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Stress Testing the University Fall Break Policy: Understanding the Impact on Student Mental Health

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Résumé de l'article

Pour soutenir la santé mentale des étudiants, des universités canadiennes ont instauré un congé d'automne visant à atténuer le stress et l'anxiété. Toutefois, il n'existe aucune donnée sur le niveau de stress ou le fardeau de la maladie mentale chez les étudiants. Avec la méthodologie d'une étude de cas et une combinaison d'approches, cette étude visait à évaluer les effets du congé sur la santé mentale des étudiants. D'après les enquêtes, le congé est apprécié de la majorité des étudiants, qui considèrent qu'il permet de réduire le stress lié aux études. Les groupes de discussion ont révélé des éléments clés sur le stress et sa gestion chez les étudiants, qui ont des incidences pratiques sur toute politique sur le mieux-être mental desétudiants. L'étude offre des suggestions de politiques pour aider les établissements postsecondaires à déterminer l'efficacité d'une semaine de congé dans la réduction du stress et de l'anxiété des étudiants.

STRESS TESTING THE UNIVERSITY FALL BREAK POLICY: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

Attempting to support student mental health, many Canadian universities have implemented a fall break with the assumption it would be helpful in alleviating students' stress and anxiety. However, there is no baseline data regarding stress level or mental illness burden of students to understand its effectiveness. Using case study methodology with mixed methods, this research sought to appraise, given a lack of baseline data, the impact of a fall break on student mental health. While the surveys revealed that students overwhelmingly liked the break and perceived it to reduce their school related stress, the focus groups revealed key insights into understanding stress and coping among university students about how students like to de-stress that have practical implications for any policy aimed at promoting students' mental wellness. This research offers practical policy suggestions to help post-secondary institutions determine whether a fall break week can be effective in addressing students' stress and anxiety.

Keywords: fall break, mental health, stress, policy evaluation, higher education

Résumé

Pour soutenir la santé mentale des étudiants, des universités canadiennes ont instauré un congé d'automne visant à atténuer le stress et l'anxiété. Toutefois, il n'existe aucune donnée sur le niveau de stress ou le fardeau de la maladie mentale chez les étudiants. Avec la méthodologie d'une étude de cas et une combinaison d'approches, cette étude visait à évaluer les effets du congé sur la santé mentale des étudiants. D'après les enquêtes, le congé est apprécié de la majorité des étudiants, qui considèrent qu'il permet de réduire le stress lié aux études. Les groupes de discussion ont révélé des éléments clés sur le stress et sa gestion chez les étudiants, qui ont des incidences pratiques sur toute politique sur le mieux-être mental des étudiants. L'étude offre des suggestions de politiques pour aider les établissements postsecondaires à déterminer l'efficacité d'une semaine de congé dans la réduction du stress et de l'anxiété des étudiants.

Mots-clés : congé d'automne, santé mentale, stress, évaluation des politiques, enseignement supérieur

Introduction

It appears that the prevalence, severity, and persistence of mental health issues is increasing across North American post-secondary campuses with university and college students now viewed as a high-risk population (Linden & Stuart, 2020; Porter, 2019). Students increasingly report greater levels of stress and anxiety (Xiao et al., 2017) and cases of resulting suicides are well publicized. As mental illness often develops between the ages of 15 and 24 (Eisenberg et al., 2007), post-secondary students are a particular at-risk group. With 2.1 million part- and full-time

post-secondary students in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019), their mental health is a significant concern.

There is a well-established relationship between academic performance and health (Matingwina, 2018)—the better your health, the better your academic performance. It is reasonable to argue then that reducing stress should lead to improved mental health with better post-secondary academic outcomes as a result. While it seems that there has been a rise in the number of students seeking mental health treatment (Council of Ontario Universities, 2021; Oswalt et al., 2020), there are still a large number of students in need of support but who do not seek treatment and are left untreated with no real explanation as to why (Corscadden et al., 2019; Seehuus et al., 2019). There is evidence that suggests that socio-economic disparities could be to blame (Cullinan et al., 2020). Illustratively, Nash et al. (2017) report that many students are aware they have a need for treatment, yet they do not seek care due to demographic (i.e., higher distress levels, money problems, working priorities) and behavioural (not as committed to academics, lack of social relations) inequities. Consequently, numerous mental health policies based on an assumption of stigma are of questionable efficacy at best (Rao et al., 2019). This, combined with the current state of the pandemic and its negative repercussions on student mental health, means it is pressing that universities implement effective policies that support and promote awareness of evidence-based interventions.

