it came to more specific problems with the dominant narrative, interviewees spoke of grades and assessment most frequently, with a focus on how students are assessed and what grades are indicative of. The general consensus was that grades were the largest pressure and cause of tensions for most interviewees. Grades and assessment were problematized most frequently by younger students, and can be traced to the importance that interviewees attached to grades. For some younger interviewees, grades were an important measure of success, yet, students also questioned what these grades were indicative of and how they were assessed in attaining those grades. For example, Jack, who earlier commented about grades only being 'numbers', further said:

Grades are important, because that's what most people look at these days. But I feel how you develop that knowledge in your head and how you transfer it to other people, and stuff like that—I feel like that's important too, because sometimes, you can't write stuff down, but you would know it, but you just can't write it down on the test, or something. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

Jack, who understands that grades have been normalized as important, questions the way in which students are assessed to gain those grades and how that connects to the development of knowledge, highlighting a tension between the two.

Both Apple and Esra also problematized grades, specifically their connection to intelligence, and explained that, how students are assessed impacts their grades, which they suggested, does not reflect student's actual knowledgeability about or understanding of the material.

One thing that's always bothering me about grades is that, sometimes you can debate if that's an actual appropriate way to test somebody's intelligence or knowledge of a course. I'm somebody who's really bad at memorization and regurgitating. ... I understand the actual concept itself, but I can't name it off the top of my head sometimes. ... I've actually helped other students in classes, where they didn't know what they were doing, never showed up, didn't try hard. I worked harder, understood more. I explained everything to them, and they finished with better grades than I did, because they test better than I do. And that infuriates me. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

I'm okay with taking exams, but I know there are people who have test anxiety and stuff like that. Why do I have to take a test to show how much knowledge I know? Why can't I show it in a different way? I wish it was more open, to show how much we actually learned.

[I: So, are grades an effective way of measuring how successful you are as a student?] To me, no, not really. For many reasons. Like, in classes where you have online quizzes, you can easily cheat and get a good mark. Or, you can still cheat in class, as well, when you're doing your exam. [Esra, 19, traditional, first year]

For Apple and Esra, although grades were important to them, how they were assessed to earn those grades was problematic because some students may have test anxiety, while others may cheat. Because of these reasons, grades, as a measure of knowledgeability and intelligence

were questionable for them. The push towards attaining high grades and how students are assessed, then, is a cause of tension for younger students—the rigidity of assessment and what grades represented were often at odds with how students wished to be assessed or what grades were indicative of for them.

5.2.3. *Extracurricular participation tensions.* Extracurricular participation was also problematized by some interviewees, either as being of no benefit to them or feeling forced. Interviewees that challenged extracurricular participation as being of no personal benefit were older students, some of whom felt that, although it is an important part of the undergraduate engagement success narrative, extracurricular participation was more beneficial for younger students. These interviewees explained that, because they were older, they had already gained much of the espoused benefits of extracurricular participation such as networking/friends and transferable/soft skills (e.g., time management, teamwork, and leadership). Also, some older interviewees said it would be nice to get involved on campus, but that, due to other responsibilities (both university and non-university), extracurricular participation was not possible. For the small number of older interviewees that did participate in on-campus extracurriculars directed towards mature students, they found these experiences to be unfulfilling and not beneficial to them. Mature student Alicia, for instance, when asked if the dominant engagement success narrative was a good definition of undergraduate success, explained:

Not for me. But, a definition of success for a young person that's [right out of high school] ... Because to me, maybe it's because I'm older, but getting involved in clubs and all these other things—that's not important to me. I have my whole social life. I have what I want, as far as social... social interactions are. ... I mean, when you're younger, you're building your social life, right. Because it's small. I am 56 years old. I have a huge social [life ...] But for younger people, they need to build that. It gives

them an opportunity to interact with each other. To make friends. Build social circles. Whereas, I, I'm at the point where I don't need to—it's not important to me. I don't have enough time ... because I'm too busy doing all the things that I do.
[Alicia, 56, mature, fourth year]

For Alicia, the benefits that students may get from participating in extracurriculars was good for younger students, but, because she did not have the time, nor would she benefit from it if she did, found extracurricular participation to be “not important,” and thus, it was not part of her individual undergraduate success expectations.

Similarly, mature student Jane Doe also suggested that getting involved on campus would not be beneficial to her, nor would her presence benefit others. Even when she participated in on-campus mature students' group events, she expressed that she gained very little from these experiences.

I don't belong to any of the clubs here [on campus]. It's not something that would be beneficial to me. And I don't think that I would have a lot to offer most of the clubs. [Jane Doe, 50s, mature, first generation, third year]

I have gone to a few of them [mature student group events. ...] I didn't get a whole lot out of them. I just ... you know, you see other people, and you recognize a few of them there.

[I: It feels forced, then?]

Yeah. For me, it did. I mean, other people go to them all the time and they love them, but it just wasn't my thing. [Jane Doe, 50s, mature, first generation, third year]

Mature student Mary, however, went a step further and explained that, besides participating in extracurriculars being of little benefit to her, measuring her success as an undergraduate this way, made her feel less successful.

When you define success, I don't define it by reaching out and being involved in all the clubs, because I guess, well, can I say I'm an introvert? [...] I kind of get more out of a quiet environment. When there's lots of noises and stuff like that, I don't, I don't enjoy it. So, you know, when you describe a successful student as somebody being involved in all that stuff, well that's not my thing. So, I'm now excluded from potentially being a successful student. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

For some of the older interviewees, participating in extracurriculars was not beneficial to them, and as Mary pointed out, there was a tension between what students wanted and what the dominant narrative set as expectations for being a successful undergraduate.

Some younger students spoke of extracurricular participation feeling forced due to requirements for future prospects, with both Ruth and Jack explaining that some students get involved, not because of their interests, rather, because it looks good on a résumé, which to Jack, feels disingenuous.

I know so many people who do all these things [extracurriculars], and just for the résumé. Just to get a future job. ... Just the other day I was talking to a girl who, like, she told me that she hates kids, but she got a job at a summer camp ... [Ruth, 19, traditional, first year]

I feel like, some people are forced into clubs, because they require it on their résumé, or whatever they need it for. Like [business school] and stuff like that. Because some people, they told me, "Oh, I don't like this club at all." And I'm like, "Why are you in it?" "Because I need to do it for [business school]." So, it seems very forced, instead of genuine. [Jack, 19, traditional, first year]

For both Ruth and Jack, extracurricular participation, in and of itself was not problematic, it was when students were getting involved because they *felt they had to rather than because they wanted to* that was problematic. This highlights tensions between wanting to gain the benefits of participating in extracurriculars and feeling as though it is forced.

5.2.4. *Multi-expectational tensions.* For many interviewees, their expectations for being a successful undergraduate student were complex and varied, with influences from their own motivations and the dominant engagement narrative. Thus, interviewees had internalized the norms of working towards high grades (indicative of academic engagement in 'educationally purposive activities' in the NSSE and related literature) and participating in extracurriculars (indicative of social engagement in 'enriching educational experiences' in the

NSSE and related literature) as part of their expectations of undergraduate success along with their own expectations that were influenced and shaped by their motivations for attending university. However, interviewees also expressed experiencing strain within and between these numerous and varied expectations—*multi-expectational tensions*. Interviewees who mentioned these tensions highlighted that *what* and *how many expectations* students had could lead to issues. These tensions were only noted by—and about, by a few older interviewees—younger interviewees. For example, older student Lady Gaga questioned whether younger students whose undergraduate experiences were heavily influenced by their parents and who were enrolled in a program of no interest to them, could be considered successful, even if they attained their degree.

Student success is completely different [than the dominant engagement success narrative]. And, so, I think to measure it would be finding those pieces. Like, why are people coming to university? Is it the next step for you? Do you have wealthy parents and they're like, "No. I went. You're going?" You know. "You're going to be a lawyer. I'm a lawyer, you're going to be a lawyer." And this poor kid's probably like, "I actually would like to be a chef." So, if he gets attains his goal of like, the law degree, was he successful? You know what I mean? Maybe student-wise with his marks. But, was he successful? [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

Lady Gaga notes that there may be tensions between what a student wants to do at university and what they actually do—a motivational tension that leads to expectational tensions, but only for younger students. As she further highlights, the undergraduate experience is less about being successful according to certain measures and more about your own individual educational trajectory. As a mature student who has established themselves, Lady Gaga does not worry about this for herself, but, due to the numerous influences shaping their decision to go to university as well as their expectations of the undergraduate experience, suggests that this is more applicable to younger students with less life and work experience.

Lady Gaga's excerpt above highlights an additional tension expressed by interviewees, that of wanting to enrol in a program out of interest and enrolling in a program out of its potential career benefits—studying to become a lawyer versus studying the culinary arts. 19-year-old Walter, noted this tension in his own studies, and expressed how pursuing a university degree for knowledge's sake would not provide a lot of transferable job skills, which shaped his expectations of the undergraduate experience.

I wouldn't say that we learn a ton of hands-on skills that apply directly to a job. I mean, I'm in political science, but where does that get me? Am I going to be political scientist? Like what does that actually mean? [...] I don't even know. It's just a line on my degree. [... However,] I'm also looking at [prestigious business school], of course. And that is a professional school, so, it has a tangible outcome. Maybe not so much as something like engineering or nursing or education. But, at least like, there's kind of an end game with business. Like, you're going to be an investment banker. You're going to be a marketer. Like one of those kind of things. Whereas in political science, sociology, history, English, even some of the sciences, what are you doing with that, other than research after your undergraduate degree? Like, I don't really know. But university was just something that, like, we were, I was expected to do, and it was never something I questioned until I got here. And, yes, I like what I'm studying. And I'm very interested in it. But where am I going to use sociology of youth? Where am I going to use comparative politics? I don't really know at this point. [Walter, 19, first generation, first year]

Walter expressed tension between wanting to study his interests, but expecting that there were few transferable and job skills gained from his choice of programs, took a more instrumental approach to his studies.

For other interviewees, there was a more generalized view of tensions between the various and numerous undergraduate expectations they had. Interviewees who mentioned these tensions often did so by suggesting that it was difficult to meet all of these expectations and be happy, mentally well, or have school-life balance (this is discussed in detail in the next section). For 20-year-old Natalie, there were a number of expectations she listed for students

to be considered successful; however, after listing these expectations, she challenged her own view, underscoring a certain level of uncertainty with these expectations.

I would define success in different areas. I think student success has to do, one, with your marks—so, how well you do in each course. I think it also has to do with how well you can time manage everything. So, extracurriculars, your academics, and your life. Yeah, I think ... your extracurricular thing's part of student success. Because everyone keeps preaching about [being ...] a well-rounded student. So, basically, I think student success would be somebody who can fit into that. And I'm not saying that somebody that doesn't fit into that isn't successful—they are. [Natalie, 20, traditional, first year]

Here, although Natalie initially accepted the dominant engagement success narrative, she also challenged it, suggesting you could be successful according to different, but unarticulated, measures or expectations. There is an underlying tension here between what expectations Natalie has laid out for undergraduate success and whether students attain those expectations, but also between students' different expectations of what it means to be successful.

Another interviewee, 19-year-old Sarah S., also questioned the undergraduate expectations she had just noted; however, it was only until Sarah S. had included mental wellness in these expectations that she challenged them. Sarah S. explained that, to be a successful undergraduate, students must have:

Good extracurriculars. Has a job at the same time as getting really high marks, I guess. [...] Yeah, and then I guess, also, like, healthy. So, fit. [...] Yeah physically. [...] Mentally fit. But I don't know if it's possible with all of those. [Sarah S., 19, traditional, first year]

Here, the number of expectations that Sarah S. lists as part of being a successful undergraduate are only recognized as problematic once she considers mental wellness as part of the equation, suggesting that perhaps it is due to the number of expectations that students

have of what it means to successfully navigate the undergraduate experience that leads to mental health issues.

For many interviewees, the undergraduate experience was a mélange of expectations that they had to negotiate and navigate. And, while many interviewees had internalized the dominant engagement success narrative as part of their expectations for being a successful undergraduate, many also problematized the narrative and its individual components. As noted, many tensions were a result of a combination of both the dominant narrative and individual expectations. These are explored more thoroughly below as students articulated ways of rethinking expectations within the undergraduate experience.

5.3. Rethinking Expectations of the Undergraduate Experience

Above, it was shown that a large number of interviewees had internalized the norms of attaining high grades and participating in extracurriculars as key to a successful undergraduate experience, but that a number of them also problematized this same narrative. How students problematized this narrative was connected to interviewees' motivations for enrolling in university as well as their expectations of their undergraduate experience, including the dominant engagement success narrative. As such, how interviewees framed their expectations of the undergraduate experience were much more complex and nuanced than the dominant narrative suggests or allows. Interviewees' expectations of the undergraduate experience were a complex mix that, in some cases, included aspects of the dominant narrative and other expectations, and in other cases, were framed more individually with few or no aspects of the dominant narrative included.

For some students, the dominant engagement success narrative was one part of a larger, more personal set of expectations that they had of the undergraduate experience. For example, when asked if getting high grades and participating in extracurriculars was indicative of a successful student, 23-year-old interviewee Frank agreed, but then explained how being a successful undergraduate student requires doing “multiple things”.

I think that’s a fairly accurate description of a successful student. ... Of course, I agree with that description, definitely. You have to be balanced. And you have to be well-rounded. You have to do multiple things in order to be a successful student.
[Frank, 23, mature, third year]

What these multiple things were, however, was not specifically articulated. Looking at students’ motivations, however, helps to highlight what these different aspects may be.

Many interviewees’ motivations for attending university influenced their expectations of the undergraduate experience and what it meant to be successful. Interviewees who had more complex and nuanced motivations shaping their decision to go to university often had more complex and nuanced expectations of being a successful undergraduate, while those with fewer but more focused motivations had fewer expectations. Mature student Dave, for example, whose main reason for attending university was because his family “own[s] a law firm” that he would be allowed to take over after “6 more years of school,” also simply and directly defined success at university as “Good grades. ... To be a successful student, all you have to do is pass. [...] The higher you pass, the better.” Conversely, first-generation student Walter, described more complex reasonings in his decision to attend university, highlighting that “you need to go to university ... it’s the next natural step,” that it is necessary to “advance in society, to move up that ladder, to have that mobility,” and that, although he was motivated by his “love of learning,” his parents “wouldn’t have given [him] a ton of

choice,” which aligns with the complexity of how Walter described success at university including grades, individual transformation, job preparation, and overall wellness.

How interviewees explained their expectations of a successful undergraduate experience fell into the following main themes: exertion of effort; personal growth or transformation; finding and pursuing your passion and setting and reaching your goals; and happiness, mental wellness, and school-life balance.

5.3.1. *Exertion of effort.* While the majority of interviewees spoke of gauging undergraduate success through grades or extracurricular participation, some contended that these measures were only useful if students worked towards meeting these expectations. For some of these interviewees, undergraduate success could only be realized if students exerted effort towards being successful, rather than just ‘skimming by’. Rebecca, for example, suggested that without applying themselves students might not be able to be successful.

I feel like you're not going to be successful, if you don't apply [yourself]. [...] If you don't put in the effort, I don't think it's going to come. [Rebecca, 23, mature, first generation, first year]

For Rebecca, who wanted to attend university to challenge herself and “see if [she] was smart enough for university,” being successful at university required hard work and effort.

Another interviewee, Isabelle, spoke about effort and success as individually determined rather than based on an absolute benchmark.

With university, like—if grades is what counts as success—you have to put some effort into it and actually study and make it your priority—if you want to be successful. And there's no guarantee that you will be, but at least you'll know that you did put in the effort, and you tried for it, which is a success in itself. Because you actually—you tried. You tried at least. [Isabelle, 21, first generation, third year]

Using grades as an example, Isabelle suggests that, if that is your priority, then work towards getting that—“put in the effort” and “actually study”.

Other interviewees connected the exertion of effort to grades, but suggested that, although grades were very important, that getting a lower grade with more effort was also indicative of success. As an example, international student Fish suggested that, even if students get high grades, they have to put in effort to get them or they cannot be considered successful. She further connected this to personal growth—without working for it, regardless of whether the outcome was positive (i.e., high marks), students could not experience personal growth and, hence, could not be successful. Asked what makes an undergraduate student successful, Fish said:

I would say they're successful because, maybe they achieved 99 on an exam. ... But, you can tell from the mannerism and the way they participate in class, and the way that they emphasize something when they speak, that they actually put the effort into understanding it and learning it. Now, that person is successful. It's not the person in your class, who, they just know the answers and don't try. That to me, that's not a successful person. A successful student to me, is a person who actually cares enough to try to get it done. Not a person who, just, basically oh I'll just get there in the end, I don't really care. [...] For example, maybe... it's a person who, at the beginning of the term, they understood nothing. I would use languages ... in the beginning of the term, you're struggling, you don't understand. But, by the end of the term, you notice oh, okay, this person's a little bit better. [...] They can conjugate. They can speak. To me, that's a successful person. [Fish, 22, international, third year]

For Fish, being a successful undergraduate required an exertion of effort, which she further suggests should result in a personal transformation of sorts—transitioning from a student who is “struggling” to one who is “a little bit better”. Personal transformation is another theme mentioned by students, which is discussed next.

