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Supporting Student Well-being in Formal Learning: Post-secondary Student Stories of Well-being and Academic Challenge

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Supporting Student Well-being in Formal Learning: Post-secondary Student Stories of Well-being and Academic Challenge

by

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Abstract

Within the higher education scholarship on persistence the changing landscape of student participation has been widely acknowledged (Smit, 2012). Increases in student diversity within post-secondary institutions have prompted evidenced-based concerns regarding higher education's ability to equitably meet the needs of all students (Michalski et al., 2017; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). Alongside these issues in student persistence, is the growing awareness of a rise in well-being challenges and the impacts they may have on students' academic achievement (Eisenberg et al., 2009). This qualitative inquiry generated from my own experience as a student affairs professional within academic support services and the emerging scholarship highlighting the significant connections students make between their well-being and the formal learning environments they participate in (Stanton et al., 2016). While initiatives supporting student well-being outside of the postsecondary classroom have been investigated (Scobie & Picard, 2018), there has been considerably less research addressing "well-being as a teaching and learning issue" (Crawford & Johns, 2018, p. 3).

This inquiry augments the limited scholarship in this area. In particular, this study engaged students who had previously encountered academic challenge in a narrative inquiry exploring aspects of their formal learning that helped or hindered their well-being. Employing a conceptual framework informed by ethics of care (Held, 2006) and whole student pedagogies (Mondey et al., 2017), results of this study shed light on how students perceive caring pedagogical stances within formal learning as supportive of their well-being. Findings support existing research that demonstrates the intricate relationship between academic challenge and assessment practices and emotional well-being. In addition, participants' perceptions of instructors' care for their learning and care for their future selves as demonstrated through

relational pedagogical practices were also found to be supportive of student well-being. Importantly, this study aimed to resist deficit-oriented approaches to student persistence and instead “reverse the gaz[e]” (Patel, 2016, p. 35) to consider how post-secondary classrooms may better support student well-being for a population of students, who arguably, have experienced some of the most significant challenges in their efforts to achieve academically.

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The support from my colleagues will also not be forgotten—I still have the cherished notebook they gave me filled with their words of encouragement as I was about to begin the degree and their insights and supportive listening has been invaluable to me ongoing. I am also thankful to Dr. Natasha Kenny, whose engagement with my work has been a powerful motivator in reinforcing for me the potential of research in this area.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As a student affairs professional in post-secondary academic support services, I am privileged to hear the learning stories of individual students. These stories continue to be transformative for my own learning. They enrich my understanding of the ways in which institutional systems and processes within higher education impact the lives of learners in powerful and diverse ways. These stories and the saliency they bring to the systemic barriers that exist for many students within higher education, particularly those students who experience academic challenge, serve as the impetus for this study. As higher education scholars have pointed out, despite the positive trend toward increased access to university, institutions have been slower to adapt to meet the needs of their changing student populations (Devlin, 2013). In addition to the equity concerns this raises for student persistence¹ and graduation outcomes (Michalski et al., 2017), there is also a growing recognition of the impact of well-being and mental health challenges experienced by many postsecondary students on persistence (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Increasingly, I have felt a sense of urgency to expand institutional conversations to move beyond academic preparedness and the teaching of university expectations to include broader considerations of inclusion and student well-being. I approached this inquiry with the aim of shifting deficit-oriented conversations to those that include student perspectives on how learning experiences support or diminish their well-being. The students I engaged in this study have experienced the challenging circumstance of potentially being required to withdraw from higher education due to academic difficulties. My professional experience working alongside

¹ I employ the term ‘persistence’ as it is frequently used in the literature to define “the ability of students to continue their post-secondary studies from one year to the next and ultimately to proceed to the completion of their program” (Parker & Baldwin, 2008, p. 1). However, I recognize the problematic nature of the term in its implication that the onus for student success exists with the student.

these students tells me that their voices have much to add to discussions aimed at creating post-secondary teaching and learning environments that enhance student well-being. The literature also emphasizes the importance of involving students who have been required to withdraw in our efforts to better understand issues of persistence (Kopp & Shaw, 2016; Woodfield, 2017). With the aim of enhancing post-secondary teaching and learning practices, I employed a narrative inquiry methodology to explore aspects of formal learning that support or detract from the well-being of students who have encountered academic challenge.

This chapter situates the study in the Canadian postsecondary context in relation to issues of participation, retention, and student mental health and well-being. This is followed by a brief introduction of the conceptual framework I adopted for this study, which includes ethics of care theories (Held, 2006) and whole student pedagogical approaches (Modey et al., 2017). In the last section of the chapter, I articulate the study's aim, central questions, and significance. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of myself as researcher and the assumptions I brought to the research.

Context

The benefits of participating in higher education in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have been broadly documented. In their review of the literature, Michalski et al., (2017) cited numerous studies confirming that those who attain university credentials earn considerably more than those who do not, and recent OECD data demonstrated that likelihood of employment is directly correlated with higher levels of tertiary education (OECD, 2020a). Broad access to post-secondary education is critical to equity and quality of life concerns (Michalski et al., 2017) as “lower educational attainment negatively impacts one’s socio-economic status, health, and overall well-being” (Pidgeon, 2016, p. 77).

Post-secondary institutional policy efforts as well as government agendas to broaden participation have resulted in meaningful increases in the number of students attending tertiary education (Tremblay, 2012). This has also meant the significant expansion in the diversity of students participating in higher education. Smit (2012), in relation to the diversity of postsecondary student populations, has remarked that “massification of higher education is a worldwide phenomenon” (p. 369) and in the Canadian context Michalski et al. (2017) have pointed out that “universities in the twenty-first century are far more diverse in terms of students’ gender identities, ethno-cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, sexual orientations, citizenship and able-bodied status differences” (p. 66). In his recent report on the Canadian post-secondary sector, Usher (2022) reported that International student participation climbed from 40,000 in the 1990’s to 345,000 in 2018-2019 and that based on 2022 Canadian University Student Consortium (CUSC) data, 31% of Canadian university student respondents indicated a disability and 44% of respondents identified as a visible minority (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2022). There is also an increasing focus within the Canadian university landscape on reducing barriers to postsecondary education for Indigenous peoples (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). Based on 2022 CUSC data, 4% of respondents identified as Indigenous (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2022). This is in comparison to 2016 Canadian census data that demonstrates that Indigenous peoples comprise 4.9% of the population (OECD, 2020b).