Even before the pandemic, there was a mental health crisis across universities campuses, with more students seeking treatment and universities struggling to provide mental health supports to service everyone (Xiao et al., 2017). According to Statistics Canada (2020), suicide is the second leading cause of death among those aged 15–24 in Canada. Additionally, there is a marked increase across campuses of students reporting mental health conditions (Oswalt et al., 2020). Illustratively, Xiao et al. (2017) report that generalized anxiety, depression, social anxiety, and family and academic distress are on the rise for post-secondary students. Students consistently report meeting the demands of their studies (deadlines, increased workloads, grades), living environment, and change in social connections as stressors (Acharya et al., 2018). Additionally, in their qualitative discussions with students, Logan and Burns (2021) found that balance, interpersonal relationships, future prospects, performance pressure, and financial issues and employment were common self-reported stressors.

The pandemic has intensified this crisis and has had a profound effect on student mental health and wellness (Zhai & Du, 2020) including an increase in mental health disorders (Chirikov et al., 2020) with persistent psychological impacts (Copeland et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, the restrictions related to the pandemic (i.e., lockdowns, social distancing, self-isolation) have had a negative impact on student mental health (Nurunnabi et al., 2021). Consequently, students most commonly turned to parents and friends for support during the pandemic, with little perceived support from their prospective post-secondary institutions (Mosanya, 2020). The pandemic has highlighted the need for better mental health supports for students (Zhai & Du, 2020).

There are established prevention strategies that have proven useful in improving the quality of life for post-secondary students (Conley et al., 2017). Accordingly, effective policies should support and promote awareness of evidence-based interventions. With the steady increase in number of students struggling with their mental health, an issue that some have deemed a mental health crisis (Xiao et al., 2017), the need to develop effective policies that support the mental health of university students should be self-evident. One policy that many universities across Ontario have implemented is the creation of a fall break, with the assumption it would be helpful in alleviating students' stress and anxiety. Little is known about the efficiency or actual utility of mental health initiatives applied across post-secondary campuses (Heck et al., 2014). Until recently, research (Agnew et al., 2019; Hulls et al., 2018; Poole et al., 2018) reporting the impact of a fall break policy on student mental health was non-existent, meaning that, at the time of implementation, there was essentially no empirical evidence to support that assumption or guide implementation. At our institution the fall break was first implemented the week following Thanksgiving in the fall of 2013, with a reduced December exam timetable.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to appraise, given a lack of baseline data, whether a policy for fall break week (break in fall semester similar to winter term, at our institution it is the week following Thanksgiving) does in fact reduce stress and anxiety for university students. Our research question was: What is the impact of the fall break policy on student mental health? This research adds to the literature evaluating the impact of a fall break on student mental health and offers practical policy suggestions to help post-secondary institutions determine whether a fall break week can be effective in addressing students' stress and anxiety.

Methods

This case study used both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence to collect self-reported data on mental health outcomes associated with the fall break, including both contrasting realist and interpretive perspectives (Yin, 2014). Survey data was used to provide quantitative evidence on the impact of the fall break policy. Focus groups are commonly used in case study research for understanding how distinct groups of people (e.g., students) react to a shared experience (e.g., the fall break) (Tracy, 2013). We used focus groups to understand emotional experiences that help to capture students' lived experiences of the fall break. Embedded quantitative and qualitative evaluation procedures were used to evaluate and compare survey data with focus group interviews to increase rigour in our case study research (Fetters et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). Data analysis occurred simultaneously, and we used a contiguous approach to integration with quantitative results reported first, followed by contextual qualitative findings (Fetters et al., 2013).

Fall Break Survey

In January 2014 (year one) ethics was approved, and then renewed in January 2015 (year two) and January 2016 (year three), through the university's Research Ethics Board (REB) for our data collection and storage. The surveys were distributed over the course of three days, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at different locations across campus, during the last week of January in partnership with the University Student Union (USU). Student researchers, along with student BUSU staff, advertised the surveys at designated booths, with potential respondents recruited at these booths. Students could give consent and then fill out a hard copy of the survey either on the spot or take a slip with information on how to fill the survey out online via SurveyMonkey. In either method, students had the option of skipping questions they did not want to provide responses for. Sampling for the survey was convenience, with students randomly selected from various locations across campus. In year one (2013/2014) the fall break survey included eight items that were scored using a 7-point Likert scale of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" where appropriate.