5.3.2. *Personal growth or transformation.* A number of younger interviewees suggested that, in order to be truly successful, students must experience some form of personal growth, either through the attainment of knowledge or skills, or a personal transformation of sorts. Further, when it came to personal growth, most mature students

equated this with extracurricular participation, which helps to explain why this was not mentioned by them. Younger students, however, suggested that there should be some sort of personal growth or transformation, as a culmination of the university experience, to be a successful undergraduate.

As both 21-year-old Mabel and 19-year-old Esra expressed, students should experience some sort of personal growth or transformation by the end of their time at university, otherwise a student could not be considered successful. They, additionally, explain what this personal growth looks like, with Esra also critiquing the dominant narrative's focus on grades. Asked what makes a successful undergraduate student, Mabel and Esra responded:

I'm going back to having those skills. And under skills is also is knowledge. Like, you should come out of here more knowledgeable than you were. ... Success should also be building, forming relationships. [...] You should just come out of here a better person, which is forming relationships, having skills, being more knowledgeable. Being more tolerant. [Mabel, 21, first generation, second year]

It's not just receiving the degree. I think it's about what you've learned. Like, what types of lessons you learned. Whether it be about yourself as person, or other people. Or even just, like, in general, your course. I think it's just what you've learned, and how you've progressed. [...] I'd say it's, like, more development [as an individual]. [...]

I definitely think [the dominant engagement success narrative is] too narrow. [...] Because—just because you have a high GPA, doesn't really say much about [...] I still think—it still has to do with you, personally, and like, personal growth. If you ... if you leave university the same person you were as you came in—even if you have a high GPA—I still think that's not a lot of growth. Or that's not really being successful. [Esra, 19, traditional, first year]

Interviewee Frank also said that students had to experience personal growth, but framed this transformation as growing up, highlighting the additional role that universities often play in a student's life.

It's just to develop the skills, other skills, besides getting the good grades—different soft skills. The part that, sort of, you just have to grow up to be a more mature, and

more complete person, I guess. [...] And, transferable skills, yeah. Yeah, I guess, those two things together would make a successful undergrad student.
[Frank, 23, mature, third year]

For some younger students, there was an expectation that a successful undergraduate experience entails some sort of personal growth or personal transformation above and beyond just attaining high grades or extracurricular participation. Some interviewees, however, suggested that rather than experiencing personal growth, students can only be considered successful if they find and/or pursue their goal or passion, which is discussed next.

5.3.3. *Finding and pursuing your passion and setting and reaching your goals.* Finding and pursuing your passion and setting and reaching your goals was mentioned most frequently by mature, first-generation students, and often by those who had come to university after being in the workforce. For these interviewees, part of having a successful undergraduate experience was about finding your passion. Interviewee Bryce, for instance, explained that he decided to go back to university after his employment contract was not renewed and he realized he “couldn’t be as competitive as [he] wanted to be with [his] educational background,” and because “[he] didn’t really love what [he] was doing anyways, ... [so, he] took it as an opportunity ... to go back to school.” For Bryce, coming to university for the second time gave him a chance to find and pursue a new career.

I was really determined to kind of, go back and, quote unquote, right the wrongs that I, like the decisions that I had made in my previous time at university. [Bryce, 44, mature, first generation, first year]

The influence of this can be seen in how Bryce explained undergraduate success.

I think undergraduate students, initially, most of their pressure... I’m really coming at things mostly from academically, ‘cause ... Success would be to achieve the grades that you need to, to continue on in your undergraduate degree, and to... kind of find your way through to what you want to do. [Bryce, 44, mature, first generation, first year]

Bryce's desire to enrol in university was influenced by the potential to find and pursue a new passion, which he suggested needs to occur for a student to be considered successful. Here, then, a successful undergraduate student will find their passion through the undergraduate experience.

Similarly, mature student, Annie, who had come to university to pursue a new career as a French teacher after volunteering with her son's school, connects being a successful undergraduate with pursuing her passion, leading her to have a happy life. She says that, for her, attending university was about "pursuing passions," and that, rhetorically, "how can you not be happy when you're studying something you're passionate about?" Thus, for Annie, being a successful student was about pursuing passions, with the undergraduate experience contributing to the pursuit of that passion. And in her case, because she was pursuing her passion of becoming a French teacher she felt like a successful undergraduate. Looked at differently, how Annie defines being a successful undergraduate is based on her own expectations of the undergraduate experience which cannot be reduced to the dominant engagement success narrative.

Similar to pursuing passions, some interviewees suggested that setting and pursuing goals was how to be a successful undergraduate student. For these interviewees, students must set, pursue, and ultimately attain their goals to have a successful undergraduate experience. Additionally, like pursuing a passion, interviewees who spoke of pursuing goals also framed undergraduate success through personal expectations external to, but intertwined with, the university experience. For Daffodil, who had emigrated from Iran to Canada to improve her life, and who was pursuing a nursing degree to build on her previous career,

being a successful undergraduate was less about institutional measures and more about setting and working towards attaining her individual goals.

My definition of success is totally different from my GPA—from what is put on my reports, or what other instructors—or even school—decides about my success. My success is defined as a state, that I had to goal. I put steps toward it. And I came to the university, and as a mature student, I tried to kind of overcome all the obstacles and hurdles for me—financial, geographical, cultural, language barriers. And gradually I moved forward toward my goal. I didn't reach my, the base goal that I had, but as far as I'm moving toward it, I feel that I'm successful. And ... my success is beyond marks or GPA. It's how I dealt with my problems. How I problem solved. How I moved forward, although there were so many obstacles in my way. So, that's my success in university. [Daffodil, 35, mature, first generation, third year]

Additionally, Daffodil said that another part of her decision to attend university was to “explore [the] many different dimensions of [her] personality” in order to reach her full potential. This is seen in her framing of success as setting and reaching her own goals.

Interviewee Joy spoke of both personal growth and pursuing your passion as she articulated what her expectations were of undergraduate success. For Joy, however, there was much more to undergraduate success than this, highlighting the complex expectations that students navigate and negotiate in their undergraduate experiences.

So, I would say an undergraduate student couldn't feel successful unless they were in the proper program for them. ... So, I think, like, to be successful, it's not just, oh, I have my degree now, I'm successful. It's, like, studying for four years, that's a lot of your time. It should be what you love, and what you're interested in. ... So, I think to be successful as an undergraduate student, you must do well in your program. Be in the right program for you. And make connections and meet people. And be well-balanced, like, balance is key for health and success.

[...]

So that would mean, they're getting good marks. They're happy and they're not on the verge of [...] mental illness or whatever. ... They're enjoying what they're learning, and they're feeling like it's important. ... They weren't just doing it to get a degree, like I know a lot of people do. Like, I've heard people say I'm just getting a degree. They have no interest in learning. Which is fine, whatever. To each their own. But, you're not going to be successful in that degree. Your marks probably won't be great if you don't enjoy it. So, yeah, having a balance. So, they're healthy, they're getting good marks, they're maintaining good friendships and relationships,

and they're getting involved. ... And kind of letting it build them as a person. [Joy, 23, mature, first year]

As Joy noted, undergraduates should be doing more in university than just enough to get a degree; instead, students should be pursuing their passions and interests, getting good marks and being involved—measures of success in the dominant engagement narrative—as well as building networks and connections and experiencing personal growth—her personal expectations of undergraduate success. This highlights both the complexity of the undergraduate experience and students' expectations for being a successful undergraduate. Joy also importantly noted that being successful is a balance of all of these expectations—a theme that other students also mentioned, which is discussed next.

5.3.4. *Happiness, mental wellness, and school-life balance.* In addition to the above expectations of undergraduate success, a number of interviewees also articulated that happiness, mental wellness, and school-life balance were also necessary; however, this often came across as a meta-narrative that was included as an 'also' to the numerous other expectations that students had. When it came to happiness, students usually connected this to pursuing a passion or attaining a goal. This can be seen in Joy's excerpts above where she connects pursuing a passion ("being in the right program") to happiness ("they're happy"), which she further said is needed "to be successful in that degree".

Mature student Jane Doe, however, suggested that happiness was related to a student's grades rather than them pursuing a passion. As shown above, Jane Doe had suggested that as long as student was happy with their marks then could be considered successful. Jane Doe was motivated to enrol in university for a love of learning, which shaped the importance that grades had for her (i.e., self-validation), and in turn, her expectations of

the undergraduate experience. Happiness, for her, was less about pursuing passion and more about being happy with your achievements. Said differently, for some interviewees, although grades are a key marker of undergraduate success, students can only be considered successful if they are happy with their marks and the effort exerted towards achieving them.

For other, younger, students, happiness was more generalized, with interviewees saying that setting and attaining goals was not enough, students also had to be happy with those goals. This underscores an additional subtext that suggests what students expect and what is expected of students may be at odds—although students may be pursuing goals, they may not have been set by, or be of interest to, them. For instance, as Smurf and Francesca explained, attaining high grades and getting involved could only be counted as success if the student was happy pursuing and attaining those things.

I also think they have to be happy doing what they're doing. Like, it's not just success if they accomplish those things [high grades and extracurricular engagement]. They have to be really happy doing it. ... Suppose they were your goals. You accomplished them. Yes—that's successful. But, there's also an added dimension of being happy with yourself. At ease with yourself, you know? [Smurf, 22, traditional, fourth year]

Like, you have to be happy. If you're attaining high grades and you're doing extracurriculars, and this and that, like, it doesn't really mean anything if you're not happy—if you're not enjoying yourself with it. I find, why would you want to go through all that if you're not going to at least be positive, or ... have a good outlook on everything? [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

Both Smurf and Francesca said that a successful undergraduate experience was one where the student was happy and enjoying what they were doing. Even if students were deemed successful according the dominant narrative, these interviewees suggested that students were only successful if they were also happy pursuing these things.

International student Kim also said that happiness was a necessary ingredient in the undergraduate success recipe and that this comes from pursuing your passion. However, for

Kim, this happiness is only attainable by pursuing your own goals rather than whether you are happy with pursuing external expectations. When asked about undergraduate success through the dominant narrative, Kim replied:

I think happiness still part of it. [...] I think it has to take, like, I look at who you are. Because if you are pursuing those, then that's a good definition. But if that's, like, all your parents putting on you or, like all the society putting on you, then you're not successful person. You're just a loser to society. [...] I think it's important to follow your dream, or like follow your inspiration. [Kim, 22, international, third year]

Happiness, in this case, is more about an alignment between the student's motivations and expectations of the undergraduate experience, where students can only be successful if they are happy with what they are doing at university.

While some interviewees focused specifically on happiness in the undergraduate experience, other interviewees were more concerned about mental wellness in general. This was most frequently noted by younger students and often mentioned as being able to be mentally well after trying to fulfill their expectations of undergraduate success. For example, 21-year-old Mabel expressed that being successful at university was about more than “grades [...] and sports,” further suggested that students should also

come out of here a better person. Which is, you know, forming relationships, having skills, being more knowledgeable. Being more tolerant. [Mabel, 21, first generation, second year]

Mabel, however, added a caveat to this, suggesting that students “should be able to keep [their] mental health intact” in order to be successful, which she noted before listing the additional expectations beyond grades and sports. Earlier in the interview, Mabel had also mentioned struggling with mental health concerns in her first year—the influence of which can be seen here.

First-year student Walter also spoke of mental wellness, which he included as part of a general, overall wellness. He further noted additional expectations students have to be a successful undergraduate, which, as noted above is influenced by his motivations to attend university.

Undergraduate student success would be holistic success, in terms of academics, wellness—overall wellness. So, I would consider that to be spiritual wellness, physical wellness, mental wellness. ... Succeeding in your grades, with your program. It being something that you want to study. And then, just developing ... academically and making yourself marketable in the workforce [Walter, 19, first generation, first year]

Walter outlined the different expectations he had for being a successful undergraduate, but only after he suggested academics and overall wellness, highlighting the importance Walter placed on mental wellness.

Another interviewee, 20-year-old Natalie, felt that the dominant engagement narrative was okay, but that “they could add to it,” positing that, “a successful student also means somebody who can be physically and mentally healthy as well.” Additionally, Natalie expressed that there was a pressure attached to trying to attain high grades, and after her talking about being physically and mentally healthy, I asked about her own experiences with pressures and trying to attain high grades and if that impacted her mental and physical health, to which she replied in “yes”, further adding that it has made her “sick”. For some interviewees, there were real and tangible concerns about mental wellness that often came along with trying to fulfill numerous expectations of being a successful undergraduate.

Other interviewees more generally suggested that students must find a balance between each of their expectations of the undergraduate experience, and sometimes in addition to other aspects of their lives. These were mentioned most frequently by younger students who were further along in their studies. Third-year student Leslie, for instance,

expressed that, in addition to the dominant narrative of getting high grades and participating in extracurriculars, undergraduate success also needed balance. Leslie, however, highlighted the importance of grades over that of balance and the additional expectations she has for undergraduate success. Asked about undergraduate success, Leslie articulated

Again, very subjective, but I would say success is based on grades and your GPA. Maybe not for me necessarily, but, within this system. I would also say a balance. [...] Balance in terms of your grades, your social life, etc., etc. But maintaining your high grades. [...] I think clubs, and even working your way up in the club. Like, vice president, president, anything like that. I think that would be successful. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

While Leslie expressed that there needs to be balance between a student's expectations for being successful—in this case through grades and clubs—grades, ultimately, are more important, even though her own marks might not necessarily be high enough.

Some interviewees expressed that, in addition to balancing their expectations of the undergraduate experience, students also had to balance these with other aspects of their lives. As such, not only are there numerous expectations to be a successful undergraduate, but students also have additional responsibilities and expectations external to the university that need to be met as well. Fourth-year student Apple, for instance, who had suggested that being a successful undergraduate was about grades and proving to herself that she was smart enough for university added, besides “making it to the end,” as an undergraduate, you should also

try to balance your life—your social life, your family life, and your personal life, and try to maintain normal kinda health and well-being at the same time. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

For Apple, although grades were important to her, she suggested that “as long as I pass, it's okay,” which she then connected to balancing the additional aspects of her life, including

family and personal life and health and well-being. This shows that Mcinnis and James' (1995) assertion that undergraduates fit university into their already full, complex, and busy lives may be true for some students; however, how and why students do this is much more complex and nuanced than implied.

The undergraduate experience, as noted by many of my interviewees, is a complex and varied one for students, often involving numerous expectations. Additionally, students' motivations for coming to university played a part in how they viewed undergraduate success. Older interviewees often had simpler and more direct reasons for attending university and fewer and more targeted expectations of success in their undergraduate experience, while younger students had more complex and varied factors influencing their decision to enrol in university, resulting in a more complex set of expectations to be successful. And, while the majority of interviewees understood the importance of attaining high grades and participating in extracurriculars—with many internalizing this dominant narrative as part of undergraduate success—why these grades were important highlighted key differences between different student subgroups and underscored the influence of students' motivations on their views of the undergraduate experience, and student success in particular.

Additionally, students highlighted other problems with the dominant narrative, leading students to redefine undergraduate success in their own terms, while still including different parts of the dominant narrative that have been fit to their individual educational trajectories. The additional concern about happiness, mental wellness, and school-life balance

is also of note, highlighting further tensions between interviewees' expectations of undergraduate success. Some of these tensions are highlighted above, while others are described in the following chapter. As interviewees discussed the expectations they had of their undergraduate experience, a more complex story arose out of these tensions, with interviewees listing additional consequences as a result of these tensions. However, interviewees also articulated how they responded to these challenges and tensions, with some students also offering potential solutions to some of these issues in their responses. These three themes—the impact of expectational tensions on students, student responses to expectational tensions, and student suggestions for preventing and resolving expectational tensions—form the basis of the following chapter where I examine how students navigate and negotiate the numerous expectations they have of a successful undergraduate experience.

6. NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING EXPECTATIONAL TENSIONS: IMPACTS, RESPONSES, SUGGESTIONS

Chapter 5 highlighted how the undergraduate experience is a complex weave of varied expectations for being successful, with an equally complex set of influences shaping those expectations. Many interviewees had internalized, but also problematized the dominant engagement success narrative, noting additional or different expectations of undergraduate success. Challenges to the dominant narrative and how students expressed their own expectations of undergraduate success underscored the complexity in interviewees' expectations of the undergraduate experience, but also highlighted how this complexity could be problematic for some students. How students characterized a successful undergraduate experience was often tempered by acknowledging that there were challenges to and tensions between expectations, as well as concerns with the number of expectations students had to be successful. Further, interviewees also intimated that, as a result of these tensions, students also experienced other issues that impacted their undergraduate experience, and often in a negative way. This forms the basis of the current chapter that helps answer **RQ3**: *Do students experience conflicts within or between their motivations for attending university, their expectations of the undergraduate experience, and the dominant engagement success narrative, and if so, what are the consequences of these conflicts, and how do students negotiate them.* Expanding on results from Chapter 5, this chapter begins by highlighting how expectational tensions further impacted interviewees. This is followed by a discussion of how interviewees navigated and negotiated these tensions, with the final section of this chapter highlighting students' suggestions for preventing or resolving these same tensions. These

three themes—impact of expectational tensions on students, student responses to expectational tensions, and student suggestions for preventing and resolving expectational tensions—are the focus of this chapter.