Equally critical to access initiatives in relation to post-secondary participation, is student persistence and degree completion (Childs et al., 2017). Given the well-documented benefits of tertiary education discussed above, students must also have equitable opportunities to attain desired qualifications and “partake in all of the rights and privileges pertaining therein” (Burke Leon et al., 2019). There have been understandably longstanding concerns for the persistence

and graduation of all students from the viewpoints of quality of life and well-being, in addition to aims that are economically-driven from institutional and societal perspectives (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Best estimates in Canada of overall university graduation rates based on data from 2013 - 2014 by Statistics Canada are 74% (Usher, 2022). However, in relation to access efforts, and the growing evidence that post-secondary institutions continue to struggle to create equitable conditions for students to achieve academically (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Finnie et al., 2012; Museus & Quaye, 2009), persistence literature has increasingly taken up issues of success in relation to student equity groups (Museus & Quaye, 2009). These perspectives will be explored further in Chapter Two.

Despite the prolific literature on student persistence, research involving students required to withdraw from their institution due to low academic performance is surprisingly limited (Kopp & Shaw, 2016; Woodfield, 2017). Students who are dismissed from their studies for failing to meet their institution's grade point average requirements are broadly referred to as academically dismissed or involuntary leavers (Beasley et al., 2020). Woodfield (2017) has argued that the language of persistence in part explains the gap in literature, given that students academically dismissed are prevented from persisting and thus not the focus of persistence research agendas. Other explanations for the lack of attention given to academically dismissed students have been related to the subtle differences in academic requirements across institutions and the difficulty of differentiating this student population from students who voluntarily choose to leave their studies (Kopp & Shaw, 2016). Given their lack of opportunity to persist despite their intent to do so, researchers have emphasized the value of understanding the experiences of academically dismissed students as part of the overall retention conversation (Kopp & Shaw, 2016; Woodfield, 2017).

As will be explored further in Chapter Two, increasingly discussions of persistence have also been shaped by concerns for postsecondary student well-being. Studies have demonstrated the prevalence of students' mental health and well-being challenges (Bewick et al., 2010; Cook et al., 2006; Keyes et al., 2012; Linden & Stuart, 2020) and most notably the National College Health Assessment data has provided Canadian institutions, both at the institutional and consortium level, a somewhat concerning picture of student well-being with significant (20% or more) percentages of students' reporting depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and overwhelming sadness within the last two weeks of the assessment (American College Health Association, 2019). Additionally, links drawn between well-being and academic success (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Linden & Stuart, 2020) and well-being and equity (Linden & Stuart, 2020; Scobie & Picard, 2018), have provided evidence of the importance of considering student well-being as a critical issue for student experience and persistence.

The recent global COVID-19 pandemic has also presented unique student well-being and academic achievement concerns. Isolation protocols aimed at preventing viral spread have had broad and significant impacts on individuals around the world. For many postsecondary students worldwide, in addition to everyday isolation requirements, a rapid shift to remote learning became the norm (Shin & Hickey, 2021), leading UNESCO to declare in a 2020 update titled *Half of world's student population not attending school*, that "the scale and speed of the school and university closures represents an unprecedented challenge for the education sector" (para. 2). Emerging research on postsecondary students' well-being during the pandemic has demonstrated that in addition to difficulties with social isolation (Prowse et al., 2021), a number of students also reported high academic stress (Prowse et al., 2021) and anxiousness about their future academically (Clabaugh et al., 2021). While research on the effects of the pandemic on mental

health and well-being are in their early stages, these studies provide additional evidence of the relationships between well-being and postsecondary students' academic success.

Turning to defining well-being, scholars have pointed out that precise definitions remain elusive in the literature (La Placa, 2013; Squires, 2019). Within public discourse well-being definitions often draw on the World Health Organization's reference to well-being and health (La Placa, 2013), which stated that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2006, para. 2). In the broader Canadian context, mental health has been presented as inclusive of well-being, frequently framed as not the "absence of mental illness" (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 14) but "a state of well-being" (p. 14) essential to individuals' full participation in their communities and the realizing of their "own potential" (p. 14). As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, well-being and mental health in higher education have often been framed by Keyes' (2007) construct of flourishing, which is inclusive of *emotional, psychological, and social well-being*. In her argument for including student voice within the discussion of well-being, Squires (2019) argued that given the broadness of well-being conceptually, it is necessary to include "feedback across many, interconnected dimensions of wellness across physical, mental and social constructs" (p. 4). To date, however research engaging students' perspectives on well-being within postsecondary institutions has been limited (Stanton et al., 2016), and none explicitly has engaged students who have experienced significant academic challenge.

Well-being and Formal Learning

Existing research seeking to understand students' perspectives on well-being, demonstrates that students draw significant connections between aspects of their well-being and their formal learning, that is, their classroom learning activities, relationships with faculty and

peers and coursework and assessments (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2022; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016). Although these studies also address student perspectives on broader university concerns related to well-being, such as stigma (Giamos et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2022), definitions of well-being (Stanton et al. 2016), student coping strategies (Giamos et al., 2017) and campus support services (Baik et al., 2019; Giamos et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2022), they also present strong evidence for the relationship students make between their well-being and the teaching and learning environments they participate in (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2022; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016). For instance, Baik et al. (2019) analyzed 2500 student qualitative responses on recommendations for improving mental health and well-being and found the largest percentage of comments (37%) were related to teaching and learning experiences. Participants within several studies also emphasized connections between the notion of caring and their well-being and the importance of being understood as whole and unique people (Baik et al., 2019; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016).