After careful review of year one (2013/2014) and productive feedback from students, faculty and staff, some revisions were made to the study design and additional items were added to the survey. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016), the fall break survey included eight items from year one and added an additional six items with varying response options, five of which only applied to students in their third or fourth year of study. Analysis reported here focused on nine items from the fall break survey. Table 1 details these nine items.

Focus Group Data

Sampling for the focus groups was purposeful and included participants who were registered in undergraduate courses at our institution that implemented a fall break, which those students experienced (Tracy, 2013). Prior to the start of each focus group session, undergraduate students in any year of study (years one through four) were purposefully selected across various locations on Brock campus by student researchers just before conducting the focus group interviews. Focus groups were conducted the week following surveys during the first week of February. They ranged from 45 minutes to one hour in length and students were either given lunch (2013/2014) or a $10 campus gift card for participating (2014/2015 and 2015/2016). In year one of data collection (2013/2014) three focus group sessions were conducted. In year two of data collection (2014/2015) only two focus group sessions were conducted, as no new themes were emerging and research theme saturation had been reached. In year three (2015/2016), three focus group sessions were conducted in order for saturation to be reached.

The same semi-structured interview guide (SI-1) was used for all of the focus groups and served as a basis for open dialogue between the participants and the interviewer. These questions focused on uncovering students' lived experience of the fall break in the context of how the fall break influenced their mental health. Discussion topics related to activities students engaged in on the fall break, benefits and drawbacks prior to and after the break, workload and stress levels, and how the break factored into stress levels, all of which are presented in this article.

Data Analysis

Explanation building was used to provide insights into causal links on the impact of the fall break policy (Yin, 2014). Survey and focus group data were compared and

Table 1

Fall break survey items

Item Number	Question
1	On the fall break I did (options provided)
2	During the fall break how many days were you on campus
3	The fall break was useful in reducing my school related stress levels
5	The increase in workload before the break led to an increase in your stress levels
7	The increase in workload after the break led to an increase in your stress levels
If you are in your third or fourth year of study only:	
10	Compared to other years, did you find the fall break had an increase or a decrease in your stress levels (increase, decrease)
If you are in your third or fourth year of study only and you had December exams:	
11	How many final exams did you have during the December exam period (0 through to 6 or more)
13	Did you find that this year's December exam schedule (i.e., time slots from 8am to 11pm) was more or less stress inducing than previous years (i.e., 9am to 10pm) (options provided)
14	Relative to other years what effect did you find this year's December exam schedule had on your performance on exams

contrasted to explain the evaluation of the fall break policy in order to provide details of the case. This was another step in the iterative explanatory process and provided an explanation of the impact of the fall break policy.

Quantitative Measures

In year one (2013/2014) descriptive statistics as well as two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study, age, and program were examined. In order to increase power, some variables were collapsed to make one larger category, or reduced to make smaller categories. For instance, initially there were 44 education programs in the data set, some with very few numbers. Therefore, analyses were performed first including all programs and then again with only the largest three. The gender variable initially included male, female, and other, and was reduced to male and female, as "other" was rarely reported and so it was removed from the analysis. The age category grouped 17- and 18-year-olds together, had those aged 19–21 individually, and grouped those who were age 22+. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016)

descriptive statistics, as well as two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study, and faculty, were examined using Stata 13 on each of the above variables. Data from surveys was triangulated against the qualitative focus groups to begin building an explanation on the impact of the fall break policy.

Qualitative Measures

Focus group data was analyzed using a thematic analysis method that included open coding, axial coding, and theming. All focus groups were transcribed verbatim using a secure transcription service and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers and the research assistants (MacPhail et al., 2016). This allowed for rich, thick data to be iteratively analyzed and triangulated between the surveys and the focus groups to explain the impact of the fall break policy.