6.1. Impact of Expectational Tensions on Students

For some interviewees, there were additional consequences stemming from some of their expectations for undergraduate success. As shown in Chapter 5, interviewees problematized both the dominant narrative and their own expectations of undergraduate success, highlighting tensions within and between different expectations. An additional outcrop of these tensions was further negative impacts on students' individual educational trajectories. There was a level of complexity to these consequences that, at times, were overlapping, co-creating, or constitutive of other consequences, and even creating more tension. Below, I list these consequences separately; however, they should be thought of as smaller constituent components of interviewees' larger *consequence narratives*. The main consequences noted by students include pressure, stress, and mental health concerns; comparisons to and competition with other students; feelings of failure; a reduced focus on learning; and feeling disadvantaged or disconnected. Taken as a whole, these consequences highlight the often-negative outcomes that come about as students navigate and negotiate multiple and varied expectations of undergraduate success as they work towards reducing or resolving these tensions.

The majority of these consequences were mentioned by younger students, with older students discussing these consequences too, but only as applied to younger students. This follows from Chapters 4 and 5 where it was younger students who experienced tensions

within and between their motivations for attending university and their expectations of being a successful student. This sometimes resulted in a confusing blur of tensions and consequences, with some tensions occurring as a consequence of other tensions, which in turn have their own consequences. Generally, most of the consequences that were mentioned by interviewees were focused on students' expectations surrounding attaining acceptably high grades, though other tangentially related consequences were also mentioned. The following sections highlight the consequences that arise from the expectational tensions students noted in the undergraduate experience.

6.1.1. Pressure, stress, and mental health concerns. The most commonly mentioned consequence due to expectational tensions was undue pressure, stress, and mental health concerns. However, the impact of these consequences was so prevalent that they took on a life of their own and in some cases even created additional tensions or consequences. For example, many interviewees expressed that, as a result of future educational plans, the stress associated with the pressure to attain high grades increased significantly, which in turn, and in conjunction with their future plans—usually grad school—created competition with other students, forming another level of pressure and stress leading to mental health concerns. Often, interviewees mentioned pressure and stress in view of the number and composition of expectations they felt they had to attain during their undergraduate experience, especially achieving high grades. These consequences, however, were more of a concern for younger interviewees, with few older students mentioning them and only in reference to younger students. Mature student Daffodil, for example, spoke of 'psychological distress' impacting

younger students but not herself, recounting how her age and life experience help mitigate this distress.

[University] could be more difficult, if it was not because of my being mature. And psychological distress. I have seen many first-year students—like, 17 years old, first time from home—they had gone through very bad psychological [distress] ... One of my friends ... she just burned out. No help. No support. No peer groups. You become isolated. You're an island, with so many assignments to do, and you just, don't know what to do. ... I troubleshoot a lot for myself. ... Moving forward is my motto—no matter what happens. You always learn from something that you've done wrong. But it could be a disaster if I didn't have that kind of life experience.
[Daffodil, 35, mature, first generation, third year]

Compared to younger students, Daffodil noted that her life experiences helped keep the pressure and stress at bay, suggesting that younger students were unable to keep up with the numerous demands that an undergraduate degree often has, resulting in mental health concerns for these students.

For some of younger students, pressure and stress were a result of tensions within the dominant engagement discourse, with interviewees suggesting that there was a price to pay for meeting—or trying to meet—the numerous expectations they felt they had to fulfill in order to be a successful undergraduate. 19-year-old Sarah S., for example, had internalized the student engagement discourse as key to a successful undergraduate experience, but suggested that, additionally, students should also be physically and mentally fit. However, as noted in Chapter 5, Sarah S. questioned if fulfilling multiple expectations (achieving high marks, participating in extracurriculars, and holding a job, while being physically and mentally healthy), was achievable, saying “I don't know if it's possible with all of those [expectations].” For Sarah S., the tension of trying to attain the numerous expectations she felt there were to be a successful undergraduate came at a *cost*.

I think that university's ... or society's, I guess, standards for success, for undergrad students, is probably a little broad. There's so many things you have to attain at once. [...; And] it's impossible to attain all of those. I mean, I'm sure a number of people have done it, but [...] There's always a cost. [Sarah S., 19, traditional, first year]

Although Sarah S. does not question these expectations or the tensions they cause, she does note that there are potential negative outcomes from them.

For other younger students, rather than the *number* of expectations leading to mental health concerns, they suggested that it was the tension *between* their expectations that led to mental health consequences. More specifically, students noted how the student engagement success narrative and their own expectations of the undergraduate experience were at odds. First-generation student Leslie, who was noted in Chapter 5 as saying that she understood the importance of dominant engagement success narrative, but that “self-success is more important, because you need to attain what you want,” also suggested that this tension could lead to negative health outcomes. Framing the dominant engagement success narrative as “the definition of success that society says is success,” Leslie explained:

I think that holds a lot of pressure. [...] I think it's detrimental. I think it causes us to focus on—well, me—to focus on, things outside of what I want to focus on—or what I would rather be.

[I: And so, this tension could potentially impact people negatively in a mental health kind of way?]

Oh, for sure. I think it could. And your, like, self-esteem. I think if you're not meeting the standards of the head honcho ... Your self-esteem goes down if you're not meeting the standards of other people. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

Similarly, first generation student Penelope highlighted tensions stemming from expectations in the dominant narrative, suggesting that this leads to mental health concerns.

That's where pressure comes from. Like, when there's this generalized idea of what the average person should look like. [...] Everyone thinks that they're capable of [getting high grades and participating in extracurriculars], or that that's something that's attainable for them, because people don't talk about the variations or, maybe you don't want to look like that. ... So, then, people become pressured to meet that.

And it may just be that they don't actually want to meet that goal, but they're only doing it because they feel they have to. Or they actually can't meet that goal, for a bunch of different barriers, but they're still trying. And that's how people get low self-esteem and become depressed and have anxiety. Or, have all these problems. And just feel not great about themselves, when they could just be successful in their own definition. [Penelope, 21, first generation, third year]

The tensions between individual views of undergraduate success and the dominant student engagement success narrative impacts an individual's educational trajectory and also leads to negative mental health outcomes according to some younger students. And, as both Leslie and Penelope noted, it is this pressure—either exerted upon, or felt by students—of trying to meet a unidimensional view of what it means to be a successful undergraduate that leads to mental health concerns.

For some interviewees, the consequences of the tensions between these numerous expectations were so significant that some students connected them to the ultimate mental health concern—suicide. Apple, for instance, suggested that mental health concerns were a result of tensions within the dominant engagement success discourse, positing that, for many undergraduates, surviving the undergraduate experience is a very real, and very immediate concern.

Um, to be involved ... that'd be nice, but I don't think ... if you weren't involved, I wouldn't say you weren't a successful student. This sounds, like a really fucking morbid way to say it, but the fact that you made it alive [...] I'm sorry, there's a lot of students every year that take their lives, and who knows if it's just because of school or it's part of it. ... And now it's, like, kinda scary, but that's actually something you have to think about—you made it out alive. You made it through, [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

Similarly, students Joy and Natalie also spoke of suicide as a consequence of these tensions.

However, both of them expressed that those taking their lives are not students who are struggling with their academics; rather, they suggested it is the students who would be

considered very successful within the dominant engagement success discourse who are committing suicide.

[To be] a successful [student], it would be a good balance of ... good grades, good involvement, good relationships, good health. [... Because,] I mean, there's a suicide risk, for instance, at universities. [...] I don't actually know if I should say this—if it's even accurate—but from what I've heard, ... those committing suicide aren't the ones failing. They're doing very well. They're very stressed out. They're trying so hard to get better and better. So, it's like, they might look like a successful student, until they've killed themselves. [Joy, 23, mature, first year]

[My university] prides itself for having all these resources and stuff. But in the past two years there's about four suicides that have happened. And they were people that you would have never expected. It's, like, [orientation week peer leaders], who are upbeat, extroverted, amazing people who have so much support systems, and are probably doing academically well, to a degree. ... They [university administrators and faculty members] don't take into consideration that, we don't have just school. We have a life. We have work. We have issues that are happening at home, or with our friends, etc. Or relationships. [...; But,] it's us. We pressure ourselves. [Natalie 20, traditional, first year]

The pressure and stress that come along with pursuing undergraduate studies may seem like an accepted aspect of the undergraduate experience; yet, some students have suggested that this level of pressure and amount of stress are untenable for numerous students to the point that some—and unexpectedly, even students who are doing well according to the dominant narrative—feel the need to end their lives. One potential explanation as to why high-achieving students experience mental health issues comes from interviewee Sarah L.

21-year-old Sarah L. suggested that there were many students who, although they had high grades and were involved on campus, could still feel *not good enough*—even though, to others, they might be considered high-achieving, model students as suggested by Joy and Natalie. Sarah L. was in her third-year of a Medical Sciences degree and was looking to get into medical school. She explained that there have been times where both her and colleagues in her program experienced feelings of being not good enough:

I think that if my goal or dream wasn't medical school—if I wanted to do something else—then I would have a different cut-off grade that I needed to get, in order to feel like I was a successful student. ... But I think it's because I'm aiming for medical school, and I know how competitive it is, that it's just never good enough for me. Honestly, sometimes I get afraid that I could be getting a 4.0, and yet, I feel like sometimes, what if I get a 4.0 and that's not even good enough. [Sarah L., 21, traditional, third year]

Because I'm in medical sciences, everyone in my program, all my friends, want to go to medical school. I have a friend who has a 4.0 average—above 90 in everything. He's brilliant. Above 95 in everything, actually. [...] But he's not satisfied. ... To see someone getting above a 95 and still have anxiety attacks and panic attacks about whether he's good enough or not, whether he'll ever get into medical school. Constantly comparing himself to everyone else. Staring at the GPA conversion chart. ... Like, I think that I've seen too many students like that, and I think it's less of who they are as a person, but rather, how we've kind of been shaped by other forces. I don't know what force that is. I don't know if it's just societal norms or university. Or, I don't know. [Sarah L., 21, traditional, third year]

Sarah L. highlighted how, even amongst high achieving and highly motivated students, the pressure and stress of trying to achieve even higher is very problematic, causing some students to feel not good enough, even when they would be considered tremendously successful to most outside viewers. These stresses can, in turn, eventually lead to significant and potentially fatal mental health issues. However, this pressure and stress may be due to Sarah's particular program, as research has shown connections between medical school students and significant mental health concerns (Zivanovic et al. 2018). Another tension that shows up in Sarah's excerpt is comparison to and competition with other students pursuing similar educational trajectories. Students, then, are hit with a double dose of tensions that cause mental health concerns—feeling not good enough compared to dominant ideals, and feeling not good enough compared to other students.

6.1.2. *Comparisons to and competition with other students.* Another commonly mentioned consequence of expectational tensions is comparisons to and competition with

other students. Some interviewees explained how they compared themselves to other students to gauge their own progress, using class averages as a benchmark for their *individual* success. Other interviewees spoke of competing with other students, specifically in reference to future educational plans (e.g., graduate school, careers, prestigious programs or faculties). While there were both younger and older interviewees who *compared* themselves to other students, it was only younger students who were *competing* with other undergraduates, as seen in Sarah L.'s quote above.

Interviewees who mentioned comparisons to other students did so based on their own academic progress and self-perception of their abilities, e.g., 'I can do better *than this*,' while competition with others was driven by being better than someone else, e.g., 'I can do better *than them*.' In this manner, students compared themselves to others so they could *do their best*, while competing with other students was so they could *be the best*. Mature student Jane Doe, for instance, who was concerned with grades for self-validation, used a recent exam score to compare her grades to other students', more specifically, how well she compared to the average.

We had an exam recently in the course I'm doing, and I didn't do great. I got a 77... which is not terrible. I understand that. But what bothered me more than anything else with it, was it was below the mean. [...] I can do much better than the mean. I know I can. Because we compare ourselves to other people. [Jane Doe, 50s, mature, first generation, third year]

As such, when Jane Doe compared herself to other students, it was more about meeting her individual goals and living up to her self-perception—she could do better than average. This may be an extension of being an established individual that has already transitioned into adulthood and hence, does not struggle as much with locating themselves within the greater

population, and does not need grades for future educational plans—there is no competition with other, younger students.

Similarly, traditional student Aliliana also spoke of comparisons to other students but was able to put a positive spin on it. Aliliana, highlighted the different expectations that students have of the undergraduate experience, much of which aligns with the dominant engagement success narrative, suggesting that comparing yourself to others who seem to be successful according to this narrative can have both positive and negative effects on her undergraduate experience.

One thing I've learned since being here is that it's really easy to compare yourself to other people. But we all want different things. We're all doing different things. We all want to meet different people. We're all on different paths. So, to compare yourself all in the same, like, categories I guess, it's hard to do, because we might not all want that. [...] It's just, like, everyone's really, really smart. Everyone's really, really involved. So, if you're comparing yourself to other people, then that's kind of, like, an ego hit, I guess. But it like makes me want to be better, at the same time, which is good. [Aliliana, 18, traditional, first year]

For Aliliana, the comparison to others can result in an 'ego hit'; however, she also put a positive spin on this, noting that, rather than creating issues for her, she was encouraged to do better.

Similar to Aliliana, international student Kim had internalized the dominant engagement success narrative, using it to compare herself to other students. However, instead of framing it negatively, Kim spins the narrative, suggesting that, although she may not be doing as well as other students based on her grades, because she is pursuing a goal, she is better off than her peers who, she suggests, are unsure of their goals.

I feel like, maybe compared to my peers, they may have better grades than me. They may have a lot more complete social life than I have. But then, I don't think they really understand what they want to pursue. Like, in the long term. I think for me, although I have changed my ideas a few times, and I'm not getting as high grades,

and I have to spend a lot more time on studying—like, I have to suffer, to sacrifice my spare time. But then, I understand clearly, like, what I want to get. [Kim, 22, international, third year]

Kim's view that, compared to others, she has a clearer post-graduate plan, highlights that expectational tensions do not necessarily result in negative consequences, and that students may adapt to these tensions and view them more positively, potentially even as opportunities to re-frame their own expectations.

While some interviewees compared themselves to other students as a way of gauging their own success, others went further and framed these comparisons as competitive in nature. In this manner, interviewees spoke of wanting to be better than others in order to gain access to a prestigious program or graduate school. For instance, earlier I highlighted how both Jack and Sarah L. suggested that the importance of grades for them had to do with limited access—to a prestigious business program for Jack and to medical school for Sarah L.—and that students vying for limited positions leads to competitiveness amongst fellow classmates. Jack, who was quoted earlier as saying “the pressure” from trying to gain access to the prestigious business school at his university was tied to grades, which in turn created competition.

When you hear someone getting a better grade than you, you're just like, oh. I want a better grade than that person. ... Competition just arises.” [Jack 19, traditional, first year].

This competition between students may be due to what MacKean (2011) has called a “weeding out” philosophy employed by universities, whereby students are thrust into competition with each other over grades and access to particular programs so as to not get “weeded out” from these programs. As a result of this competition, students also expressed the additional consequence of feeling inadequate.

6.1.3. *Feelings of inadequacy.* Many interviewees who felt the need to compare to and compete with other students as a result of expectational tensions also expressed feelings of inadequacy. For these interviewees, there were feelings of not being good enough to meet current program demands or future program requirements. However, for these students, the standards for being *good enough* were exceptionally high. As shown earlier, Sara L. expressed feeling high levels of competition with and between her classmates as many were aiming for medical school, as she wondered about getting a 4.0 GPA, being “afraid that ... that’s not even good enough”. These high expectations placed on students creates a competitive environment, further impacting their mental health.

Mature, first-generation student Daffodil connected competition to get into specific streams in her Nursing program to feelings of failure, which she suggested was more for other students. However, Daffodil also explained that, although she was denied access to a particular stream, this was not due to her own shortcomings; rather, she suggested it was a failure of the university system. For some of her younger peers, though, she explained that, because they viewed undergraduate success through the dominant narrative—in this case, grades—they felt like failures, and in turn, experienced mental health issues.

My dental aptitude test was 21, which is really competitive. Then my GP was 86.825. I lost that year getting into dental school because of 175 thousandths. So, I am among the group of losers that didn’t get into the program. Why are other people more successful, you know? So, how they define success, and where they put you in that system—academic system—is really brutal. ... But, as I mentioned at the beginning, my definition of success is really different. If I know that, today, I solve the problem that was existing since yesterday for me, I call myself successful.