These findings, as well as Keeling's (2014) call to address higher education's "systematic challenges and barriers to students' well-being" (p. 146) through an ethics of care, have spurred scholarly discussions on the value of framing teaching and learning from an ethics of care stance (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Riva et al., 2020). As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, ethics of care as a moral theory foregrounds the act of relational caring for the needs of others as a central value (Held, 2005). Ethics of care scholars, such as Held (2005), have emphasized the importance of considering caring practices beyond those that occur within families, to include care as a value in society. In the context of education, Noddings (2005; 2012) is widely known for her work on ethics of care stances within teacher/ student learning relationships and school curriculum. Although ethics of care has not been prominent in higher education research, recent

scholarly work involving students' perspectives on well-being suggests ethics of care as a promising lens with which to illuminate aspects of formal learning experiences that are supportive of student well-being. Further, within teaching and learning scholarship emerging from the pandemic, there has been an increasing focus on care and care-based pedagogies (Gravett et al., 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2022; Hess et al., 2022). As such, I have incorporated ethics of care approaches within the conceptual framework of this study. This will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

In addition to ethics of care theories, the conceptual framework for this study also includes pedagogical perspectives on teaching the whole student. Just as research on student conceptions of well-being point to themes related to care, these same studies also demonstrate students desire to be seen as whole people (Stanton et al., 2016) and their views that “learning with purpose” (Stanton et al., 2016, p. 95) and active classroom participation (Riva et al., 2020) are supportive of their well-being. Although whole student pedagogies are wide-ranging in nature, they broadly include a focus on learning that engages students both affectively and cognitively, in ways that allow students to make personal meaning of content and learn in relational ways with the teacher and within a community of peers (Mondey et al., 2017). As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, I incorporate three primary themes identified within the literature on whole student pedagogies within my conceptual framework. These are the affective nature of learning (Beard et al., 2007; Schoem, 2017), engaged learning (Mondey et al., 2017) and relational learning (Mondey et al., 2017). Integrating whole student pedagogies within a conceptual framework that includes ethics of care approaches, provides an additional perspective to consider student insights on the ways in which the pedagogical practices they experience within their formal learning can support their well-being.

As discussed above and as will be further elaborated on in Chapter Two, there is a growing recognition of the imperative for post-secondary institutions to adapt to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse student populations. This is seen both within the persistence literature, which has begun to explore inequities in student success and the well-being research with student participants which advocates for the adoption of an ethics of care in institutional approaches. Additionally, well-being research that includes student voices has begun to demonstrate that students make close connections between their well-being and aspects of their formal learning, particularly in terms of a sense of care and being engaged as a whole person. However, this research is limited (Stanton et al., 2016). Very few studies employ ethics of care or whole student pedagogies conceptually to explore student learning and aspects of student well-being (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Tett et al., 2017) and none of these studies explicitly include those students who have been at risk of being required to withdraw. Although continued efforts toward greater understanding of all students' perspectives on well-being and formal learning remain important, engaging those students who have experienced significant academic challenge, that is, those students who despite a desire to persist, have been at-risk of requiring to withdraw from their institution for academic reasons, offers the potential for unique and important insights into well-being in the context of formal learning.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify aspects of formal learning that support (or hinder) well-being for those students who have experienced academic challenge. Through this inquiry, I aimed to explore the ways in which notions of care and teaching the whole student appear in participants' stories of formal learning and how students identify elements of these pedagogical stances as supportive of their well-being. By engaging with

participants' perspectives on these aspects of formal learning in relation to their well-being, I aimed to enhance our understanding of how teaching and learning approaches within the post-secondary classroom can be adapted to better support student well-being, particularly for those students who experience academic challenge.

Research Questions

In this inquiry, I posed the following primary question: for postsecondary students who have encountered academic challenge, what aspects of their formal learning experiences help or hinder their well-being? Sub-questions underlying my primary question included:

How do notions of well-being appear in students' stories of formal learning within their experiences of academic challenge?

What do students' stories tell us about how ethics of care and whole student pedagogical stances are demonstrated by faculty within their teaching and learning approaches?

How do students perceive learning experiences in which faculty adopt ethics of care or whole student pedagogical stances as contributing to their well-being?

Rationale and Significance

While much work has been done to address student well-being in postsecondary environments, the urgency of well-being concerns and students' needs for support continue to exist. Current data regarding the prevalence of mental health and well-being challenges demonstrate that issues of well-being remain a pressing concern for students' university experience (American College Health Assessment, 2019). Further emerging research from the pandemic has demonstrated unique additional challenges to postsecondary learners' well-being (Prowse et al., 2021). This is not to diminish the important work that has taken place. As a student affairs practitioner and a member of various campus mental health strategy committees, I

feel personally that research and practice has made tremendous gains raising awareness, reducing stigma, and supporting students in enhancing their mental health literacy. However, while there is significant literature focused on identifying, and assessing the outcomes of student programming outside of the classroom (Scobie & Picard, 2018), there remains a dearth of qualitative research engaging student perspectives (Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016) that focuses on their experiences within the classroom. Furthermore, although the existing research including student perspectives has demonstrated a high proportion of student well-being concerns in relation to teaching and learning experiences (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2022; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016), research that takes up well-being as “a teaching and learning issue” (Crawford & Johns, 2018, p. 3) is in its very early stages. In addition, the increasing diversity of our student populations and the evidence of the relationships between equity and well-being and student success all point to the need to engage alongside students, particularly those who experience academic challenge, to enhance our understanding of the complexities of their learning experiences with a focus on how we might change teaching and learning environments in ways that support their well-being and capacity to academically succeed.

The stories that students share in this study add to the literature to elucidate ways in which postsecondary institutions can better support students’ well-being, particularly in the classroom. This approach also aims to augment the current important work taking place on increasing student mental health literacy (Scobie & Picard, 2018), to include a broader teaching and learning focus.

Narrative Beginnings

As mentioned at the outset, my interest in this study arose from my practice in student affairs and the privileged encounters I experience within my role. It is important to me, both professionally and as a researcher, to acknowledge the generosity with which students share their stories as learners with me as a privilege; their insights have contributed to my own learning immensely. They continue to push me to investigate my assumptions as a white, middle-class female educated in classrooms informed almost exclusively by Eurocentric ways of knowing. Although I appreciate that there are nuanced power dynamics within these relational interactions with students, it is the invaluable learning found within them that has driven me to search for ways in which teaching and learning practices can be adapted to engage the whole student from a position of care. Often in my experience as a university administrator in student affairs, I see contradictions between the strategic priorities and the reality, the overarching institutional processes, and the lived experiences students share with advisors when they visit our unit in search of support. Part of this incommensurability, I feel can be attributed to what Maxine Greene (1995) in reference to Mann's metaphor from the novel *Confessions of Felix Krull* refers to as seeing "the world small" (p. 10) versus seeing the world "big" (p. 10). Seeing big allows us to look at things up-close, recognizing the unique circumstances of each student within the academy. Seeing small, dominated by broad analytics and survey data of the majority of students, reflects how we often operate in higher education, particularly in relation to formulating our academic regulations and policies. While I appreciate that there is value in looking small, so often students' voices and individual experiences are absent from the institutional view. This is particularly true for those students, who for a variety of reasons, experience academic challenges. When those voices do come to light, we can be slow to adjust, influenced by arguments of how few students a particular issue, as an example, preferred name,

might affect in the academy. In seeing big, however, we might recognize the indignities to inclusion, identity and personal safety that are created by not ensuring that there is a process for students to use their chosen name within the university. As I engaged in research with students who have experienced academic challenge, I aimed to maintain the position that it is only by including student voices and looking big, that we can truly understand the ways in which institutional contexts help or hinder student well-being and support students to succeed academically.