Results

Fall Break Survey

Participants

Overall, participation in the fall break survey increased in each year of data collection. In year one (2013/2014) the fall break survey participants included 713 (4.8% of full-time undergraduate students) students in years of study one through four. Of those, 267 were male and 446 were female. In year two (2014/2015) the fall break survey participants included 1,124 (7.5% of full-time undergraduate students) students in years of study one through four. Of those, 354 were male and 770 were female. In year three (2015/2016) the fall break survey participants included 1,234 (8.4% of full-time undergraduate students) students in years of study one through four. Of those, 398 were male and 836 were female.

Survey. Overwhelmingly, analyses revealed that for all three years of data collection (2013–2016) most of the students spent their time during the fall break either doing schoolwork (39.6% year one, 40.4% year two, 51.9% year three) or relaxing/vacationing (40.9% year one, 36.3% year two, 28.2% year three). The data also revealed that most students did not spend any days on campus during the fall break (59.3% year two, 66% year three). It should be noted that this item was only assessed in years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) of the fall break assessment. Moreover, after experiencing the fall break the majority of participants in each year of data collection reported that the break reduced their stress levels, and this percentage increased a little in each year of data collection (82.0% year one, 91% year two, 94.8% year three). In year one (2013/2014) of the fall break survey only 35.5% of students who perceived an increase in workload before the break also perceived an increase in their stress before the break. Alternatively, only 28% of students who perceived an increase in workload after the break also perceived an increase in their stress after the break. In year two (2014/2015) of the fall break survey only 31.3% of students who perceived an increase in workload before the break also perceived an increase in their stress before the break, and only 22.5% of students who perceived an increase in workload after the break also perceived an increase in their stress

after the break. However, in year three (2015/2016) of the fall break survey, 33.3% of students who perceived an increase in workload before the break also perceived an increase in their stress before the break, which is a slight increase from the year prior. Slightly more than 25% (25.7%) of students who perceived an increase in workload after the break also perceived an increase in their stress after the break than the previous year.

For those students in their third or fourth year of study who had exams in the December exam period only, the majority of participants wrote four exams. Compared to previous years, 44% of students perceived the December exam schedule to be either much more or somewhat more stress inducing than previous years. However, the majority of participants did not report a perceived negative impact on their performance on exams as a result of the December exam schedule. That said, 54% of students perceived the December exam schedule to have no detriment on their performance, while 23% found the December exam schedule to be mildly detrimental on their performance.

Fall Break Focus Groups

In year one (2013/2014) focus group participants included 13 students (one in first year, four in second year, two in third year, six in fourth year) in the faculties of Education, Health Sciences, and Social Sciences. Of those, three were male and 10 were female. In year two (2014/2015) focus group participants included 10 students (five in first year, four in second year, one in fourth year) in the faculties of Social Sciences and Applied Health Sciences. Of those, two were female and eight were male. In year three (2015/2016) focus group participants included 10 students (two in first year, seven in third year, one in fourth year) in the faculties of Applied Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Education, and the Goodman School of Business. Of those, seven were female and three were male. Similar to the surveys, the focus groups revealed overall that students like the fall break and perceive that it does reduce their overall stress and anxiety. However, the focus groups also revealed some discrepancies between the two data sets. Focus group theming revealed three major themes: stress, timing, de-stress. For the purposes of this research, only those themes that relate to stress and de-stress are included.

Stress

This theme represents the factors around student stressors and how students cope with their stress, what helps, and what does not. Student stressors were both school-related and self-related, both of which have an impact on a student's perceived stress. A sub-theme of de-stress also emerged as a way for students to de-stress from their academic pressures. Students reported using various strategies to try and cope with their stress; for some the fall break was one of these.

School-related stress. Students experience different kinds of school-related stressors. School-related stress included writing exams, having multiple assignments due at the same time, too heavy a workload, money, grades, missing classes, and living away from home. For instance, when asked what contributes to their stress levels as a student, one participant described how exams and assignments are stressful, saying: "Exams, assignments are all due at once, generally at the same time" (Focus Group 1, 2014). This was a common stressor even in the third year of data collection, with one participant saying: "Like this past December, all my exams were back-to-back, so you have to know how to manage your time to study up to those" (Focus Group 3, 2013). Another student described what it felt like to have multiple assignments due before the break, saying: "The week before the break every single thing was due, every midterm, it was the worst week. It created so much stress it was absolutely ridiculous" (Focus Group 1, 2015). Students suggested that "time management is a huge thing" (Focus Group 1, 2015). Another student suggested that "it's not even your smartness or your ability to learn, it's your time management" (Focus Group 2, 2013). Students also thought having a heavy workload had a major impact on their school-related stress. One participant explained that "I have no time to focus on myself, and no time to sleep either because it's just one thing after another" (Focus Group 2, 2014).