So, this is, for me, a failure of the system. Because of better measurements, you’re putting 0.01 to get rid of 1% [of students]. And then, that 0.01 is going to define if this person’s going to become a good dentist, and this person’s not. I have very good dexterity. I have observed so many surgeries. I have done so many skills with hands. I

think that I'm a really good candidate. I didn't get in—[its's] the system failure—not mine. Nobody can judge who I am. ... But I know that so many of my classmates, they ... were under emotional distress once they couldn't get into it. They go feel a lot because, they accept[ed the program's] meaning of success. And, based on that, they are not successful, they are failures. [Daffodil, 35, mature, first generation, third year]

Although Daffodil described the university's definition of success and where you fit in that definition as 'brutal' based on her own experiences, she also explained that because her definition of success is different than this, the university was, in fact, getting in the way of her reaching her own success—something highlighted earlier by another interviewee, Leslie. And much like Daffodil intimates above, Leslie also saw this tension as negatively impacting a student's mental health. For some interviewees, however, these expectational tensions were less about feelings of inadequacy, and more about the impact on students' learning.

6.1.4. Reduced focus on learning. For many interviewees, attaining high grades was part of their internalized undergraduate expectations; however, for many of these students, the pressure and focus on grade attainment was often at odds with why they decided to come to, and what they expected to get from, university. Interviewees mentioned that, as a result of focusing more on grades, they were also focusing less on learning or understanding the course content—a key reason for them enrolling in university in the first place. For example, Ana Maria, who included wanting to learn more as one of her motivations for coming to university, explained that she understands the importance of grades, but suggests that the undergraduate experience needs to be about more than that.

[Grades are] a measure I understand, but, yeah, there's a lot of things that, I think as a corporation, that [my university] needs to change. It needs to change in a way that it's not just grades, it's encouraging people to actually learn. To get yourself and learn on your own. [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

Although Ana Maria understands the necessity and importance of grades, she feels that her university promotes a focus on them that takes away from the learning aspect of the undergraduate experience. Additionally, Ana Maria presses that it is the fault of her university that students' focus is on grades, and as such, the onus is also on the university to reconfigure this narrative to emphasis learning over grade attainment.

Similar to Ana Maria, traditional student Natalie, also felt that university should be more about learning. However, for Natalie, she said that, although learning happens in universities, students' main concern and focus is on grade attainment which results in a reduced focus on learning course content.

I think it [university] should be more about learning. And, I know ... we learn so much. But I think it's the way that we're learning that's not effective. Because everyone's focused on cramming and getting specific grades so they can get ... scholarships or other things. So, what people are learning, isn't to actually benefit themselves. ... Some of the time, it's like, "oh I have to take it, it's a prerequisite." Or "I'm just taking it because I have to, and I have to do really well, in it." I don't feel like we have the opportunity to actually be able to sit in class, and just be there because you want to be there. To enjoy it. It's more like, we have to be there so we can continue our degree and finish it. [Natalie, 20, traditional, first year]

As Natalie suggested, students' focus on grades takes away from the joy of learning, further highlighting tensions between the dominant engagement success narrative and student's individual expectations of the undergraduate experience. As a result, Natalie contends that, even if students are learning, it is utilitarian in nature and less about the joy of it.

Another student, Esra, also suggested that the pressure attached to attaining high grades is also prevalent when it comes to exams. For Esra, she wished that there was less focus on grades, especially via exams, for two reasons—cheating and memorization. When asked about her expectations of university, Esra said:

[I wish there was] less focus on grades. [...] Personally, I'm okay with taking exams, but I know there are people who have test anxiety and stuff like that. And it's just like, why do I have to take a test to show how much knowledge I know? Why can't I show it in a different way? I wish it was more open to show how much we actually learned.

[I: So, are grades an effective way of measuring how successful you are as a student?] To me, no. Not really. For many reasons. In classes where you have online quizzes, you can easily cheat, and get a good mark. Or, you can still cheat in class as well, like when you're doing your exam. I understand the majority of exams, it is application, so it's not really memorizing information. But, to certain extent, it kind of is. Like you're just memorizing, you're not really understanding the information. [Esra, 19, traditional, first year]

As Esra noted, cheating may be an effect of students pursuing higher grades, upping the ante for students who are comparing to or competing with their peers. She also said that, because exams are intimately connected to grades, the focus is more on memorization in order to get a good grade on the exams, rather than actually understanding the material to learn—learning for the test instead of for its intrinsic value.

Similarly, first-generation student Apple encapsulated how striving for higher grades is directly related to less learning. Apple noted how the stress from trying to study more in order to get a better grade, actually had the inverse impact on her learning.

The irony behind grades is, I find that, the harder I work for a higher grade, the more information I'm not actually retaining. So, by me not actually sleeping and making sure to get those final few things in ... it's hard to remember that information 'cause you're under so much stress, and your mind is just ... mixed up with everything, that ... I have a hard time retaining that information. I don't think I actually learnt that information, because my mind and my body were stressed. The moment I got it down on paper, my brain erased it and moved on to the next information that needs to be stored. So, it's like, sometimes you'll go to class the next day, [and the professor says], "Well, you learnt this last year." It's like "Sweetheart! You think I remember this after I wrote it down? No. But do I want to remember it, do I want to learn it? Yes." But, I'm under so much pressure to have that stored, and then shoot it out. And then it's gone. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

As Apple said, because of the pressure to learn and retain information in order to 'shoot it out' on an exam, she was not learning and understanding course material in a meaningful

way beyond memorization in order to get a grade. The origins of this tension can be seen earlier in the interview where Apple explained how the cost of university impacted her expectations of the undergraduate experience.

I like learning, but it's too expensive to come here just to learn, so I need to be getting something bigger out of it. So, I wanted to get a job, and I thought university would kind of provide me with a better chance of getting that job. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

Although Apple had a love for learning—one of her reasons for coming to university—she noted how the cost of a university education made her choose between wanting to learn and needing to get acceptably high grades so that the amount of time and money she has invested in university does not go to waste and provides her with a more tangible outcome via a job.

6.1.5. Feeling disadvantaged/disconnected. Another consequence of expectational tensions noted by interviewees stemmed from comparisons to other students or a generalized view of the undergraduate student experience, where some undergraduates felt as though they were at a disadvantage or disconnected from the university. The interviewees that made note of this were non-traditional students who often felt that their undergraduate experience was different than that of an idealized 'traditional' university student or what was promoted by the university. Students who felt disadvantaged were often younger and compared themselves to other students, while students who felt disconnected were often older and felt the university was not structured for them.

Students who felt disadvantaged framed this either through class differences, or as though they were unaware or unsure of 'what to do' while at university, especially when compared to 'traditional' university students (e.g., high-achieving, upper/middle class). Interviewees who expressed differences between themselves and 'wealthier' students were

first-generation and younger. For example, interviewee Leslie spoke of class differences and needing to work while in university and the impact it can have on academic performance.

Those from a higher class, they don't need to worry about that extra stress [from accruing and paying off debt]. Whereas those from more lower classes, they do. So, I think that will influence your ... performance in school sometimes. Well, because ... those of lower class maybe need to work, whereas those of higher class, maybe don't need to. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

Leslie noted that wealthier students do not need to work and do not accumulate educational debt which is stressful for less-wealthy students, suggesting that this could negatively impact students' grades.

Like Leslie, Francesca and Walter also spoke of disadvantages they felt due to their self-proclaimed class status. First-generation student Francesca, felt that, as a student with a middle-class background, there were things she was unable to do that wealthier students could.

I noticed a lot of times, a lot of those kids [who slide by with lower grades] do come from wealthier families, and they can afford—no pun intended—they can afford to slide by and, or dropout, or do this, or change a million times. But, from me—I come from a very middle-class family. ... I'm sure if I did change my mind or wanted to do something else ... [my parents would] support me fully. [... But,] \$20,000 a year for me, I find, means a lot more and has a much larger effect than \$20,000 for someone who can afford to switch their program whenever they want. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

Looking at this through Francesca's tensions in her decision to go to university may help explain why Francesca also felt disadvantaged—she may have been trying to figure herself out and would have liked more time for personal and intellectual growth rather than just having to get through her degree to get a job, something that wealthier students did not have to think about.

Walter, who had suggested that university was “the new high school” and that it is necessary to “advance in society, to move up that ladder, to have that mobility,” also felt that, because of his class background, he had to work harder than wealthier students in order to have similar prospects to them after graduation.

There's a perception of [my university] being a high-end kind of school. ... A lot of affluent families. Parents who have very high executive jobs, who are sending their kids to university, because this is where they went. Or, they went to university, so, of course their kids have to go to university. A lot of students from private schools. I so do not fit that stereotype. I'm not from a high-income family. I'm from a rural Northern city. I would consider myself much more grassroots. I don't have a job to take over, or a business to inherit from my parents or anything. So, I feel like I have to work harder to prove myself in university. Whereas, there's a lot of people here who, regardless of what they achieve here, are going to have things handed to them in life, and I just know that won't be the case for me. And it never has been, and it never will be. So, I have to make something for myself. [Walter, 19, first generation, first year]

For Walter, his class background was a source of disadvantage; however, he felt that working harder in university would help to bridge the gap between the advantages afforded to wealthier students and himself, especially with regards to career prospects.

While some interviewees felt disadvantaged specifically because of their class (admittedly, a more complex concept than presented), other interviewees saw ‘traditional’ students as having the advantage of ‘being in the know’, making them more able to navigate the undergraduate experience than the interviewee. In this case, it was first-generation students who felt disadvantaged compared to traditional students, often expressing that other students seemed to know how to effectively navigate the undergraduate experience, either because they knew things or knew how to do things that interviewees themselves did not. As first-generation students Apple and Isabelle explained:

It's taken me a long, long time to figure out how to do all this stuff. Considering I'm going into my fifth year and I just learned, how to, like, volunteer ... ‘cause no one

had told me what I should do to get into what I want to do, so I've just kinda been pitter patter and trying to figure it out on my own, and it's really hard to do that [...] I wanna be a parole officer, right, and you need to try to get into volunteering. Trying to get into volunteering was hard, and I don't understand, for example, [prestigious business school] kids. I knew people in it, they're going to school full time, and they're working part-time jobs, and they're volunteering outside of their program. And, I just don't understand how. Maybe I'm not as naturally smart or something, but, it's like, how do you have time for all that. Volunteering on top of a full course load would freak me out. [Apple, 22, first generation, fourth year]

I feel like it [the dominant narrative] does get to me sometimes. ... I talked to some of my friends in my courses, and they're telling me about all these amazing things they're doing. ... They're doing internships, and I'm like, I don't even know where to look for one. [...] It gets you sometimes when you're comparing yourself to other people, because a lot of people have more opportunities than others. [...]

This summer, I am going to try and look for an internship or something. Because last year and the year before ... I didn't really consider you have to do an internship to look good for your things. I thought it was optional. But, now, I'm seeing you have to be on the same playing ground as everyone else, if you want to get a job or go to grad school or law school. ... At least now I know what I'm supposed to be doing, especially because last year and the year before, I felt kind of lost. Because everyone was "yeah, I could volunteer, but does it really matter?" And I thought it was just grades that matter. But now I'm seeing, there's more to it than just that. [Isabelle, 21, first generation, third year]

As such, for first-generation students Apple and Isabelle, there was a general understanding of what an undergraduate experience should look like; yet, compared to traditional students, they were unaware of, or felt unable to meet all of, those expectations.

Throughout the dissertation, I have shown how older students have been sheltered from some of the stresses, pressures, and tensions that younger students experienced, suggesting that the undergraduate experience for mature students is more individual and less about the dominant engagement success narrative. Being a mature student has been presented as an advantage; however, upon a closer analysis of these data, it became apparent that older students were disadvantaged in some ways—even when they had reframed the undergraduate experience according to their own expectations. For older interviewees, there

was a feeling of being disconnected from the university because it was not geared towards them, making them feel left out of the undergraduate experience. Although older interviewees views of the undergraduate experience aligned with the dominant engagement success narrative, this was only for younger students. Older students, instead, felt disconnected from the undergraduate experience because it was not geared towards them and they would not gain the associated benefits associated with the undergraduate experience, in particular, extracurricular participation. However, some of these same interviewees suggested that they had accrued many of these benefits over time, and as such did not need them. For example, mature student Mary explained what younger students needed do to be successful, but that this was not for her, specifically as a mature student. When asked about the dominant engagement success narrative as indicative of undergraduate success, Mary said:

That's somebody else's definition. [Success is more individual, but ...] I know that there has to be some sort of a benchmark. You know, here's what your goal should be. If you want to be successful, yes participate in clubs that are of interest to you—if that's your thing. Do what's required of you to ... because university is about the education, and it is also about the relationships—I get that—but, I'm a mature student. [Mary, 51, mature, first generation, first year]

As a mature student, Mary found that the unidimensional view of the undergraduate experience potentially precluded her from being successful according to that view; however, she resolved this by suggesting that this does not apply to her because she is an older student. It is further implied, then, that some aspects of the dominant narrative may not be suitable for or directed towards mature students, and are much more aligned to a younger students' educational journey.

Interviewee Bryce, is much more explicit about the university not being structured for mature students. Bryce felt that getting involved would be a great way to network and

meet people in lieu of feeling invisible in large lecture classes. However, this did not turn out to be the case, as Bryce found out.

I joined the student club ... called the BUGS network, which is a biology club. I really wanted to do that, but then I found that, it's almost like they're not designed for me, right. [...] Me as an older student. Like, there is just a real sense of being the other. ... It always seemed, like, frivolous, if I was going to stick around on campus to go to a club or something where I probably wouldn't, quote unquote, fit in in the first place. [...] I thought [that] ... it might be helpful to network, do some networking. And since I was so invisible in large [undergraduate] classes, that if I did a little bit more networking and met people through clubs, that I might be able to make contacts that way. But ... it hasn't materialized that way. [...] In general, I find it harder to make my way through the undergraduate process as a mature student than it is as a younger student. [Bryce, 44, mature, first generation, first year]

Bryce felt that, compared to his previous undergraduate experience when he was younger, there was much more of a disconnect between the university experience and his status as an older student.

Similar to Bryce, interviewee Annie also suggested that university was not structured for older students, referring to a particular program and course structure, which, although she understood this was because of the smaller number of older students compared to younger students, still made her feel frustrated about her undergraduate experience.

They don't seem to gear any of the courses more in our direction. And I understand that. Because again, we're such a small number. [...] I took a business course last year. [...] And, because I have a business background, thought this would make sense, and I figured it would be a fairly smooth sailing. ... But the way they format their course, is basically, you do four hours of homework, you come to class the next day and they explain where you went wrong. And then you learn to fix it. Which is great, if you have four hours a night to do homework. ... It's great if you have no life and you're a full-time student, and you're completely involved in school. But for other people, that's not really conceivable and doable. ... So, there are different learning experiences when you're a mature student versus when you're a younger student. [Annie, 30s, mature, first generation, third year]

Annie used a particular experience to highlight how the structure of the course is geared more specifically to younger students who have less responsibilities than older students may

have. She further explained how being mature also made the social aspect of the undergraduate experience less applicable to her.

Well, obviously the education is important, 'cause that's kind of the whole point [of university]. But there's a lot of experiences too. Mind you, it's different for an adult. I don't, like, I don't get the whole party experience. I don't get... well, and I wouldn't anyway, 'cause, you know, bedtime's early for me. [Annie, 30s, mature, first generation, third year]

Annie understood the many associated benefits with attaining an undergraduate degree, but that this was more for younger students. She further explained that she was just going through the motions needed to get the credential since she had already gained many of these benefits due to her age and previous job experiences. Thus, the unidimensional view of the undergraduate experience was something that made older students feel disconnected from the undergraduate experience.

That students felt disconnected from the undergraduate experience or disadvantaged because they felt that they did not know what to do compared to their peers, highlights how these expectational tensions could have problematic outcomes. When viewed through the lens of Tinto (1987), students to who do not integrate socially in university have more negative experiences and outcomes, often leading to students dropping out. As such, students either had to respond to these expectational tensions or face potentially negative consequences, including dropping out.

Interviewees expressed that the unidimensional view of the undergraduate experience had numerous, and often multiple, consequences for them as a result of expectational tensions within and between their motivations to go to university, their understanding of the undergraduate experience, and the prevailing engagement success narrative. These

expectations and the resulting tensions manifested in various ways for students; however, these tensions experienced by students also reveals the complex and conflicting nature of the multiple roles and objectives of a university education of the undergraduate experience. For example, the increasing necessity for a university credential for most, including service-sector and entry-level, jobs contends with the competitive nature employed within most universities. These various roles and objectives manifest in various ways for students, including expectations of the undergraduate experience, which at times can be difficult to navigate. However, as some interviewees indicated above, not all of these consequences were finalizing or terminally impacting student's educational trajectories, with some students either reframing these consequences into something more positively or ameliorating these consequences through a variety of strategies, which are explored next.

6.2. Student Responses to Expectational Tensions

Most interviewees who struggled with navigating the expectations of the undergraduate experience were often quick to readjust their approach, showing resilience through adaptive strategies. Interviewees noted both mental and physical responses to expectational tensions, and usually as it applied to the dominant engagement success narrative. The main student responses to expectational tensions were: reduced emphasis on grades, reframing success as a process, and adjusting engagement emphasis and behaviours.