Given the narrative beginnings articulated above and the conceptual framework that shaped this study, I identified the following assumptions as a researcher. The first, as discussed above, is that individuals have different life experiences and learning experiences within postsecondary institutions and as such also have different learning needs. Although there is considerable research to support this (Bowles & Brindle, 2017), primarily this assumption is based on my own experiences supporting individual students in their academic pursuits within my professional role. The second related assumption, which is also drawn from my own professional interactions with students and the supporting literature, is that students belonging to equity groups or those who encounter challenging life circumstances, experience unique barriers in having their individual learning and/or well-being needs met within higher education. The third assumption is that learning and well-being are cyclically interrelated, in that mental health challenges can impact academic achievement and likewise difficulties in academic achievement can impact students' mental health and well-being. This assumption is based on current research (Eisenberg, et al., 2007), which will be further discussed in Chapter Two. The final assumption, which I come to based on my experience working in student affairs, is that despite the conclusions regarding the self-sufficiency of adult learners that are often drawn (Hagenauer &

Volet, 2014), postsecondary students do benefit personally and academically from the development of caring relationships with faculty and staff while attending university.

Summary of Chapter One

Drawing from current literature on student persistence and well-being, this chapter has introduced the context for this study, highlighting the incongruity found in continual increases in student diversity and post-secondary institutions' lack of adaptation. In addition to presenting the study's aims and central research questions, I have also attempted to provide some insight into how my professional experiences with students who have experienced academic challenge have served as the impetus for my inquiry. In Chapter Two, I review the scholarship on persistence and student well-being in greater depth as well as introduce the conceptual framework for the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the literature related to academic challenge and student well-being in the context of higher education. I begin with a more detailed review of existing studies that include academically dismissed students and a critique of deficit-based perspectives within the persistence literature (Zepke & Leach, 2005). This is followed by a summary of the current literature on student well-being as it relates to student persistence and academic success, including recent studies focused on student perspectives of well-being. I conclude with a discussion of the scholarship on formal learning that addresses student well-being. This is presented within the context of the study's conceptual framework, which includes ethics of care and whole student pedagogies.

Academically Dismissed Students

As discussed in Chapter One, there are relatively few studies that explore academically dismissed students. The existing studies and the trends in overrepresentation of minoritized students they demonstrate raise important questions regarding the equity of postsecondary learning conditions (Kopp & Shaw, 2016; Woodfield, 2017). Woodfield's (2017) examination of leaver data in the UK, for instance, revealed both that minoritized students were more often dismissed for academic reasons and that this pattern was much more prominent in particular disciplines regardless of population size. In related research, Wimshurst and Allard (2008) found a similar trend in the distribution of failure grades across disciplinary programs within an Australian higher education institution. While, like Woodfield, their data revealed minoritized students received a higher number of F grades, they remarked that "the school offering the course ranked as the most important predictor among course variables of the proportion of fail grades awarded" (p. 695). They also found that course size had a considerable effect, with

students in larger courses receiving a higher proportion of F grades. Both Woodfield (2017) and Wimshurst and Allard (2008) stress the importance of institutional factors in academic achievement rates, arguing that the “composition of the required-to-withdraw category is, to some extent, a determination of disciplinary cultures, customs and practices rather than characteristics of the students themselves” (Woodfield, p. 248).

A handful of qualitative studies have also explicitly engaged students who have experienced academic failure or who have been academically dismissed (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Ajjawi et al., 2020; Beasley et al., 2020; McPherson & Marrero, 2021; Tovar & Simon, 2006). These studies provide some evidence of the complexities and multidimensional nature of academic success and persistence. Research focused on interventions with students who were reinstated following academic probation or academic dismissal illustrated the need to provide supports to students that move beyond issues of academic preparedness to include those of social identity, financial issues and help-seeking (Beasley et al., 2020; Tovar & Simon, 2006). As is similar to traditional research on student retention, the focus of these studies is on the student’s role in adapting within the institution. This perspective presents some significant limitations in understanding student persistence, as will be discussed further below. Perhaps, one notable exception is Ajjawi et al.’s (2019) study involving students who have experienced academic failure. In this study, researchers explored students’ perspectives on institutional and situational factors related to their experiences of failure.

Lastly, of particular note to my inquiry is the scholarship’s emphasis on the emotional and psychological toll students experienced in relation to academic failure, probation or dismissal. For instance, Beasley et al. (2020) concluded from their findings involving students on academic probation that “the stressors associated with these chronic academic struggles, not only

affect students' academic self-concept and motivation; they can also affect them psychologically and emotionally" (p. 11). Likewise, Ajjawi et al. (2020) remarked that within students' descriptions of experiences of academic failure "the intensity of emotions described by some was surprising, giving rise to and/ or compounding existing mental health concerns" (p. 401). These studies are an important reminder of the psychological distress that students can experience when unsuccessful in their academic achievement efforts. There is strong evidence within the qualitative studies above that student persistence involves significant affective elements.