Some participants reported having difficulty determining how much time to dedicate to each course and assignment. For instance, one participant suggested that: "poor time management skills" played a large role in their stress patterns, saying, "I think in the fall my habit is part of working up to assignments becoming due that builds stress and usually it's not the best use of time" (Focus Group 2, 2016). Another participant described the stress of how they always feel like something is hanging over them, saying:

Yeah, I'd definitely have to agree with you [that] these assignments yes are stressful, especially when there are a lot of them due at one time, but I would say the most stressful is knowing that you're always behind. Unless you're reading 24/7 there's, for me personally, there's no way for me to ever be ahead or on top of everything because I'm not a fast reader and having to read 150 pages of a book in one class is crazy to me, because I have to read 50 pages in another class and 20 pages in another class, so I would definitely deem readings as very stressful. (Focus Group 3, 2014)

Living arrangements while at university also caused students to experience stress, including from both living away from home, and staying at home. One participant stated:

Because I live at home…like living arrangements may be a little bit stressful, well living with my parents it's a bit stressful just because I'm always doing something, and then they feel that I'm not spending like, enough time with them. (Focus Group 2, 2016)

The financial burden of being a student and living away from home was also perceived by students to be a school-related stressor. One participant suggested that:

I think money obviously is a big one that we didn't really touch on yet, like the financial stress of being a student. For some people it's more relevant than others, for some it's not such a big deal, but I think if you look at the amount of people that use OSAP that tells you right there. (Focus Group 2, 2014)

Prioritizing schoolwork and free time were important to students and also sometimes a cause of their stress and anxiety. One participant explained how they prioritized schoolwork:

The funny thing with that is I definitely agree, if I've been in class for four hours I'll come home, and I'll watch a TV show online, but as I'm watching a TV show I feel guilty because I feel I should be doing something else, because how I prioritize it is student, staff, and then self. (Focus Group 2, 2014)

Another participant explained:

I also think for me it's like, trying to manage everything. I tend to try and prioritize what's the most

important thing, but they're all really important, like when you have three or four things due in the same amount of time when are you going to start working on them? (Focus Group 2, 2015)

Self-related stress. Self-related stress included things like volunteer commitments, feelings of guilt, and not being able to relax. For many of the participants self-related stress included trying to fit in personal appointments, having time to go grocery shopping, missing parents, and having a part-time job. Many participants juggled both school and volunteer commitments, which also sometimes caused them to experience feelings of stress. One participant described this as:

> I do volunteer outside of school as well, but because the place I volunteer at is back home, it makes it harder for me to balance that and I actually can't. So, I want to volunteer but I can't during the school year because of the stress of school, because I know like, if I take a day off to go volunteer with them and have fun and do my interest, I'll be a day behind in everything else and it just adds to the stress. (Focus Group 1, 2014)

Even feelings of guilt regarding missing classes caused students to experience feelings of stress related to self. One participant described this feeling, stating: "Being in my fourth year now, I feel so guilty when I miss a class. Like in first year I didn't really care, but I feel so guilty when I miss a class now" (Focus Group 2, 2015). As students progressed through their academic years of study, their future was also something that also weighed heavily on their minds and caused students to experience feelings of stress. One student described this as:

> I think what could be stressful is like, the future in terms of where university's going to get you. Are you going to get a job? Am I here for nothing? Is this going to lead me to a job? Like do I have any certainty when it comes to my future? (Focus Group 2, 2016)

De-stress. Much like what we found in our surveys, the fall break helped students to de-stress. A theme related to stress was how students de-stress—in other words, how they relieved stress. This included things like having time to relax, going home, and taking their mind off of school. One participant described the fall break as helping them to de-stress, saying: "Yeah it helped me

de-stress 'cause you got to relax and didn't have to worry about school" (Focus Group 2, 2014). Another student described how they de-stress: "Lay on the couch [and] watch wrestling for three hours, that's how I de-stress" (Focus Group 1, 2016). Some participants reported that going home was also a way to de-stress, with one participant explaining, "nothing like going home and having a home-cooked meal. That's a good stress reliever" (Focus Group 1, 2014).