6.2.1. Reduced emphasis on grades. One of the more salient ways that interviewees responded to expectational tensions was by reducing the emphasis they placed on grades, often rationalizing that the outcome of grades does not warrant the pressure students feel in the pursuit of them. This reduced focus on the importance of grades was noted by younger

students, many of whom spoke of grades as they applied to future endeavours, noting that, outside of academia, high averages are of little importance. For example, both 21-year-old Penelope and 19-year-old Aliliana reduced the emphasis they placed on grades by rationalizing their lack of utility beyond the confines of academia.

I go in [to exams] being, “I’m going to do my best, and if that means I get a 70, if that was my best, then okay fine.” And if that means I got a 90, then faaaantastic. ... I always try to put in the most effort and whatever comes out of that, I kind of have to be happy, ‘cause I did what I can. [...] But, with that being said, at the end of the day, is me going to have a 93 or an 85 going to really affect me getting into my Master’s? ... Is it going to ... affect if someone hires me? Probably not. [Penelope, 21, first generation, third year]

When we’re going to university, everyone was like, “your grades are going to tank, don’t expect a lot.” So, I didn’t. ... For the entire year, I thought I needed 75 average to get into honors spec. for Psych. Just recently, I found out that I need to get 79. ... But before, I wasn’t super concerned about the fact that I was getting mid-seventies. I knew that I would improve. And it didn’t really affect the amount of effort that I put into my exams and stuff. Afterwards, like, if I didn’t get an 80, I tried not to beat myself up about it. [...] After your four years, why do grades matter? ... I guess, unless you’re going into your Master’s and your PhD and stuff. But then at the end of that, it’s like, why do your grades matter? [Aliliana, 18, traditional, first year]

By reframing the importance of grades with a post-graduate mindset, students were able to reduce the emphasis on grades, and, in turn, help to reduce some of the pressure they placed on attaining them.

For other interviewees, there was a connection between reducing the emphasis placed on grades and mental health concerns. First-generation students Rebecca and Mabel explained how, as long as their grades were ‘okay’ they no longer tried to stress about how high they were, with mental health being highlighted as part of this explanation.

Because I’m doing things ... that I actually enjoy, ... my grades have gotten better. [...] Unless I’m getting low 60s, high 50s. Then obviously, I’m, like, “Okay. This isn’t where I want to be.” But, if I get in the 70s, then, as long as I’m doing well. [...] Then, I’m okay. I try not to stress about it anymore. ... If you’re just stressing about

grades all the time, you're sort of ruining the experience. [Rebecca, 23, mature, first generation, first year]

Being an academic student, we always thought grades were a reflection of our character, or who we are. Or how good we are. So, you know, going from an 80 to 60s was really rough. But, now. I don't take them so seriously. [...] I don't want to do graduate studies, so, now, it's just, what can I learn versus what points can I get. [I: So, what do you think grades are there to represent?]

It kind of sounds really cynical, but how well you can memorize things, or how well you can give them back what they want. [...] Right now, if I don't do so well, I no longer take it so hard. I just say, okay, you just didn't understand it, so you need to do better. [Mabel, 21, first generation, second year]

Mabel further explained that reducing the importance of grades helped to significantly

improve her mental health, which she said was very bad in her first year of university.

Interviewees felt that there was significant amounts of pressure to attain high grades that created stress for students—Rebecca suggested that this stress ruins the undergraduate experience, while Mabel explained how reducing this stress and focusing on “what [she can] learn versus what points [she can] get”, helped with her mental health. Rebecca's excerpt highlights another way students responded to expectational tensions, reframing success as something that is worked on—success is a process, not a destination.

6.2.2. Reframing success as a process. Although numerous interviewees expressed feeling pressure to get high grades, some suggested that, rather than focusing on grades as an end point to work towards, reframing their end goal with less emphasis on grades could help relieve some of this pressure. For these students, their responses were contextualized within the engagement success narrative and whether they felt they were meeting these expectations successfully—specifically grades. There is a subtextual sense of tension in the interviewees' responses, whereby they felt as though they were meeting their individual expectations, but not those of the dominant discourse—expectations that were intangible and vague, and as

such, may never be attained; yet, they were powerful enough to influence students' feelings about their educational trajectories. This response was common amongst first-generation students, as exemplified by Francesca, Leslie, and Lady Gaga below.

Right now, I do not feel like I'm being successful, and that's, again, only based on my grades, at the moment. But I'm also hard on myself. So, I do take that into consideration. ... It's not to the point where, because I don't feel successful right now, I think I'm not going to be successful [ever]. I'm confident that, with next year, now that I have the building blocks—the skills—like, what I need to do ... next year I can be [successful], the year after that, more successful and more successful based on my own terms. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

I think if you compare me to someone else, no, I wouldn't be as successful as someone else. Like I said, there's always room for improvement. There's always room for more. [... But,] I'm pretty proud, and happy with myself. I think I'm still working towards success. I don't think it's quite there yet. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

Yeah. I think that I could have had a couple of better marks. But I know why they weren't better, and I know how to fix it going forward. That's success to me, to have learned that. ... I believe I'm successful, but I believe it's a work in progress. [Lady Gaga, 40s, mature, first generation, second year]

For Francesca, Leslie, and Lady Gaga, reframing success as a process rather than a static goal, helped them reconcile their expectational tensions with attaining high grades. This allowed the interviewees to suggest that they were able to successfully navigate the undergraduate experience, but in a way that worked for their individual educational trajectories.

6.2.3. Adjusting engagement emphasis and behaviours. Students also responded to expectational tensions through adjusting the amount of emphasis placed on their academic and extracurricular engagement in order to find balance. For some interviewees, this meant that they reduced their time participating in social activities and extracurriculars to focus on academics, while others used extracurricular participation to help reduce stress and find

school-life balance. These response was common amongst younger interviewees who contextualized this within their individual educational trajectories.

For some interviewees, academic engagement in the pursuit of higher grades took precedence over other social activities and extracurriculars. Often, this response was a way for interviewees to find balance by reasserting their priorities and refocusing their goals away from social experiences to academic ones. As Ruth and Sarah S. explain:

In first semester, ... I got it in my head that I could do the same things I did in high school, so, I tried to join a lot of clubs. [But,] with my failing grades—it was not failing grades, but calculus I was definitely failing. And with all of it, I stopped going to any of the clubs, because I'm like, I need to study. But once I sat down, I couldn't really study because I was so behind lectures. So, as of now ... I go to the gym and then, on the weekend I volunteer at the animal shelter. ... So, that stuff, ... I don't do during the weekdays because I just can't. I don't have the energy. [Ruth, 19, traditional, first year]

I guess, like, once I've attained [my goal] it's a new one. So, ... my grades would be my goal right now. [...] Like, I've got that attitude that I'm going to focus on my grades, that's all I'm going to focus on. I don't go out as much anymore. [Sarah S., 19, traditional, first year]

By adjusting the emphasis on different aspects of the undergraduate experience—specifically the social/extracurriculars and the academic—these students were able to resolve some of the tensions they felt trying to meet numerous expectations of undergraduate experience. In particular, the social and extracurriculars fell by the wayside so that academics could take precedence.

Other students adjusted their levels of engagement in order to reduce the pressure they felt from trying to meet numerous academic expectations, in particular, grades. For these students, engaging in social activities and extracurriculars provided them with a reprieve from the stress they felt from trying to attain high grades. Similar to Apple, who above said that the harder she worked for grades the less she retained, other students felt that

too much focus on academics could negatively impact their grades, and that balance was needed. As first-generation student Leslie noted:

I think ... there needs to be a balance. So, would doing more than I do now improve my grades? Yes. But I wouldn't want to completely cut out other activities, because I think you need balance. I think that's really important. And I think studying too much can actually, can have more of a negative effect than ... Like, physical activities or working out. Or sports or something. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

Leslie said that there is more she could do to improve her grades, but doing so instead of using that time to find balance through other activities, could actually have a detrimental impact on her grades. Another student, Sarah L., explained just how detrimental focusing too much on grades could be, and how she responded to that.

I found out that, because my body was starting to shut down. [...] I lost 30 pounds last year. In the span of, like, 5 months. [...] That's how much I studied. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep, I didn't do anything. [...] Yeah. But, looking back on it, it was very unhealthy. [...] So, now I'm making time for some school, some organizations, some friends, some health. But, a part of me is still angry at myself, because I feel like most of my energy should be going towards studying. [Sarah L., 21, traditional, third year]

As Leslie noted and Sarah L. exemplified, focusing too much on academic engagement could be detrimental to students mental and physical health, and as such, reducing the focus on academics and including more social and extracurricular activities could help relieve these pressures and tensions students feel.

Other students also picked up on the pressure-relieving aspects of getting involved outside of academics, and suggested that, beyond helping with stress relief, it could contribute to a more enjoyable and positive undergraduate experience. As Francesca said:

I want a positive experience with my university career. Like, I know a lot of people, it's just come and get your degree and leave. And for a lot of people, that's all they really do, is they come here, get their degree, they leave. But I want to be able to have a positive experience with [my university] as well. Like I want to be able to get involved in things and interact with the school itself. And be able to enjoy myself while I'm here doing that. [...] I feel, like, for sure it's a huge stress reliever. It takes a

lot of pressure off, I find, when you just have that time where you can kind of have me time, as opposed to just sitting in your room. [Francesca, 19, first generation, first year]

Francesca did not want to be a student with a utilitarian approach to university—enroll, get the degree, and leave—instead, she wanted to enjoy the experience, which, through getting involved, could reduce stress from academics and give her a more positive undergraduate experience.

For many interviewees, there were numerous expectations for them to negotiate and navigate within their undergraduate experience; however, the majority were able to respond to the resulting expectational tensions through a variety of adaptive strategies. Responses ranged from mental readjustment to behavioural readjustment, all focused on reducing these tensions or finding balance through reduced emphasis on grades, reframing success as a process, and adjusting engagement emphasis and behaviours. These responses highlight how students negotiate numerous expectational tensions that start before the university application process, continuing through the undergraduate experience, and as they work towards transitioning into graduate school or the workforce. However, that students were able to resolve some of these tensions highlights student resiliency and calls to question the dominant engagement success narrative, including the notion that there is a culture of disengagement on campuses. Additionally, interviewees were able to use these interviews to go beyond just explaining tensions and responses to these tensions, with some students also offering suggestions as to how to prevent these tensions in the first place. These are discussed next.

6.3. Student Suggestions for Preventing and Resolving Expectational Tensions

Interviewees also responded to expectational tensions by emphasizing what could be done to prevent or resolve them. Interviewees offered potential solutions to help ameliorate expectational tensions often as they applied to the dominant engagement success narrative, and usually with a focus on grades or assessment. Solutions often came about as a response to the above-mentioned mental health concerns consequence. However, not all interviewees offered solutions, and instead were content dealing with expectational tensions rather than preventing them, though this could be due to the fact that some students felt that they could not change the dominant narrative surrounding grades. Mature student Ana Maria, for example, explained that she understood why grades were important, but suggested that the pursuit of high grades leads to mental health concerns. She further posited that institutional efforts should focus on preventing mental health concerns rather than treating them—an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

I know that there's... the measure of a grade, you need a minimum required, I do understand that. But, I know that there's a lot of students—there's a lot of stress, like, between exams. And, [I know] ... we have many resources to help students when they are [not doing well ...] So, instead of having 15 psychologists more to help you when you're there, how about help us before then—before getting to that point—to need the help. To be anxious and depressed, or to have suicidal thoughts, or I'm a loser. [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

As Ana Maria noted, grades were a major source for stress for students which, in turn, negatively impacted students' mental health. And while the university is making an effort to address this, Ana Maria pressed that a preventative approach, rather than a curative one, would be more effective. The following are preventative solutions that students brought up in their interviews: altering assessment and adjusting institutional funding and planning.

6.3.1. *Altering assessment.* Interviewees noted that the most salient tensions focused on grades, leading some interviewees to suggest adjusting assessments. These interviewees noted that, if the pressure to attain high grades was not part of the undergraduate experience, students' mental health could be better, and in turn, they could have a more successful and enjoyable undergraduate experience. As noted by Leslie and Natalie, altering how they were assessed was a good solution to many issues facing numerous undergraduates.

If there's a way to get rid of [grades], I think success could be greater. But, how do we get rid of something that holds such ... power. [Leslie, 22, first generation, third year]

[I: Would you say that, if there wasn't as much pressure to get high grades ... there would be a totally different mindset?]

I think it'd be different. I think mental health would be a lot better at [my university]. In general, mental health is shit here. [Natalie 20, traditional, first year]

For these students, grades were problematic could be solved by abolishing them or reframing them. This would, in turn, help ameliorate the pressure and stress students felt to attain higher grades, allowing them to focus more on learning and less on gaining points, as Mabel suggested above. However, as Leslie noted, the pervasiveness of grades and the power they have make it unlikely that her suggestion could become reality. Interviewees also suggested other institutional adjustments that could facilitate a better undergraduate experience for students.

6.3.2. *Adjusting institutional funding and planning.* Interviewees noted that both institutional funding and planning could also be altered to help ameliorate tensions they felt in their undergraduate experience. For example, tuition and the cost to benefit ratio was a sticking point for some students, some of whom suggested that the cost of attending university manifested in students feeling pressured to complete the degree as quickly as

possible due to the high financial burden, taking away from other benefits associated with an undergraduate degree, such as learning. Interviewee Natalie, who said that the pressure to attain high grades created mental health concerns, also noted that this could be exacerbated by the exorbitant cost of attaining a degree.

I feel like, if university was free, for instance, ... a big pressure would be gone. Because then you'd be, "you know what, even if I'm going to school for eight years, I don't have to deal with \$100,000 of debt when I'm done." Which is, like, completely taking the burden out. You know what, eight years of learning—that's how I'd see it then. Not eight years learning, but also debt, and then worrying about how I'm going to pay off that debt. [Natalie 20, traditional, first year]

For Natalie, because the cost of getting a degree is so expensive, she felt as though she had to rush to get her degree so that her future would be less daunting. Making university free, she suggested, could help relieve some tensions. However, this would not address the institutional structure that some students had concerns with.

Other students explained how the way that the university was spending money was a source of tension. Interviewees thought that spending less on capital projects like new buildings, and more on academic resources such as hiring more faculty, would be more beneficial to students, and provide a higher quality education.

To me, 600 students [in a lecture is too much]. You know, it's a professor giving the class, and sometimes the expectations are higher then. And, as students, I think we should challenge the system on giving better expectations. I'm sure that the professors are very well-prepared, but we need more professors. We need more academic material and staff. [...] In general, I think we need more faculty members. And I'm sure that the government has money and [my university] has money, to do that. And I know that they're building lots of buildings ... Which is good. I don't see anything wrong with it. ... But, let's give more quality than quantity to our students. But the ones who have the last say is us. [Ana Maria, 34, mature, first generation, first year]

As Ana Maria points out, there are many issues as a result of institutional decision-making—decisions that have significant impacts on students' individual educational trajectories, yet do

not include them in these decisions. In this case, Ana Maria suggests that reallocating funding towards the learning experience and away from building construction could significantly improve the undergraduate experience, not just for students, but also for faculty who are saddled with larger classes sizes.

These are but a few potential solutions that could potentially be sourced from this study. And, while interviewees only mentioned a small number of solutions to ameliorate expectational tensions, the pervasiveness of the dominant narrative may explain why this is. As Leslie questioned, how can the power that grades have over expectations of the undergraduate experience be altered? That students have internalized the dominant narrative as normative may have students feeling as though changing this is impossible, which is further exacerbated by the fact that these same student voices are already left out of the undergraduate experience discourse—why speak of things if they cannot be changed or if no one will listen to them anyway.

Interviewees' suggestions above can be seen as an extension of their larger views of the university experience and highlights the complex and varied nature of the undergraduate experience that, at times, is full of many, and often, conflicting expectations, leading to numerous negative consequences for students. Additionally, including these suggestions with how interviewees rethought their undergraduate experience provides a more robust overview of what students feel would more fruitfully—and positively—contribute to having a successful undergraduate experience.

The findings in this chapter highlight the importance of student voices within the dominant engagement success narrative pervading higher education discourse. Interviewees articulated that having to navigate and negotiate complex and varied expectations created tension for them, and also had negative impacts on students' individual educational trajectories. How interviewees responded to these tensions and the suggestions they made to help prevent and/or reduce them indicate that students are traversing a complex web of expectations, that ultimately leads to students having to choose between various expectations, often making choices that go against individual motivations and expectations of the undergraduate experience. The impact and implications of these findings are discussed in the following chapter.

7. THE MULTI-EXPECTATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE:
COMPLEX MOTIVATIONS, CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS, AND
NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING TENSIONS

At the beginning of this thesis, I expressed that the goal of this study was to explore prescriptive and assumptive views about students' motivations for attending and expectations of engaging at university, and how these impact their undergraduate experiences, specifically within the context of the dominant engagement success narrative. As such, I spoke directly to undergraduate students to understand their perspectives on, and how they navigated and negotiated, their undergraduate experiences. Chapters 4 and 5 explored undergraduates' motivations for attending university and their expectations of the undergraduate experience, respectively, highlighting various complex and nuanced educational trajectories and perspectives of the undergraduate experience that students have. In Chapter 6, I expounded on findings from Chapters 4 and 5, revealing how tensions within and between student motivations and expectations of university could lead to consequences for undergraduates, which, for some interviewees, fostered the growth of adaptive strategies as well as suggestions for preventing and resolving these tensions. In the current chapter, using findings from Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and content from the literature review, I resolve my research questions and objectives and explain these findings in the context of the undergraduate experience discourse more generally, and the engagement success narrative more specifically. The chapter also explains my research contributions and implications. outlines research limitations, and suggests future research directions, ending with some concluding thoughts.