Deficit Discourses in Student Persistence

In their synthesis of the literature on student retention, Zepke and Leach (2005) highlighted two contrasting perspectives of student success, which they termed 'integration' and 'adaptation'. The integration view necessitates student's integration with the culture and norms of the institution in order to achieve success. Zepke and Leach found that the majority of literature in their review adopted this more traditional discourse, which they attributed to the influence of Tinto's (1993) theoretical model of retention. Tinto's model posited that in addition to students' *pre-entry attributes* and *intentions*, their decisions to persist were highly impacted by the degree to which they experienced *integration*, both academically and socially. Markers of integration included engaging with faculty and peers, achieving academic success, and participating in campus communities and activities. Tinto discussed the institution's role in creating conditions for retention and contended that student "conformity" (p. 106) was not necessary. However, the model's emphasis on integration and with it the implication that student success requires taking up institutional values and practices (potentially at the expense of their existing values), has been critiqued as problematic, particularly for minoritized students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

With respect to adaptation, Zepke and Leach (2005) found these discourses to be newly evolving within the retention literature. In contrast to integration discourses, adaptation discourses highlighted the institution's role in valuing and integrating the various cultural identities students enter the academy with.

Devlin (2013), in picking up Zepke and Leach's (2005) contrasting discourses, has argued that integration retention discourses have been a significant source of 'deficit discourses' in relation to student diversity, (in particular, students from low socio-economic backgrounds) and student persistence. In reference to the wealth of literature related to enhancing students' individual learning skills and attitudes to better succeed in higher education, Devlin stated,

while valuable, such research can be based on the assumption that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students, and can presuppose a level playing field in relation to socio-cultural and background characteristics. (p. 943)

Important in the statement above and further developed by Devlin is the assumption of a 'level playing field' for students entering postsecondary studies. Deficit discourses imply that the student is "the problem" (Devlin, 2013, p. 943) and fail to acknowledge the cultural advantages possessed by students from backgrounds that higher education has traditionally served (namely white and affluent). In relation to discussions of integration, many draw on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' to illuminate challenges for students from equity groups who attend higher education institutions that systemically favour the norms and ways of knowing and being of advantaged student populations (Pidgeon, 2009). A heavy focus on 'interventions', as part of integration initiatives, results in less discourses involving adaptation as a critical aspect of supporting students' success. Patel's (2015) critique of educational research has pointed out the way in which a focus on intervention research in the effort to resolve 'achievement gaps'

perpetuates systemic inequities. In addition, Smit (2012) in her discussion of student diversity and deficit discourses emphasized that this framing of “student difficulties perpetuates stereotypes, alienates students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in perpetuating the barriers to student success” (p. 370). Thus, an important frame for persistence in the current study is adaptation as introduced by Zepke and Leach (2005).

Retention / Persistence models

Drawing on Zepke and Leach’s (2005) distinction between integration and adaptation retention discourses provides an opportunity to explore retention and persistence models that are more inclusive of the institution’s role in the success of their students’ diverse needs. While Tinto’s (1993) theory of retention has been influential in guiding research on student persistence, as mentioned above, critics have pointed out that its focus on integration assumes that those students with lived experiences other than traditionally majority-served student populations need to adopt the values and ways of knowing that are dominant in higher education institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pidgeon, 2009) in order to succeed. Many scholars have advanced retention conversations through explorations of the impact that integration and deficit models of retention can have on students’ persistence efforts and personal well-being. These include Pidgeon’s Indigenous Model of Student Retention (2009), Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) influential work on student belonging involving Latino students, Harper et al.’s (2018) exploration of Black undergraduate student success, Vaccaro et al.’s (2015) study involving the sense of belonging of students with disabilities, to name a few. In emphasizing the importance of students’ subjective integration experiences, these studies expand upon earlier research that has relied on applications of Tinto’s (1993) model that use student behaviours (e.g., faculty and peer interactions, extra-curricular participation; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as indicators of integration. For minoritized students this tendency toward a focus on behaviours, Hurtado and Carter have

argued, fails to account for the way in which “social distance” (p. 327) has the potential to limit participation. Through an examination of the affective experiences of belonging, the researchers above also illuminate elements within the institutional environment that create significant barriers to student integration experiences such as lack of representation as well as negative racialized and discriminatory interactions. As research expands to include student persistence and success experiences that match our diverse student populations, it becomes imperative that we select models of persistence that offer holistic and inclusive perspectives and that accommodate the vast variety of nuanced factors that influence the different experiences of student success.

One such model that holds promise is Carroll, Ng and Birch’s (2009) adaptation of Cross’s (1981 as cited in Carroll et al., 2009) ‘Chain Response Model’ initially employed to investigate challenges of access for mature students by Gibson and Graff (1992). Drawing on Gibson and Graff’s (1992) application, Carroll et al. employed Cross’ framework of situational, dispositional, and institutional factors to the study of distance business students’ progression and retention in online learning. An overview of each aspect of the framework is provided below.

Situational factors

In reviewing the literature, Carroll et al. (2009) defined situational factors as the “student’s particular life circumstances” (p. 199), citing sample literature of reasons for student leave-taking ranging from monetary barriers and family responsibilities to personal health conditions. Their findings with post-graduate business students confirmed that situational factors were significant in relation to students’ decisions to stay or leave. In particular, interviewees identified work commitments and childcare / family responsibilities as major factors to persistence.

Institutional factors

In defining institutional factors that impact student retention, Carroll et al. reviewed literature on institutional practices that support or inhibit retention. In the case of their particular study, institutional factors were framed in relation to their potential to inhibit mature students from studying while working, identifying studies which cite “staff responsiveness” (p. 199), program alignment to career aspirations, and support systems as well as overall program delivery models. Students’ responses within the study demonstrated that institutional factors similar to those identified in the literature were indeed factors impacting their ability to persist.

Dispositional factors

Dispositional factors capture aspects related to an individual learner’s attributes that may support learning. Carroll et al. (2009) identified four factors in this category from the literature, which they incorporate into the model. These included ‘self-efficacy’, ‘motivation’, ‘realistic goals’ and ‘student satisfaction’. Carroll et al. concluded that for their participants just two of these factors, motivation and realistic goals, were significant to their participants’ retention decisions.

There are several reasons why this framework is well-suited to understanding the retention experiences of academically dismissed students. As Carroll et al. contended, “the non-prescriptive nature of the factors contained within this model makes it ideal for an exploratory study” (Carroll et al., 2009, p.198). Bowles and Brindle (2017), in their systematic review of retention literature confirmed the efficacy of Carroll et al.’s applied framework, extending the model to add additional enabling and disabling retention factors within each category, thus also demonstrating the flexibility of the framework. More recently, Ajjawi et al. (2019) engaged with this model as a lens to explore the way in which students respond to academic failure. In

addition, drawing on the issues discussed above related to deficit and integration discourses and student persistence, this framework provides an opportunity to consider the institution's role in persistence, and attend to possible institutional adaptations. In fact, even in relation to dispositional factors, Carroll et al.'s study demonstrated the intricate link between students' motivation and goals and the institution's role in designing curriculum that met learners' expectations for "real-world knowledge and skills that may benefit their career progression" (p. 206). I now turn to a discussion of the well-being literature in the context of post-secondary institutions and student persistence.