Coping strategies. Some of the ways students coped with their stress was by giving themselves a reward, catching up on schoolwork, relaxing, practising good time management skills, and by balancing interests with schoolwork. For instance, having a drink or food they enjoyed in exchange for doing so many hours of schoolwork. One participant described their reward system: "I will watch TV for two hours if I felt like I did a good job studying" (Focus Group 1, 2016). Another student stated that:

> So, if I've had a really stressful week and I think I did really well on something, I'll reward myself with a Pepsi. I know that sounds really cheesy but because there's so much going on at school, right? If I've done like, so much work in one week it's just kind of that extra little reward. You're like, "aww" I can sit down and enjoy this and like take five minutes to myself and just cope. (Focus Group 2, 2015)

Students also coped with their stress by using the fall break to catch up on schoolwork and go to appointments. One participant stated that:

> I actually did some schoolwork, some readings, to kind of catch myself up from where I was at, and then I also did some like personal stuff that I needed to get done. Some doctors' appointments that I needed to take care of and stuff. (Focus Group 3, 2015)

Students also coped by balancing interests with schoolwork. They did this by visiting family and friends, doing volunteer work, or playing sports. One participant described using balance between school and extracurricular activities as a way to cope with stress:

> I think in terms of coping you have to balance between your interests and your education. I think that balance comes more into perspective when you want

to reward yourself. That's how I cope, by doing things I like. (Focus Group 2, 2016)

Another participant agreed, saying that "the school-related stress is getting all that work done to be able to do extracurricular [activities]" (Focus Group 2, 2016). One participant even described how they spent the fall break combining studying and hanging out with friends:

> I did a combination of study, hanging out with friends, boyfriend, family. Also I had two midterms and a paper due the week after so there was a lot of studying going on there. But then there was like, a good mix of hanging out with other people and trying to de-stress. (Focus Group 1, 2014)

Discussion

Using case study methodology with mixed methods, this research sought to appraise the impact of a fall break policy on student mental health. Overall, our results indicate that students like the break and perceive the break to reduce their stress and anxiety. Yet, our focus groups revealed that while the break may have improved student perceptions of self-related stress by allowing more time for personal appointments, to make some extra money, or to go home and see family and friends, it did little to actually alleviate school-related stress from having too many appointments, multiple exams back-to-back, a heavy workload, multiple courses to manage, and the associated deadlines to meet.

Unlike other survey data that found the fall break led to students experiencing higher levels of overall stress (Poole et al., 2018), our surveys revealed that the majority of students perceived the break to reduce their overall stress. One reason for this discrepancy could be due to the fact that Poole et al. (2018) did not include first-year students, who did not attend university before the break was implemented. In our surveys, in each year of data collection, the majority of participants were in either their first or second year of studies. Consequently, we found that compared to years before the break, students strongly agreed that the break reduced stress. In each year of data collection an improvement across student responses can be seen, indicating that in each year of the break more students were in favour of the break and perceived there to be less stress and anxiety as a result of the break. This is most likely the result of the natural

fluctuation in adjusting to a new timetable and where Thanksgiving falls within the semester. For instance, in the first year of the study, the condensed December exam timetable meant some students had to write three exams in less than 24 hours (one in the morning, one in the evening finishing at 10 p.m., and one first thing the next morning). This was revised in subsequent years so that students would not have this conflict as per the usual institutional policy. Additionally, while Poole et al. (2018) found that students reported less stress after the break, our analyses revealed that, overall, workload and correlated stress did not significantly increase before or after the break, and these responses also improved in each year of data collection.

In our focus groups, students also suggested they like having the break and perceived the break to reduce their stress and anxiety; yet, we were surprised that the focus groups also revealed unique school- and self-related stresses that students experience that the fall break does not address. Likewise, literature points to student stress more commonly being related to academics and associated due dates (Medula, 2017; Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). We found this to be true. In our focus groups, participants reported that school-related stress included writing exams, having multiple assignments due at the same time, too heavy a workload, money, grades, missing classes, and living away from home. Many participants had to manage both school and volunteer commitments, which also related to perceptions of stress and anxiety. While the break afforded some students the chance to de-stress, it did little to actually alleviate the school-related stressors reported by our focus group participants. Additionally, finances and finding balance are also common stressors for higher education students found in the literature (Pitt et al., 2017); our findings suggest the break does little to mitigate these as well.