7.1. Motivations, Expectations, and Tensions in the Undergraduate Experience

Within the engagement success narrative, undergraduates are expected to engage both socially and academically to gain the most from their undergraduate experience and to persist to graduation. Undergraduates who do not engage at institutionally-prescribed, socially-accepted, and faculty-promoted levels are framed as more likely to be unsuccessful during their undergraduate experience and are labelled as disillusioned, deficient, and disengaged (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Hu and Kuh 2002; Kuh 2003; Kuh et al. 2006, 2007; Trout 1997). Additional research has also suggested that a potential causal factor of undergraduate disengagement lies in students' motivations for enrolling in university, with the suggestion that, the more students are extrinsically motivated, the more disengaged they are at university (Côté and Allahar 2011; Twenge and Donnelly 2016). Reality, however, is more complex, as the findings from my research have shown.

In the sections that follow, I answer my research questions and challenge the taken-for-granted, common aspersions that are widely cast upon undergraduates as disengaged if they do not toe the line of the engagement success narrative. I highlight students' motivations for attending university and their expectations of undergraduate success, which I then contextualize within the undergraduate experience discourse.

7.1.1. What motivates undergraduates to enrol in university. While research suggests that students have become more extrinsically motivated in their decision to attend university than previous generations (Twenge and Donnelly 2016), or that students are unidimensionally motivated to attend university (Côté and Allahar 2011), findings from my research challenge these assertions. To answer **RQ1**—*What motivates undergraduates to enrol*

in university and how does this compare to extant literature on students' enrolment motivations—

I examined students' motivations in their decision to attend university. Interviewee responses indicated that students' decisions to go to university were complex and varied—undergraduates listed numerous norms, pressures, and influences that, along with their personal motivations, shaped their decision to go to university.

In Chapter 4, interviewees spoke of having varied and numerous motivations for attending university, such as normative expectations, parental pressures, familial influences, and self-validation. Additionally, different student subgroups had different tendencies in their motivations for attending; older, mature students noted more intrinsic motivations than younger students, international students mentioned having more familial pressures than domestic students, and younger students were more motivated by potential career or job opportunities, while older, mature, students were less so. These findings underscore the numerous influences shaping students' decisions to attend university, highlighting differences in student subgroups, problematizing the unidimensional view of student motivations. As such, the idea that students are either *only* intrinsically or extrinsically motivated can be challenged, with most students having many motivations shaping their decision to attend university. However, while my findings cannot indicate whether students are more or less intrinsically or extrinsically motivated than previous generations (see Twenge and Donnelly 2016), students had multiple influences and pressures impacting their decision to attend university—*both* intrinsic and extrinsic motivations—which may suggest that students are internalizing more extrinsic motivations *in addition to*, rather than *instead of*, intrinsic

motivations. This suggests that there is more to the motivation engagement literature than is currently discussed or allowed for.

One of the more salient findings of this research was the difference between older and younger interviewees' motivational orientations. For older interviewees, because they tended to have more intrinsic, personal motivations and few pressures or norms influencing their decision to enrol in university, they also tended to experience few, if any, tensions within or between their motivations. Younger interviewees, however, spoke of a number of norms, pressures, influences, and personal motivations shaping their decision—multi-motivational orientations that were particular to them. However, along with these multi-motivational orientations, younger students also experienced tensions within and between these different motivations. For example, interviewees said that they were motivated to go to university for academic and intellectual pursuits, yet, many of these same students felt pressured to go to university in order to attain a credential for a job. With university being both a place of higher learning but also necessary for gaining access to a better career or job was not lost on the students, many of whom found that the cost of a university degree created a further tension that often played out in students' expectations of the undergraduate experience. Further, the distinction between older and younger interviewees' motivations also plays an important part in their expectations of the undergraduate experience as will be shown next.

7.1.2. *What are students' expectations of the undergraduate experience.* Most research on the undergraduate experience has articulated that successful undergraduates are those that engage with the university academically and socially, and that not meeting these expectations

is cause for concern and garners students the negative “disengaged” label. This engagement success narrative dominates the undergraduate experience; however, much like students’ motivations above, findings from my research suggest that, when including student voices in the discussion, there is more to the undergraduate experience than the current engagement success narrative suggests or allows for. To answer **RQ₂**—*What are students’ expectations of the undergraduate experience and how does this compare to the dominant student engagement success narrative*—interviewees were asked about their perspectives on and expectations of the undergraduate experience and the dominant engagement success discourse.

Findings from Chapter 5 highlighted that most students had internalized the dominant engagement success narrative (either for themselves, or in the case of older students, as it applied to younger students), but that some also problematized this dominant narrative. How students problematized the narrative was influenced by the importance they placed on attaining high grades or extracurricular participation, which was tied to students’ motivations for attending university. The distinction between older and younger students’ motivations becomes salient here, in that, older students who mentioned more intrinsic motivations framed the importance of grades around self-fulfillment, while younger students framed the importance of grades as necessary for gaining access to prestigious programs, departments, and graduate studies. Additionally, while younger interviewees noted the connection between extracurricular participation and other non-academic benefits such as transferable skills, networking, and personal growth, older students highlighted that these were more for younger students, as they had already gained much of these benefits. As such, extracurricular engagement was not part of older students’ expectations of the undergraduate

experience. Hence, interviewees suggested that the dominant engagement success narrative should be thought of as more of an ideal type that guides students or that students should strive for, but one that students may not want or be able to meet. Viewed in the context of the above findings then, when it came to the dominant engagement success narrative, whether or not students felt they could—or wanted—to meet these expectations was heavily influenced by their motivations for attending university; mature students expressed *less desire* to meet these expectations, while younger students felt *less able* to meet them. For younger students, this feeling of being less able to meet these expectations was because of their more numerous and varied expectations of the undergraduate experience, while for older students, the felt less desire to meet these expectations because of their more specific expectations of the undergraduate experience.

Interviewees also expressed that, on top of the dominant narrative, students could only be considered successful through exertion of effort; personal growth or transformation; finding and pursuing their passions and setting and reaching their goals; and happiness, mental wellness, and school-life balance. However, which of these aspects were considered necessary for undergraduate success also depended on student's motivations, again highlighting the differences between younger and older students. Older students tended to frame their expectations around pursuing their passions or reaching their goals, with happiness also playing a part at times; younger students, conversely, tended to talk about exertion of effort, personal growth or transformation, and mental wellness and school-life balance. These findings, together with students' motivations for enrolling in university, highlight differences in student subgroup educational trajectories as well as how this plays

out within the undergraduate experience. While both older and younger students problematized the dominant narrative, it was only younger students who tended to experience tensions within and between their expectations of the undergraduate experience including the dominant narrative. Older students tended to enrol in university for more intrinsic reasons leading them to have fewer, but more specific, expectations of the undergraduate experience that were more aligned with their motivations. Younger students, however, had a larger and more diverse set of factors shaping their decision to enrol in university, including norms, pressures, and influences that, on top of their personal motivations led to a more complex set of expectations of the undergraduate experience, that included the dominant narrative. The complexity of these expectations resulted in tensions for some of the younger interviewees, with many students also identifying further negative consequences as a result of these tensions.

7.1.3. *Do students experience conflicts within or between their motivations for attending university, their expectations of the undergraduate experience, and the dominant engagement success narrative, and if so, what are the consequences of these conflicts, and how do students negotiate them.* As my research has shown, students' motivations for enrolling in university, and their expectations of the undergraduate experience are a complex mélange of various factors shaping their individual educational trajectories. However, having numerous and varied motivations and expectations of university does not necessarily result in conflicts for students. Thus, in order to answer **RQ3**—*Do students experience conflicts within or between their motivations for attending university, their expectations of the undergraduate experience, and the dominant engagement success narrative, and if so, what are the consequences of these conflicts,*

and how do students negotiate them—interviewee responses to questions about their motivations, expectations, the dominant engagement success narrative, and general likes and dislikes about their undergraduate experience were analyzed. These conflicts were noted in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and together, underscore the importance of both this research and the inclusion of student voices in the undergraduate experience, particularly that of expectations surrounding undergraduate success.

For some interviewees, depending on the composition of their motivations to enrol in university, they also experienced tensions between these motivations. Generally, it was younger students who expressed having more tensions, which was tied to the number and variety of, as well as the balance between, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations they had. Older students, however, had fewer, and more intrinsic than extrinsic motivations shaping their decision to enrol, resulting in few tensions being mentioned by them. This extended to their expectations of the undergraduate experience—interviewees who experienced conflicts within or between their motivations to attend university also experienced conflicts within or between their expectations of the undergraduate experience.

Expectational tensions were mentioned by younger interviewees who spoke of having to navigate and negotiate numerous and competing expectations of the undergraduate experience. Students had to choose between these expectations, with grades often maintaining their importance over other aspects of the undergraduate experience. This highlights, how, generally, younger students accept, internalize, and often embrace the dominant engagement success narrative, but that this acceptance results in students feeling pressured to get good grades, leading to stress and conflict with other expectations they have

of the undergraduate experience. Older students, however, did not feel pressured to meet the expectations of the dominant engagement success narrative, as they had reframed their undergraduate experience within their own expectations, and as such, experienced few, if any, tensions in their undergraduate experience.

As a result of these tensions, younger students experienced additional consequences that impacted their individual educational trajectories. Interviewees explained that choosing between conflicting demands resulted in a loss of some of the benefits associated with a university education, as well as what the students themselves hoped to gain from their undergraduate experience. Consequences mentioned by interviewees included: pressure, stress, and mental health concerns; comparisons to and competition with other students; feelings of failure; a reduced focus on learning; and feeling disadvantaged compared to other students or feeling disconnected from the university. Often, interviewees experienced more than one of these consequences, with them frequently occurring with or because of other consequences or tensions, further underscoring the complexity of the undergraduate experience.

In this research, interviewees responded to these tensions according to the importance they placed on various expectations they had of the undergraduate experience. Because grades were the main cause of interviewees' tensions, students' responses to these tensions included a reduced emphasis on grades, reframing success as a process, and adjusting engagement emphasis and behaviours. Interviewees further built on their responses offering additional suggestions for institutions to help with preventing and resolving expectational tensions.

Collectively, the above findings show that, while at first it appears that students see undergraduate success, by and large, according to the dominant engagement success narrative, closer analysis reveals more complexity in their motivations, expectations, and engagement within the undergraduate experience. This complexity is a source of tension, resulting in additional consequences for students. Next, I contextualize these findings within the undergraduate experience discourse, highlighting how differently engaged students problematize the dominant engagement success narrative.

7.2. Disengaged or Differently Engaged? Problematizing the Engagement Success Narrative.

As noted in the literature review, the engagement success narrative frames undergraduate success through students' engagement. Accordingly, being intrinsically motivated leads to higher levels of academic and extracurricular engagement resulting in higher grades and gaining more of the benefits associated with the attainment of an undergraduate education (e.g., networking, job skills, and personal growth), whereas being extrinsically motivated has the opposite impact—lower levels of academic and extracurricular engagement, lower grades and gaining fewer or no benefits associated with the undergraduate degree, and students dropping out (Côté and Allahar 2011; Kuh 2003; Kuh et al. 2005). However, as findings from my research have shown, when student voices are included in the undergraduate experience discourse, this discussion becomes more complex and nuanced, with clearly observable differences between interviewees' motivations, expectations, and engagement, and the dominant narrative. These differences problematize the dominant engagement success narrative. In particular, they challenge approaches to and measures of

student motivations and expectations of the undergraduate experience, as well the characterization of (dis)engagement.

7.2.1. *Challenging approaches to and measures of student motivations.* In the engagement success narrative, students' reasons for enrolling in university are often dichotomized into either intrinsic or extrinsic motivations (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000, 2020), with further research underscoring generational differences in students' motivational orientations for going to university, suggesting that there has been an increase in extrinsic and a decrease in anti-extrinsic (intrinsic) motivations since the Baby Boomer generation (Twenge and Donnelly 2016). Building on this, other research has suggested that extrinsically motivated students are often more instrumental-vocational in their reasons for enrolling in university—a credentialist approach to the undergraduate experience focused more on the attainment of a degree for future job prospects rather than for learning (Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Twenge and Donnelly 2016). This literature frames students as having a single, static—either intrinsic *or* extrinsic—motivational orientation; yet, findings from my research challenge this view.

Interviewees' decision to enroll in university was highly complex, and more varied and nuanced than the dominant narrative's unidimensional motivational orientation suggests or allows. Shaping students' decision to enrol in university included *both* intrinsic and extrinsic motivations such as job/career prospects and personal motivations such as a love of learning, as well as external pressures, norms, and influences. Interviewees' social locations and life experiences contributed to differences in motivational orientations between older and younger students. Older students who had been (or still were) in the workforce and/or

had families had very different motivations compared to younger students coming right from high school, such that some older students were influenced to go to university to be a role model to their children, while some of the younger students could still be considered children themselves. Additionally, both older and younger students were motivated to attend university because of self-actualization; however, younger interviewees focused more on personal growth, whereas older interviewees focused more on self-fulfillment. Together, these highlight the impact of life experiences and social location on students' decision to enrol in university; older students with families and children may be motivated to go to university to be a good role model or to prove to themselves that they can 'do university', whereas students right from high school may enrol in university because of social norms, to attain more knowledge, for personal growth, and because they see university as the pathway to a good job. The multi-motivational orientations that students had challenge the instrumental-vocational credentialist view that students enrol in university solely for the credential. Students want more than that, but due to the increasing cost of university and necessity of university credentials for jobs, framing students with the singular credentialist motivation, negates the impact that other pressures, norms, stresses, and personal reasons have in shaping students' decision to enrol in university.

The findings from my research challenge the approaches to and measures of student motivations in the following ways. First, although the dominant narrative frames undergraduate students as unidimensionally oriented, students' decisions to enrol in university were multi-dimensional and included different combinations of various pressures, norms, influences, and personal motivations. Students had multi-motivational orientations.

Second, these multi-motivational orientations and differences between older and younger interviewees' responses show that students are *both* intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, rather than just extrinsically motivated—though this does not allow for comparisons across generational cohorts. Finally, although research connects extrinsically motivated students to having a singular credentialist view of university, interviewee responses highlighted that students' multi-motivational orientations, especially younger students', did include a credentialist slant—students specified the necessity of a degree for future job prospects and a middle-class lifestyle—but this was in addition to personal, intrinsic motivations. Including student voices and analyzing interview data leads me to problematize the engagement success narrative by challenging approaches to and measures of student motivations within the discourse. Implications of this become more prevalent when exploring how students navigate and negotiate their undergraduate experience.

7.2.2. *Challenging expectations of the undergraduate experience.* Underscoring the engagement success narrative are participation in *educationally purposive activities* and *enriching educational experiences* which have become the defining expectations of being a successful undergraduate (Kuh 2009; Kuh et al. 2006). Research explains that engaging according to these expectations also “increases the odds that any student ... will attain his or her educational and personal objectives” (Kuh 2009:698), presenting a congruence between students' expectations of the undergraduate experience and the dominant narrative. This prescribes expectations of the undergraduate experience as a unidimensional, one-size-fits-all approach to undergraduate success. My research showed that students' expectations of the undergraduate experience were more complex than this, being multi-dimensional, varied,

and nuanced, often including, but adding to the engagement success narrative. And, while students generally accepted the dominant narrative, they found problems with it, highlighting both the pervasiveness of the dominant narrative, but also the pressure, stress, and tension it can cause for students.

Students' expectations of the undergraduate experience were significantly varied—some included the dominant narrative or certain aspects of it, while others challenged, added to, or disregarded this narrative altogether. Students had varied expectations of the undergraduate experience, with a noted difference between younger and older students. Younger students had a larger and more varied set of expectations compared to the fewer, more specific expectations noted by older students. Some older students expressed not including extracurricular participation in their expectations of the undergraduate experience because they would not benefit from participating in them and/or they just did not have the time to, while some younger students included additional expectations, such as personal growth or school-life balance as part of their individual educational trajectories.

These findings challenge student success expectations in the following ways. First, rather than the unidimensional, one-size-fits-all approach to undergraduate success prescribed by the dominant narrative, interviewees articulated multi-expectational approaches to the undergraduate experience. Students navigated and negotiated their undergraduate experience based on a mix of individual motivations, expectations, and the dominant engagement success narrative. Second, students' multi-expectational approaches to the undergraduate experience challenge the assumptive views about the congruence between students' expectations of the undergraduate experience and the dominant narrative. Students

generally acknowledged, often accepted, and at times embraced the dominant narrative, yet some students problematized, added to, or excluded it from their individual educational trajectories. Thus, though there is somewhat of a congruence between students' expectations and those of the dominant narrative, their expectations are much more complex and varied suggesting less of a congruence and more of a begrudging acceptance. Students' carefully choreographed dance between different and competing expectations further problematizes the engagement success narrative by challenging the characterization of disengagement, explored next.