Well-being

There are growing concerns in the persistence literature about student mental health and well-being, spurred on by troubling National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data, which has demonstrated significant numbers of students experiencing higher than average stress levels and difficulty coping (American College Health Association, 2019). For instance, with the Alberta 2019 Consortium data, 46.2% of students reported greater than average stress within the last 12 months and 57.2 % of respondents indicated that they found academics "traumatic or very difficult to handle" (p. 15) within the last 12 months (American College Health Association, 2019). In the Canadian context, the significant focus on student mental health is evidenced by the over 30 campus mental health strategies that have been implemented within individual postsecondary institutions (Best Practices Network, 2018), in addition to national strategies on student mental health issued by post-secondary bodies such as the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services' (CACUSS). Within post-secondary strategies, mental health and well-being are often discussed as associated constructs (MacKean, 2011) with mental health frameworks presented as "inclusive of emotional, social, and psychological well-being"

(University of Calgary, 2015, p. 5). Of wide influence within Canadian institutional mental health strategies is Keyes' (2007) concept of flourishing (Canadian Association of Colleges and Universities Student Services and Canadian Mental Health, 2013; University of Calgary, 2015; MacKean, 2011; Rashid & Loudon, 2018). Thus, for the purposes of this study, definitions of well-being are drawn from Keyes' (2007) work and described below. This is followed by a brief discussion of literature related to well-being and persistence.

Well-being and Flourishing

As discussed in Chapter One, the construct of well-being within the literature often lacks precise definition (La Placa et al., 2013; Squires, 2019). Where studies do define well-being, Ryff and Keyes' (1995) 'psychological well-being scale' (Bowman, 2010) or Keyes (2007) concept of flourishing are common (Rashid & Loudon, 2018). In the Canadian postsecondary context in particular, well-being is commonly associated with flourishing (Keyes, 2007). Mental health (be it flourishing or languishing), is underpinned by what Keyes (2007) defined as three distinct aspects of well-being. Emotional well-being, Keyes defined as an individual's subjective experiences of positive feeling or satisfaction. Functional well-being is composed of two separate well-being scales, that of social well-being and psychological well-being. Social well-being relates to an individual's feelings of social connection and inclusion, and ability to grow and engage in society in meaningful ways (Keyes, 2002). Psychological well-being is perhaps the most drawn upon scale in studies of well-being and includes the following six dimensions: "self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery and autonomy" (p. 209). According to Keyes (2002), flourishing and languishing exist on a holistic continuum in which one whose subjective well-being is high, as determined by their responses to the three above scales, would be considered flourishing. Those who score low are

considered languishing. Importantly, those who have a mental illness can flourish and those who do not have a mental disorder may be considered languishing based on low well-being.

Therefore, this construct attempts to operationalize mental health and the symptoms of mental health rather than traditional health frameworks focused exclusively on mental illness (Keyes et al., 2012).

Well-being and Persistence

Clear relationships can be drawn to the literature on sense of belonging and student persistence discussed above (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and the concept of social well-being. Studies focusing on relationships between students' mental health disorders have also linked depression and academic performance (Eisenberg et al., 2009). In addition, early studies have begun to demonstrate relationships between flourishing and academic achievement. Keyes et al.'s, (2012) study involving over 5000 U.S. students found that languishing students had a much higher frequency of reported academic impairment, regardless of the presence of a mental disorder, than flourishing students. This study also demonstrated that those students with mental illness, alongside positive mental health indicators, had less risk of academic impairment. In another study conducted by Rashid and Loudon (2018), graduation rates were compared for students whose mental health was assessed in their first year of study. They found that "46 percent of students who entered university in a flourishing state (high well-being, low stress) graduated within four or five years, whereas only 22 percent graduated if they entered university in a languishing state" (p. 25). Further Yu et al.'s (2018) study of university students in Hong Kong concluded that students with higher rates of personal well-being as measured at the beginning of their studies positively predicted students' academic performance measured after three years of study. Although outside the student belonging and persistence research there are

fewer studies that focus specifically on academic achievement and well-being, those that do suggest significant correlations between well-being and persistence.

As mentioned in Chapter One and important to the context of this study is the emergence of the global health pandemic of COVID-19, which arguably has had significant impacts on well-being worldwide. The rapid transition to remote learning for university students has prompted new studies investigating the influence of social isolation, pandemic fears and academic concerns in relation to student well-being as measured by various well-being and stress scales (e.g., Barbayannis et al., 2022; Clabaugh et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021; Prowse et al., 2021). Although these studies do not provide direct evidence between academic achievement and well-being, they have pointed to unique well-being stressors for university students resulting from the pandemic. In Clabaugh et al.'s (2021) study measuring the emotional well-being, personality and perceptions of academic study and COVID-19 of 295 post-secondary students in the United States, they concluded that one third of participants “felt their academic future was “very” or “extremely” at risk due to COVID-19” (p. 3). Dodd et al. (2021), in their study involving Australian university students (N=787), found that a high percentage of students (86.8%) reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their academics and that 31.5% of respondents indicated that they had low well-being. Although studies do not necessarily point to increased levels of low well-being amongst post-secondary students, scholars have pointed to the potential of these new stressors to exacerbate existing concerns of mental health and well-being for this population (Clabaugh et al. 2021).