Policy Implications

Continued evaluation is needed to determine if indeed the fall break policy is the best solution for relieving student stress and anxiety as per its intention. Although in our surveys we found that students perceived the break to have a positive impact on their school-related stress and anxiety, our focus groups indicate that, similar to available evidence thus far (Hulls et al., 2018; Poole et al., 2018), there are inconsistent mental health outcomes

perceived by students. One possible explanation for this can be attributed to the design shortcomings related to both timing and labelling during the policy creation stage (Agnew et al., 2019; Pilato et al., 2021).

Comparable to Cramer and Pschibul (2017), who reported that students spent most of the time during their fall break engaged in recreational activities, our findings revealed that the majority of students spent the break relaxing/vacationing. Yet, in the focus groups, some students reported that they were confused about what they were supposed to be doing during the break, catching up on studies or taking a mental health break. Inconsistent messaging across campus about the intention of the fall break is partly to blame for this confusion and can have a negative impact on student stress and overall effectiveness of the break (Hulls et al., 2018; Pilato et al., 2021).

Whereas the surveys revealed very clearly that students like the fall break, the focus groups revealed key insights into understanding stress and coping among university students about how students like to de-stress that have practical implications for any policy aimed at promoting students' mental wellness. Granting the fall break was intended to support students' mental well-being, though it does not necessarily address common stressors, mental illness, and depression experienced by some students. There are significant demands in post-secondary education that include "high stakes academic pressure, minimal academic support, potential social isolation and long term financial debt" (Hartley, 2011, p. 596). While the fall break policy was implemented to relieve student stress and anxiety, it did little to address those substantial demands experienced by students that have been stated by Hartley (2011). For some students, the break actually created more academic pressure and stress instead of its intended purpose to minimize school related stress (Agnew et al., 2019; Hulls et al., 2018). Perhaps if there was more coordination among faculty regarding due dates, then the fall break could have mitigated some of this stress.

We discovered that how courses are structured and where assignments fall within the semester have an impact on how students experienced the break, and this ultimately had an impact on whether the break positively impacted mental health. In their research, Pitt et al. (2017) report that stress levels are highest for students at the beginning and at the end of the fall term. Given that Barker et al. (2018) also suggest that depressive symp-

toms related to academic demands peak in December, a break in the middle of the fall semester seems futile. Moreover, since the majority of students did not spend any days on campus during the break, the policy did little to provide students with the academic support they need, not to mention those students who were not able to go home over the break and may have been further isolated.

While this evaluation provides key insights into the impact of the fall break policy on student mental health outcomes, our analysis indicates that there is no "one size fits all" approach that can help students relieve their stress and anxiety. Since higher education institutions can influence the culture of student mental health (Amaya et al., 2019), it is clear that more comprehensive policies and initiatives are needed across campuses to better address student stress and anxiety (Goodman, 2017). As the student population evolves and what we know about student mental health also evolves, evaluation of our institutional mental health policies needs to iteratively happen during the life of those policies (Howlett et al., 2009).

Limitations and Future Directions

While this research has led to policy recommendations, it is not without limitations. Any research done post-hoc is at risk for recall bias. In order to mitigate this, surveys and focus groups were conducted a short time after the fall break fell in each year of data collection. While focus groups can be useful for exploring emotional experiences (Tracy, 2013), a possible limitation could be that students did not feel comfortable enough to express their opinions honestly and freely in a group setting. Future research should include individual interviews with students. Another possible limitation could be self-report perceptions of stress. Future research should include using diagnostic criteria for DSM or tested/standard measurement tools, tests, or measures of mental health. Moreover, this research did not examine diverse sub-populations or address priority populations, such as international and Indigenous students. These populations might have unique student stress and anxiety. Future research should include these populations to give a broader scope of the impact the fall break policy has on students' mental health.

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Appendix 1

Table 2

Supporting Information: Semi-structured interview guide for the fall break focus groups

Discussion Topics:
Activities students engaged in on the fall break
Thoughts on benefits or drawbacks to break prior to break
Benefits or drawbacks after experiencing break
When majority of workload occurs in semester
When highest school related stress levels occurred
How did fall break factor into stress levels
Did break increase or decrease stress levels compared to other years
Timing of fall break