7.2.3. *Challenging the characterization of (dis)engagement.* In the dominant engagement success narrative, student engagement is key to successfully navigating university—students engaging at less than expected levels or not at all are framed as *disengaged* (Côté and Allahar 2011; Kuh 2003; Kuh et al. 2005). Research characterizes disengagement as non-engagement—what students do not do or do less of according to the dominant narrative, framing disengagement as behavioural. This characterization further frames (dis)engagement through time on task—the more time on task, the more engaged a student is, and the more successful they will be (i.e., higher grades, persistence to graduate); disengagement is considered less or no time on task leading to lower grades and dropping out (Côté and Allahar 2011; Kuh 2003; Kuh et al. 2005). Thus, time-use is used to measure student engagement, and by extension, predicts students' success according to the engagement success narrative. Research has found that, based on students' time-use, disengagement has increased across generational cohorts (Babcock and Marks 2011; Côté and Allahar 2007, 2011; Hersh and Merrow 2005; Neves and Hillman 2019). This characterizes

disengagement as what students are not doing—enough of, or at all—through measures of time-use, and as an all-encompassing label of the disengaged student. However, interviewees' responses highlighted that students were choosing how to engage cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally, showing that how and to what extent they engaged within the undergraduate experience was more complex than time on task; rather, students in my research navigated and negotiated their expectations of the undergraduate experience by engaging differently than this characterization allows.

My research showed that, how and to what extent students engaged with the university was more complex than through a measure of how much time they spent on certain activities like studying. Interviewees' complex and varied expectations resulted in a negotiation between cognitive, emotional, *and* behavioural ways to help them attain their goals, much like the framing of engagement suggested by Trowler (2010). Students chose how and where to exert their efforts strategically, suggesting that, rather than being disengaged because they did not spend enough time on different aspects of the engagement success narrative, the complexity of individual educational trajectories forced students to choose how to engage. Differences between older and younger students help show this. Mature students had an emotional investment in their undergraduate experience (e.g., "I want to be here" or "I've waited so long to be here I don't want to squander it"), but also cognitively chose not to participate in extracurriculars. Younger students, however, spoke of engaging in the undergraduate experience differently depending on the number of expectations that they had internalized, such that, while they may have an interest (emotional) in gaining knowledge, they understand (cognitive) that the cost of university

makes it difficult for them to work towards (behavioural) gaining that knowledge. Students' choice to engage was often in response to these tensions, showing how they navigated tensions caused by the stress to achieve progressively higher grades by rationalizing grades' lack of usefulness outside of academia, by rebalancing their academics and mental wellness through extracurriculars, and by reducing the emphasis they placed on grades—all different forms of engagement beyond time on task.

These findings then challenge the characterization of (dis)engagement by showing that students are engaging in a variety of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive ways in order to meet their individual educational goals. This challenges the singularly conceptualized view of engagement through time use that is applied to students as an all-encompassing label, suggesting that what is often criticized as disengagement can be understood as different forms of engagement. Students are *differently engaging*—strategically navigating numerous expectations, a meshing of different levels of behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement driven by the growing complexity of what is demanded of students and what they demand of themselves in the undergraduate experience.

7.2.4. *The differently-engaged student.* Collectively, my research findings challenge the dominant engagement success narrative, offering a different view on disengagement and the oft-cited *culture of disengagement* in the literature (Baron and Corbin 2012; Côté and Allahar 2011). First, rather than students having a singular motivational orientation for attending university—either intrinsic or extrinsic—interviewees in my research highlighted multi-motivational orientations shaping their decision to attend university. Second, as research has suggested, students' motivational orientations do impact how and to what extent

they engage with university, but as shown, the impact is more complex than being intrinsically motivated and engaged or extrinsically motivated and disengaged. Student's engagement is both a product of their individual motivations and expectations and the way in which they navigate the undergraduate experience to meet those expectations. Lastly, the complexity of students' motivations led to complexity in their expectations of the undergraduate experience. This created tensions that students had to navigate in order to reach their individual educational goals, leading to students strategizing their engagement cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally in ways that aligned with their individual educational trajectories.

As such, although the dominant narrative suggests that levels of (in)action in educationally purposive activities and enriching educational experiences determine if a student is engaged or disengaged, in my research, the way that students navigated the undergraduate experience could better be thought of as *differently engaged*. Students had a complex set of motivations shaping their expectations of the undergraduate experience. How students engaged in the undergraduate experience were based on this complexity, their personal interests, and the conflicts between their expectations, including the internalized norms of the engagement success narrative. Viewed this way, student engagement can be thought of as a product of students' individual educational trajectories instead of a label attached to students meeting institutionalized measures of engagement (i.e., only through high grades and extracurricular participation). Further, the complexity with which students view the undergraduate experience fosters an environment where students must navigate this complexity through different forms of engagement, strategically maneuvering through

cognitive, emotional, and behavioural tactics to gain their individual wants from their time at university. Hence, although many students had internalized the norms of the dominant engagement success narrative, this was but one (often large) part of a larger individual educational trajectory that students navigated using a mix of different forms of engagement. The importance of these findings, and my research more generally, becomes clearer when looking at how the complexity in students' educational trajectories—their collective motivations, expectations, and forms and levels of engagement—impacts their undergraduate experience. These are explored in the following section outlining the contributions and implications of this research.

7.3. Research Contributions and Implications

My research focused on the dominant engagement success narrative that persists in the undergraduate experience discourse, where what is expected of students is based on their engagement in educationally purposive activities or enriching educational experiences. However, findings from my research problematize this narrative, outlining issues surrounding the approaches to and measures of student motivations, expectations of the undergraduate experience, the characterization of (dis)engagement, and the biggest issue, the missing student voice. By adding student voices to the discourse, a more accurate representation of the undergraduate experience by those involved in it emerges—the *differently engaged student* narrative. With the differently engaged student narrative, the complex nature of an undergraduate's trajectory through the undergraduate experience becomes more obvious, showing how, rather than disengaging, students are engaging in ways

that are more aligned with their motivations and expectations in order to meet their individual educational goals.

Using the differently engaged narrative, the implications of this research also become clearer. As noted, the complexity of a student's individual educational trajectory impacts their undergraduate experience with more complex and varied motivations and expectations creating a host of competing demands of students. Tensions from these competing demands were navigated and negotiated through a variety of strategies, often leading to students having to choose between them (e.g., wanting to learn versus wanting to pass the class to not pay to take it again) or suffer consequences by not resolving these tensions. Consequences noted by students included increased stress, pressure, and mental wellness concerns; comparisons to and competition with other students; feelings of inadequacy; a reduced focus on learning; and feeling either disadvantaged compared to other students or disconnected from the university. These consequences highlight larger issues with the dominant engagement narrative, specifically, how its continued promotion can hinder students' attainment of their educational goals, can lead to negative mental health concerns, and specifically for older students, can leave them feeling left out of different aspects of the undergraduate experience altogether.

7.3.1. Hindering the attainment of educational goals. The dominant engagement success narrative hinders students' attainment of their educational goals by making the undergraduate experience more performance-oriented and by making students choose between competing expectations, often at the detriment to their individual goals. In this light, I also highlight the role that institutional initiatives play in this hinderance.

As Baron and Corbin (2012) noted, the corporatization of the university has led to a performance-oriented academic culture that values ‘successful’ students and stresses competition, which has been tied to higher levels of student disengagement (Inzlicht and Good 2005). However, as shown, the promotion of the dominant narrative this way results in more problems for undergraduates such as comparisons to and competition with other students, feelings of inadequacy, and a reduced focus on learning. Adding students’ full set of expectations on top of this further amplifies how the promotion of the dominant narrative creates additional tensions that students must navigate.

The undergraduate experience for younger students was complex and contained varied motivations and expectations resulting in a host of competing demands of them. As such, they had to choose between different aspects of the undergraduate experience, resulting in them altering their educational expectations and engagement, and often at the detriment to their own personal wants from the undergraduate experience. Students who were motivated to come to university for their love of learning, but also because they had internalized the necessity for a degree to get a job, chose between enrolling in a program for interest or future job prospects, resulting in a complex combination of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement to resolve these demands. And as seen above, and depending on how influential the dominant narrative is in a student’s educational trajectory, students could be hit with a double dose of negative consequences—competing with others, feeling of inadequacy, and a reduced focus on learning, as well as having to choose between meeting competing expectations (both that which is presented by the university and their own). Hence, what is considered the best way to get the most out of the undergraduate

experience—the dominant engagement narrative—can have the opposite impact on students. Rather than acquiring the skills, competencies, and intellectual advantages associated with the attainment of an undergraduate degree, and rather than attaining their educational and personal objectives, students, in their attempts to strike a balance between meeting the competing demands of the dominant narrative and getting what they want from their undergraduate experience, actually lose out on gaining these benefits.

An additional factor that further impacts students from attaining their educational goals stems from institutional responses to student diversity. As noted, Canadian universities have implemented numerous programs and initiatives aimed at addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion [EDI] based on Universities Canada's *Inclusive Excellence Principles* (Universities Canada 2017). These programs have the goal of meeting the specific needs of a range of different students (as well as higher education inequities in representativeness and access) and to provide students with the necessary tools and skills to successfully navigate their undergraduate experience. However, many of these initiatives aim to improve student success by realigning students' behaviours to that of the dominant engagement narrative, minimizing both the diversity of the students and their needs. Additionally, the dominant narrative presents a simplistic view of the undergraduate experience, which suggests that simple solutions will alleviate any deviance; however, as students in my research have shown, the undergraduate experience is far from simple, and as such, these simple solutions may not be as effective as hoped. This is not to suggest that services, programs, and initiatives aimed at EDI, decolonization, and thriving are bad in and of themselves; rather, I suggest that more attention should be paid to the fact that these initiatives increase complexity in the

undergraduate experience, and that more could be done to help students understand and navigate this complexity. This could also help to explain why the earlier mentioned analytical report from HEQCO on the impact of student engagement and success initiatives provided “few if any ‘silver bullets’ that clearly improve student performance in individual courses or programs” (Wiggers and Arnold 2011:17)—these programs and initiatives may be different than or compete with student’s individual educational goals—something that is not possible to know without student voices as part of the discourse.

7.3.2. *Mental health concerns.* For many younger students, the complexity of their expectations of the undergraduate experience were often the cause of much stress and pressure leading to significant mental health concerns including suicide. As some of the interviewees in this study suggested, the students who struggle the most with these mental health concerns are those that tend to be toeing the dominant engagement narrative the most, i.e., the student who has good grades, is involved in clubs, student government, and sports, is a volunteer peer mentor, and has a job—it is high-achieving students who struggle the most with mental health concerns. This may be an outcome of one of the objectives of university being equalization of opportunity, whereby the university, by admitting growing numbers of non-traditional students, has also increased the pressure for traditional students coming from privileged backgrounds to maintain that privilege through differentiation—higher grades and even more participation—the competition that students noted as a consequence of trying to meet numerous expectations.

The importance of student voices becomes more salient here—there is an explicit connection between motivational and expectational tensions and student mental health

concerns. Even with a generally acknowledged mental health ‘crisis’ within Canadian universities (see, for example, Goffin 2017; Lewsen 2021; Nadarajah 2021), there are no institutional, provincial, or national statistics on numbers of higher education suicides, nor is there a comprehensive national strategy for student mental wellness (De Somma et al. 2017). Additionally, although Canadian data from the *National College Health Assessment II* provide statistics on whether or not students have had mental health issues (felt hopeless, overwhelmed, lonely, sad, depressed, anxiety) or seriously considered or had attempted suicide in the last twelve months—as well as potential causal factors such as risky behaviours including sexual encounters, alcohol and drug consumption, and smoking/vaping—these are presented descriptively without further analysis, and without asking students directly about causes of mental wellness concerns. Understanding the connections between motivational and expectational tensions and how these result in mental wellness concerns including suicide, and suicidal thoughts, ideations, and attempts informs institutional initiatives and policies, much of which are focused on addressing consequences (e.g., mental wellness) rather than what leads to them (e.g., competition for higher grades, too many demands made of students; De Somma et al. 2017), further highlighting the importance of including student voices in the undergraduate experience discourse.

7.3.3. *Institutional disconnect.* Throughout the dissertation, being a mature student has been presented as an advantage with few motivational or expectational tensions expressed by older interviewees. Older students understood and accepted the dominant engagement success narrative as it applied to younger students, with many older students reframing the undergraduate experience to better match their individual educational goals, resulting in

fewer tensions. Yet, these same students also felt left out of the undergraduate experience, saying that it is precisely because the undergraduate experience is mainly for younger students that they felt disconnected from it. And, while research by Tinto (1975, 1987) suggests that students who *do not* socially integrate with their institution—as facilitated through participation in extracurriculars and other non-academic activities—are more likely to drop out, when compared to the older students in my study, this does not seem to be the case, with many older students thriving more than younger students, even when they feel disconnected from the institution. As such, promoting the dominant narrative as the *only* way to be a successful undergraduate, not only impacts younger students, it also makes older students feel disconnected from the undergraduate experience.

7.3.4. *The multi-expectational undergraduate experience.* Ultimately, the results of this research highlight how the undergraduate experience is a significantly more complex endeavour than the engagement success narrative frames it to be. This complexity goes beyond the dominant narrative's tendency to reduce student success to simple measures of engagement, showing how the contemporary undergraduate experience is different things to different people. Taking into account the numerous roles and objectives of the university—teaching, training, research, public service, and equalization of opportunity—as well as the associated benefits of getting a degree such as personal growth, transferable and job skills, and learning about others and society, helps to explain this complexity. However, this complexity comes at a cost, with students' undergraduate experience becoming a multi-expectational journey filled with tensions and challenges that students must navigate. How

students negotiate this complexity leads to students compromising between their various expectations, resulting in a ‘watered down’ undergraduate experience.

7.4. Rethinking the Undergraduate Experience

My research findings challenged the dominant engagement success narrative that pervades the undergraduate experience discourse, resulting in numerous implications for various stakeholders shaping this discourse. The following are the culmination of previous research, findings from my study, and interviewees’ suggestions, and are contextualized to help address the above implications of this research.

7.4.1. Rethinking expectations. If the objectives of university, as applied to undergraduates, are to continue to be about teaching, training, and equalization of opportunity, then these have to take more space in institutional dialogue surrounding the undergraduate experience. Promoting a singular way to ‘do’ university minimizes students’ individual educational trajectories, reducing them to fulfilling institutional measures used to show the university’s effectiveness at meeting their mandates, e.g., graduation rates. However, students have a myriad of motivations shaping their decision to enrol in university that are formed by larger social discourses about the knowledge economy, parental influences, and employer demands, as well as individual wants. These motivations shape students’ expectations of the undergraduate experience, underscoring a complexity that is missing in the dominant engagement success narrative. By reducing the undergraduate experience and student success to simple measures of engagement, this complexity is negated, resulting in similarly simplistic resolutions to students’ levels of engagement. Thus, this complexity suggests that there are no easy fixes, and that what is expected of the

undergraduate experience requires multiple stakeholders to engage in discussions to foster a better understanding of how best to address this complexity.

7.4.2. *Rethinking grading.* Many students, especially younger ones coming from high school, explained how the pressure to attain ever-increasing high grades, causes competition between students, feelings of inadequacy, and most problematically, undue pressure and stress leading to mental health concerns. The pervasiveness of grades and their importance in the engagement success narrative is one part of the discussion—if we are to rethink grades, we must also take into account how grades are tied to admission, scholarships, progression, and admission to graduate studies. This highlights two additional factors to consider—the prevalence and importance of grades as a main focus of the university, and that this is a systemic issue. As such, with grades being a construct of the university, it is up to them to reconfigure the narrative in a way that de-emphasizes grading in its current form. However, as one of my interviewees noted, grades hold power and changing that is difficult to do. Thus, the complexity attached to grades and what they stand for makes it difficult to offer policy suggestions without a significant rethinking of the entire higher education system, and in turn, massive social shifts.

7.4.3. *Rethinking the role of the university.* Students in this study spoke of the many roles that university plays in their individual educational trajectories, ranging from being a means to an end via a credential; being a stepping stone to a good, high-paying career via gaining job and transferable skills; being a space to ‘kill time’ until they figured out what they wanted to do with their lives; to being a place to grow up and learn how to ‘adult’. Not only that, but from the institutional-side of the coin, there are various views that the university

sees itself as providing (teaching, training, research, public service, and equalization of opportunity), which, when viewed together with students' perspectives, underscores the increasingly complex role that universities play, not only in students' lives, but also in society. Universities have become increasingly complex institutions as they adjust to meet the diverse demands of society, including individual expectations. Student's wants vary, and universities need to fulfill all of these expectations, not just one of them. Although the complexity of the undergraduate can be seen as good (more diversity), it can also be problematic (how to facilitate this diversity). The question then becomes, how can universities accomplish this?