While validated well-being measures such as those employed in the studies above help to illuminate aspects of well-being, I am cautious in their application. Critics have pointed out the challenges related to measuring well-being through seemingly objective scales, given the

subjective nature of the experience of well-being (Ferraro & Barletti, 2016). From an anthropological perspective, Ferraro and Barletti (2016) have called for scholarship that considers culture and place, rather than the positivist approaches currently prevalent in the study of well-being in the fields of economics and psychology. While the construct of social and psychological well-being provides opportunities to consider socio-cultural influences alongside individuals' lived experiences of well-being, there is a worrying trend in quantifying and categorizing individual's well-being in relation to other variables, such as academic achievement. From my professional experience in the university, this has led to deficit-oriented approaches, similar to the ones related to student persistence critiqued above, focusing on individual interventions such as developing one's resilience or practices of daily gratitude. This has also resulted in limiting conversations directed toward the situational and institutional (and perhaps more broadly societal) impacts on students' well-being. While I am not dismissing the potential value of supporting students in developing evidence-based well-being practices, in the process of this study, conceptualizations of social, psychological and emotional well-being are considered more holistically. This includes applying Carroll et al.'s (2009) persistence framework to consider well-being from dispositional, situational and institutional perspectives as well as engaging with students' lived experiences of well-being and academic dismissal. I now turn to a discussion of research on student perspectives of well-being.

Student Perspectives of Well-being

As with research specific to well-being and student persistence, there is a similar dearth of research that includes student qualitative perspectives on well-being in the university context (Riva et al., 2020, Stanton et al., 2016). This is in spite of the focus on core university mental health strategies' emphasis on the importance of engaging student perspectives. As an example,

one of the central tenets of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services' (CACUSS) Mental Health Strategy is that it is "student-directed, grounded in values of informed choice and inclusion of students' voices in strategy development and decision-making, especially of students with lived experiences of mental health issues" (CACUSS, 2013, p. 8). This is echoed in other Canadian specific institutional mental health strategies as well (see University of Calgary, 2015 as an example). Scholars who have engaged in recent studies related to mental health and well-being that include student voices have both acknowledged the limited research that has taken place as well as the importance of including students directly in understandings of student well-being in the university context (Baik et al., 2019; Giamos et al., 2017; Stanton et al., 2016). Related to Zepke and Leach's (2005) discussion of adaptation discussed above, the studies including students that are reviewed below take up adaptation perspectives, acknowledging the importance of a whole campus approach rather than solely an individual support focus. For instance, Baik et al. (2019), pointed out in their study with students on well-being that "the ability of individuals to cope with and manage stress only addresses one part of the picture of student mental health; it is also important to promote protective factors in the university's social and academic environment" (p. 676). Likewise, in Giamos et al.'s (2017) study, students reported that mental health initiatives while important, were not an "all-encompassing, step toward changing campus culture" (Giamos et al., 2017, p.127). Below is an overview of the common themes that emerged from studies that qualitatively involved student perspectives on well-being.

The impact the pressure to perform academically has on students' well-being was a prominent theme across studies. Students in Giamos et al.'s (2017) VideoVoice project indicated that they found academic performance expectations inhibited students from seeking help.

Shankar et al.'s (2013) interview-based study involving Indigenous and students belonging to additional equity groups stressed the added pressure of funding that is contingent on academic performance standards and in Jones et al.'s (2020) study, students stressed the way in which the “perceived financial, emotional and existential threat of assessment failure led to an unhealthy emphasis on examination results as a marker of individual self-worth” (p. 4). While the desire to be challenged was recognized as important to learning (Jones et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016), as was unrealistic expectations students may place on themselves (Jones et al., 2020), student voices emphasized that being involved in decisions related to due dates for academic work (Stanton et al., 2016) and having access to alternative assessments beyond traditional timed examinations was supportive of well-being (Lindsay et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2020). Meaningful assessments accompanied by clear guidelines were also raised by students participating in Baik et al. (2019), Lindsay et al., (2022), Riva et al. (2020), and Stanton et al.'s (2016) studies. In related comments, students stressed flexibility from faculty (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016) and being seen as whole people with lives beyond the academy as important to their well-being (Baik et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2013; Stanton et al., 2016). Lastly, an important aspect of assessment raised by the participants in Shankar et al.'s (2013) study, was the impact of Eurocentric assessments and their exclusive emphasis on written forms of knowledge representation to students' well-being.

Student respondents also indicated the importance of learning in relationships with faculty and with peers to their well-being. Across several studies (Baik et al., 2019; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016; Tett et al., 2017), student responses demonstrated the connection between their sense of well-being and the feeling of being known by their instructors, as well as being respected as unique people rather than a “little group of numbers” (Stanton et al., 2016, p.

93). Alongside the desire to have more personal connections with instructors within these same studies, was the recognition by students that this was not necessarily the norm. For instance, Tett et al. (2017) concluded in their study involving undergraduate students at a Scottish post-secondary institution, that students “felt lucky when they found [faculty relationships], and actually, more than a little surprised” (p. 176).

Engaging with peers and participating in active learning emerged as an additional element supportive to well-being within several studies (Baik et al., 2019; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016). Students in Stanton et al.’s (2016) study emphasized the need for support connecting with other students within the teaching and learning environment, indicating that it can be difficult to meet other students outside of classwork. This was echoed by students in Baik et al.’s (2019) study in which students highlighted the value of student connections. Students in Shankar et al.’s (2013) study shared the negative impacts that ‘cliquey’ group dynamics and racist behaviours left unchallenged by faculty had on their experience of well-being. International student participants in Riva et al.’s (2020) study also shared challenges with peer-to-peer experiences that failed to support a sense of belonging. The authors conclude that “lack of teacher-supported group diversity” (p. 107) can impact students’ well-being adversely.

Lastly, an emphasis on culturally responsive teaching was highlighted by Shankar et al.’s (2013) participants. The participants in this study found the lack of culturally relevant content within their program of study to be negligent. In their analysis, Shankar et al. demonstrated the ways in which “Eurocentric models can also exert significant influences on the psychological health of minority students” (p. 3923). Given their study’s focus on student populations belonging to equity deserving groups specifically, Shankar et al. provided a rich example of the

importance of understanding well-being and academic achievement from a socio-cultural perspective and with an equity lens.

Although the studies discussed above are few in number, they provide critical perspectives for enhancing our understanding of post-secondary students' well-being experiences. As mentioned in Chapter One and demonstrated above, current research shows students draw significant links between their well-being and their formal learning experiences. The findings of these studies also point more directly to the importance of care in post-secondary teaching and learning environments (Baik et al., 2019; Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016; Tett et al., 2017), as well as practices that support the whole student through culturally responsive teaching (Riva et al., 2020; Shankar et al., 2013), and purposeful learning (Stanton et al., 2016) and assessment practices (Jones et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016). In fact, several studies (Riva et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2016; Tett et al., 2017) suggest the value of ethics of care approaches within teaching and learning and higher education institutions as important to addressing well-being concerns. By establishing that students see relational, engaged, and inclusive learning experiences as important to their well-being, these studies demonstrate the efficacy of further exploring teaching and learning approaches within students' formal learning experiences in relation to student well-being. Below I turn to the literature that explores student well-being as "a teaching and learning issue" (Crawford & Johns, 2018, p. 3).