Additionally, there are policy suggestions that could be garnered from the findings of this research; however, because of the exceptionally complex higher education landscape in Ontario, going into any great depth with recommendations is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The following section highlights further limitations of this study and potential direction from which to conduct further research.

7.5. Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As this was a small, single-institution study, the findings here cannot be generalized to other contexts. However, many students, faculty, university administrators, undergraduate student's parents, and the media can relate to the findings in this dissertation, which provides a basis from which other research can be conducted.

Although the sample for this study was a diverse cross-section of students, more could be done to look at traditionally under-represented groups, and in the Ontario

university context more specifically, Black and Indigenous students. Also, there have been significant social developments that have taken place since I began this dissertation, that, unfortunately, I was unable to fully consider in this research (e.g., Black Lives Matter [BLM], Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman and Girls [MMIWG] and Every Child Matters, as well as institutional incidences of sexual harassment and assault). These developments have changed the higher educational landscape such as updated hiring priorities, updated strategic plans, decolonization of curriculum, and updated roles and initiatives aimed at EDI and Indigenization. These are a step in the right direction, but only if they take student voices into account. Further, the smaller sample size did not always provide enough of a pool from which to recognize trends amongst student subgroups, another avenue for future research.

The institution used for this study has a particular reputation as being a ‘party school’—high levels of school spirit, and an active student experience scene, with a certain demographic of student that may bias these data in particular ways. However, much like my interviewees’ experiences do not represent the experiences of all students at the university, neither do the findings from the institution of study represent all other institutions. Again, however, I expect the results of this research to be recognizable and relatable to other institutions and their administration. For example, since my research was conducted at a university, an examination of students’ experiences in difference higher education spaces such as community colleges and trade schools, and in the case of Québec, Cégep, could provide interesting comparisons between different social fields.

Additionally, the sample for this study was cross-sectional, and looked at a particular set of students at one particular point in time. Future research could look at cohort differences over time, similar to Twenge and Donnelly's (2016) research on generational differences in American students' reasons for going to college, but with a view towards Canadian and Ontarian data. Similarly, longitudinal research with the same students across their entire undergraduate experience (see, for example, Lehmann 2013, 2014) could provide an in-depth look at how students' expectations change over time. Conducting time-based research could provide researchers and institutional administration with insights into program and initiative effectiveness as well as highlight emerging trends from the student perspective.

7.6. Concluding Thoughts

My research findings highlight how the dominant engagement success narrative can be problematized and looked at more fruitfully when including student voices within the undergraduate experience discourse. Interviewees explained that the undergraduate experience consists of a complex set of expectations that students must continually navigate and negotiate, which may or may not be aligned with the dominant engagement success narrative. As such, rather than students being intrinsically or extrinsically motivated and engaged or disengaged, they differently engaged in ways that fit their individual educational trajectory. Thus, the dominant engagement success narrative could be thought of as one part of a larger set of expectations that students traverse to fully realize their educational and personal objectives of university.

Perhaps the most salient implication from this research, however, is the valuable contribution gathered from including a traditionally dominated voice in the narrative. In the particular case of my research, student voices contributed significantly to understanding the undergraduate experience, especially within the context of the current zeitgeist of global postmodernity. To this end, what interviewees told me about their undergraduate experience was both conflicting and uplifting. That students experience competition with and comparisons to other students, or that the pressure to attain high grades caused students to focus less on learning and more on an exam mark, seems to be incompatible with an undergraduate experience that is supposed to be providing a nurturing environment for students to gain an education, amongst other things. Positively, however, students were able to navigate their way through these tensions, highlighting the resiliency and adaptability of undergraduates, and showing how, rather than disengaged, students are actually differently engaged with the undergraduate experience in ways that help to maximize the likelihood of getting what they want out of university and minimizing any conflicting expectations preventing them from getting those things.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Topic	Questions/Probes	Objective
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why did you to come to university? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PROBE: Why did you come to university rather than go to college? PROBE: Why did you come to this university rather than go to another university? Would you rather be doing something other than going to university? If so, what? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure reliability/validity with survey responses To measure motivation variables To figure out if university is “right” for the student (in their own opinion)
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally, what do you think the university should be about? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PROBE: What is the university’s purpose? Are these the same things you HOPE to get from university? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure reliability/validity with survey responses To measure attitudes towards the purpose of the university To see if the university’s purpose matches with the individual’s hopes
Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you think you’ll actually get what you hope to from the university? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PROBE: Why do you attend if there is a disconnect between what you think a university should provide and what you think you’ll actually get? What do you actually think you’ll get from university if you don’t expect to get what hope. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure reliability/validity with survey responses To gauge the match between attitudes towards university and expectations and hopes of what they want from the university To start figuring out notions of what students want to get to be successful
Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you study a lot for your courses? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PROBE: Are grades important to you, if so, why? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To measure reliability/validity with survey responses To gauge students’ view of academics and extra curriculars as important or not to a student

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you get involved on campus activities such as the student union, clubs, or sports teams? • What do you do that takes time away from studying or on campus extra curriculars? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What about family responsibilities? • What about a job or volunteering? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To see what other activities takes up a student's time away from campus • To measure the levels of time invested on university tasks compared to non-university tasks • To measure potential barriers to success
Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think getting high grades or being active on campus are the best ways to be successful? • Do you think you're a successful student? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ PROBE: What do you do that makes you a successful student? • What do you think makes a successful student in general? • If I told you that I'm trying to measure success through motivation to attend (goals), attitudes and expectations of attending, and behaviours to meet your goals, would you say that you've been successful as a student? • Do you think the university's view of success and your view of success are similar? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ PROBE: Does having high grades and being involved in extra-curriculars mean you're going to be successful, or do you have other ways of knowing that you've been (or will be) successful? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gauge students' views of grades and extra-curriculars to success GENERALLY • To understand students' own views of success for themselves • To see if students' views of success in general match with their own views of success for themselves • To gauge students' response to the breakdown of success into motivations, attitudes and expectations, and behaviours • To measure students' responses to a newer definition of success • To see how students define their own success
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's your favourite thing about university? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To probe into more ideas about what the students think about

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ PROBE: What do you like about university? What do you do at university that you like the most?● What's your least favourite thing about university?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ PROBE: What do you really dislike about university? What do you do that you dislike the most?○ Have you been satisfied with your university experience so far? Why or why not?	the university as helping or hindering their success
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Appendix B: Recruitment poster

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Version Date: 10 Feb. 2017



**Participants needed for research on
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SUCCESS**

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study about
university students' own views of undergraduate student success.

We are looking for volunteers who meet
at least ONE of the following criteria:

Undergraduate international student
(non-Canadian resident)

Undergraduate foreign-born domestic student
(born outside of Canada, but now Canadian citizen)

Undergraduate mature student
(started or restarted university at 21 years of age or older)

Undergraduate first-generation student
(your parents didn't attend university)

** There are also limited spots for students outside
the above criteria ('traditional' students)*

If you are interested and volunteer for this study,
you will be asked to participate in
a single interview lasting between 0.5-1 hour.

In appreciation for your time you will receive compensation of
\$10.00CDN.

For more information or to participate in this study, please contact
Cliff Davidson, PhD Candidate, Sociology
CONTACT DETAILS

Appendix C: Student letter of information and consent form

Project Title: Towards a New Definition of Student Success: Integrating students' voices and backgrounds into university student success

Principal Investigator

Wolfgang Lehmann, PhD, Sociology

CONTACT DETAILS

Co-Investigator

Cliff Davidson, PhD Candidate, Sociology

CONTACT DETAILS

1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research study about university student success because you are a student at the UNIVERSITY NAME.

2. Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand university students' own views of success. It is hoped that collected data will show what students define as success for themselves and what potential barriers they have for achieving success.

3. How long will you be in this study?

It is expected that you will be in only one interview lasting roughly 1 – 1.5 hours.

4. What are the study procedures?

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to be in an individual interview. All interviews will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be audio recorded you cannot participate in this study. Interviews will be administered in an accessible location on the campus of the University of Western Ontario.

5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole, including a better understanding as to how different university students define being successful—this information might be able to inform universities and administrators in better program design.

7. Can participants choose to leave the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed please let the researcher know.

8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?

The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 2 years. A list linking your study number with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will be compensated \$10.00CDN cash for your participation in the interview portion of this research.

10. What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your academic standing.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form

11. Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you have questions about this research study please contact:

Principal Investigator: Wolfgang Lehmann, CONTACT DETAILS

Co-Investigator: Cliff Davidson, CONTACT DETAILS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics CONTACT DETAILS.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Consent Form: Student Interviews

Project Title: Towards a New Definition of Student Success: Integrating students' voices and backgrounds into university student success

Principal Investigator

Wolfgang Lehmann, PhD, Sociology

CONTACT DETAILS

Co-Investigator

Cliff Davidson, PhD Candidate, Sociology

CONTACT DETAILS

By signing below, you indicate that you have read the attached letter of information and agree to participate in this interview. Further, your signature below indicates that you are aware that your participation in this study will be audio recorded.

First/Last Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

☐ By checking this box I acknowledge that I have received \$10.00CDN compensation for participation in this study


My signature below means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

First/Last Name of person obtaining consent (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Institutional ethics approval



**Western
Research**

Research Ethics

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice**

Principal Investigator: Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann
Department & Institution: Social Science/Sociology, Western University

NMREB File Number: 107538
Study Title: Towards a New Definition of Student Success: Integrating students' voices and backgrounds into university student success
Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

NMREB Initial Approval Date: January 26, 2016
NMREB Expiry Date: January 26, 2017

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	Survey	2015/12/07
Instruments	Focus Group Interview Guide	2015/12/07
Other	Post Survey - Draw and Survey Findings. This will be given with the survey but will be detached upon collection of the survey.	2015/12/07
Recruitment Items	Focus Group Recruitment. This will be given with the survey but will be detached upon collection of the survey.	2015/12/07
Recruitment Items	Survey Recruitment - email to profs and lecturers	2015/12/07
Recruitment Items	Focus group recruitment - email for students	2015/12/07
Recruitment Items	Focus group recruitment - telephone script for students	2015/12/07
Letter of Information & Consent	Student Focus Group	2016/01/07
Letter of Information & Consent	Student Survey	2016/01/07
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Script - In Class Students	2016/01/07
Western University Protocol	Received January 7, 2016	

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.


NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Chair or delegated board member



This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150
 London, ON, Canada N6G 1G9 t. 519.661.3036 f. 519.850.2466 www.uwo.ca/research/ethics



**Western
Research**

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Amendment Approval Notice**

Research Ethics

Principal Investigator: Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann
Department & Institution: Social Science/Sociology, Western University

NMREB File Number: 107538

Study Title: Towards a New Definition of Student Success: Integrating students' voices and backgrounds into university student success

Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

NMREB Revision Approval Date: March 08, 2017

NMREB Expiry Date: January 26, 2018

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Recruitment Items	In-class script requesting volunteers for participation	2017/02/10
Recruitment Items	Script for requesting access to professors/lecturers classes to quickly request volunteers for participation	2017/02/10
Recruitment Items	Script for requesting campus programs/offices to email their members for participation	2017/02/10
Recruitment Items	Script for requesting campus clubs to email their members for participation	2017/02/10
Recruitment Items	Poster for recruitment to be posted around the university on approved posting boards.	2017/02/10
Recruitment Items	Poster for recruitment to be sent out with recruitment emails from clubs/programs/offices	2017/02/10
Instruments	Updated focus group instrument (title now interview guide - everything else is the same)	2017/02/10
Revised Western University Protocol	Received March 3, 2017.	
Revised Letter of Information & Consent		2017/03/03

The Western University Non-Medical Science Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the amendment to the above named study, as of the NMREB Amendment Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB

son, NMREB Chair

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150
London, ON, Canada N6G 1G9 t. 519.661.3036 f. 519.850.2466 www.uwo.ca/research/ethics

**Appendix E: Recruitment script: email script for requesting to send out recruitment poster
– campus clubs and offices**

Hello [name],

My name is Cliff Davidson, and I'm a PhD candidate in Sociology at Western University.

I am contacting you to ask if you might forward the attached recruitment poster to your members for my doctoral research. You have been asked because your members are potentially one of the sample groups I hope to interview for my research.

If you could send an email with the following, it would be greatly appreciated:

<Email Start>

Subject: Invitation to participate in student success interviews (\$10 compensation)

Body:

Hello members/students,

Please see the attached poster to participate in an interview for a doctoral student's research. The researcher is specifically looking to interview [student type] students. Your participation would significantly help with his research. Please contact the researcher if you have any questions or wish to participate.

Best,

[Your Name]

Attachment:

Poster-Interview-Email-Students.pdf

<Email End>

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Cliff Davidson, PhD Candidate

CONTACT DETAILS

Appendix F: Recruitment script: email for student interview to professors and lecturers

Subject: Invitation for class to participate in student interviews

Body:

Hello [professor],

I am emailing you to ask permission to invite the students in one of your classes to participate in a study on university student success. The study is conducted by Cliff Davidson, PhD Candidate in Sociology, under the supervision of Wolfgang Lehmann, PhD, Sociology.

Briefly, the study involves participating in an interview regarding university student success. Students will be asked if they are willing to participate in an interview. Those who are open to participating will be asked to either: sign up directly following my request, or they will be given a sheet with additional details and contact information. The invitation to participate will be made in your classroom at your convenience, and shouldn't take longer than 5 minutes.

If you would like more information on this study, please see the attached letter of information, or please contact the researcher at the contact information given below.

I hope to address your class as soon as possible to cause as little interruption as possible in your course, [course number, ie: SOC 3607]. To participate in this study please respond to this email stating that you are allowing for the invitation to be extended in [course number]. We can then set up a time that works for both of us.

Thank you,

Cliff Davidson, PhD Candidate
CONTACT DETAILS

Appendix G: Recruitment script: in-class script for student interview request

Hello everyone. My name is Cliff Davidson, and I'm a PhD candidate in Sociology at Western University.

You are invited to participate in an interview regarding university student success. This interview is part of a broader study on student success conducted by myself, Cliff Davidson, under the supervision of Wolfgang Lehmann, PhD, Sociology.

Though any student can volunteer to be interviewed, I am specifically looking for the following undergraduate students: international students—those who are non-Canadian residents, foreign-born domestic students—those born outside of Canada, but who are now Canadian citizens, mature students—those who started or restarted university at 21 years of age or older, and first-generation students—those whose parents didn't attend university.

Briefly, this part of my study involves participating in an interview where you will be asked various questions about university student success. The interview will take roughly 60-90 minutes to complete. Completing this interview will significantly help with my doctoral research. However, you have absolutely no obligation to participate in this interview. Participating or not participating in this interview will not impact your mark or academic standing in any way. Also, the information gathered from this interview will not be shared with your professor and will not impact your grade in this or any other course.

Upon completion of the interview you will be given \$10.00CDN in appreciation of your time and contribution.

If you have any questions about this interview, please ask them now.

Thank you for your time.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name: Cliff Davidson

Post-secondary Education and Degrees

Ph.D. Sociology – Western University, London, Canada – 2013-2023

M.A. Sociology – Western University, London, Canada – 2013

M.A. Photography & Urban Cultures – Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, UK – 2011

B.A. Sociology/English (Bilingual Hons.) – Glendon College, York University, Toronto, Canada – 2006-2010

Diploma of Advertising and Graphic Design – Humber College, Toronto, Canada – 2001

Honours and Awards

Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Doctoral Scholarship (CGSD), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, \$105,000. 2015-2018.

Graduate Student Teaching Assistant Award, Western University, \$500. 2016.

Community Involvement Scholarship, PSAC 610, \$500. 2016.

Academic Achievement Scholarship, PSAC 610, \$400. 2015.

Ontario Graduate Scholarship, \$15,000. 2015. (Declined)

Goldsmiths College Annual Fund, with MA Photography and Urban Cultures (class collaboration), Goldsmiths College, University of London, £1,000. 2010.

International Education Opportunity Scholarship, Glendon College, York University, \$1,000. 2008.

Related Work Experience

Lecturer – 2nd year Research Methods – King's University College, Western University – 2018

Lecturer – 3rd year Qualitative Methods – King's University College, Western University – 2017

Teaching Assistant – Various courses – King’s University College, Western University – 2015-2022

Teaching Assistant – Various courses – Western University – 2012-2016

Publications

Pizarro Milian, Roger and Cliff Davidson. 2016. “Symbolic Resources and Marketing Strategies in Ontario Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis.” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 1–15.

Davidson, Cliff. 2016. “Re-Imagining the Anonymous City: Defatalizing the Digital Present through Analog Photography.” Pp. 260–74 in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De) fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives*, edited by A. M. Agathangelou and K. D. Killian. New York: Routledge.

Davidson, Cliff. 2015. “The University Corporatization Shift: A Longitudinal Analysis of University Admission Handbooks, 1980 to 2010.” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education Revue Canadienne D’enseignement Supérieur* 45(2):193–214.

Davidson, Cliff. 2011. “The Lonely City.” *InTensions*. Retrieved (<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/photos/cliffdavidson/cliffdavidson.php>)