Well-being as a Teaching and Learning Issue

As Larcombe et al. (2021) pointed out there has been considerably more focus in higher education well-being efforts on the provision of counselling services and related programming, than on the examination of formal learning experiences and their impact on student well-being. As such, there is limited research that directly explores teaching and learning environments and course-based initiatives related to student well-being. However, a review of studies beginning

with those on faculty/ student relationships and followed by scholarship on engaged and relational learning teaching practices are drawn together here to create a nuanced picture of themes that parallel those emerging from the student perspectives considered above. Included in the discussion below are studies that explicitly set out to study student well-being, as well as others in which themes of student well-being have emerged as one aspect within broader explorations of postsecondary teaching and learning. I begin with initial research on teacher/ student relationships in higher education. Following this discussion, I introduce the conceptual framework for this study, reviewing ethics of care and whole student pedagogy in greater detail. I conclude the discussion with a review of studies related to postsecondary student well-being in formal learning that explore elements of ethics of care and whole student pedagogy.

Teacher / Student Relationships in Higher Education

Although well-being studies on student perspectives suggest that students' engagement with faculty does impact their well-being, teacher/ student relationships in higher education have not garnered much research attention (Hageneur & Volet, 2014). Clegg and Rowland (2010) have argued that this lack of focus on relational aspects of postsecondary teaching generates from the traditional Cartesian divide, and the continued value higher education places on rationalism and intellect over emotion and the whole student. Others have pointed out that the adult status of postsecondary students and the associated expectations of independence have resulted in the lack of attention to research on teaching and learning relationships (Hageneur & Volet, 2014). Lastly, scholars have cited practical considerations, such as the demands on faculty to produce scholarship rather than cultivate supportive relationships with students (Crawford & Johns, 2018). However, despite these considerations, there is a growing acknowledgement that

teacher/ student relationships play an important role in student success and well-being and that they warrant further exploration (Hagenaur & Volet, 2014).

Teacher/ Student Interactions. Retention models (Tinto, 1993) and models of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002) have frequently included postsecondary teacher/ student interactions within explorations of student success (Hausmann et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1980). A few studies have investigated teacher/ student interactions in their own right and their effect on student development and satisfaction, making attempts to differentiate between types of interactions, such as more informal or formal, academic or socially-oriented encounters (Kuh & Huh, 2001). While primarily positive correlations between increased faculty interactions and student success have been found, some studies have demonstrated mixed results when interactions and student outcomes are differentiated by gender and equity deserving populations (Kim & Sax, 2009). Qualitative studies considering faculty interactions with students belonging to equity groups also raise questions regarding the efficacy of interpreting interactions between faculty and students as straightforwardly positive. For instance, Harper et al.'s (2018) study involving Black undergraduate students from an American urban university demonstrated that participants experienced frequent microaggressions and overt racism within their interactions with faculty. Thus, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) in their review of teacher/ student relationships in post-secondary contexts stated that “to date, little is known about how interactions are perceived, evaluated and experienced by students and teachers” (p. 382). This points to the need to further enhance our understanding of teacher/ student relationships from more nuanced perspectives, ones that differentiate relationships from interactions, (Hagenauer & Violet, 2014) and include explorations of faculty ways of being in teacher/ student relationships (Guzzardo et al., 2020).

In an effort to conceptualize the dimensions of teacher/ student relationships in higher education, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) distinguish between *affective* and *support* components within relationships. The *affective* dimension refers to the relational connection between student and teacher including aspects of “honesty, trust, respect” and more broadly “care for students” (p. 375), while the *support* dimension points to the ways in which instructors support students’ academic success. It is in relation to the affective dimension of teacher/ student relationships, that researchers have drawn on models of ethics of care and whole student pedagogy. Before turning to this literature, I first introduce ethics of care and whole student pedagogical approaches, which form the conceptual framework for this study.

Conceptual Framework

Ethics of Care

Although the philosophical approaches embracing an ethics of care have evolved over the years, Held (2006) identified several common features across current ethics of care articulations. One main commonality is the acceptance of the responsibility to respond to the needs of “particular others” (p. 11) as a moral ethic. This includes embracing emotions involved in caring as well as the valuing of the “claims” (p. 11) of those we are in relationship with. Held pointed out that this is in distinct contrast with traditional moral theories that prioritize rational and abstract universal principles over the particular. In addition, as Held explained, ethics of care perspectives consider that “persons in caring relations are acting for self-and-other together” (p. 13) and “the well-being of a caring relation involves the cooperative well-being of those in the relation” (p. 13). This is also in juxtaposition to moral traditions which conceptualize “the selfish individual” (p. 13) in opposition to “humanity” (p. 13). Thus, in ethics of care approaches morality considers the individual as interdependent, and in relation to others rather than individualistic. This “conception of persons” (p. 13) has important implications, according to

Held, who argued that the one engages us in answering to the needs of others, while the other emphasizes a somewhat unrealistic and even undesirable self-sufficiency.

Critiques of ethics of care approaches have pointed to the dangers of “partialism” (Edwards, 2009, p. 233) as well as examples in which caring relationships can go wrong and develop in ways which are not in the best interest of those being cared for or the carer (Held, 2006). For instance, Edwards (2000) provided an example of a parent, who in the name of caring, subjects their child to an intense training routine to support their athletic endeavours. In relation to these criticisms involving problematic caring relationships, Held’s (2006) response is helpful. In contrast to simply an emphasis of the value of caring, she stressed that the “ethics” in ethics of care is critical in signaling that evaluation and “moral scrutiny” (p. 11) are needed in the process of care. Here too, Noddings’ (2012) articulation of care emphasized that caring is both an emotional and intellectual exercise, one in which we first emotionally engage in response to attending to the “expressed needs” (p. 272) of an individual (rather than a parent’s predetermined assumptions of what is needed for the child as in the case above). This is followed by thoughtful engagement in how to address those needs or maintain the caring relationship when situations arise in which the needs of the “cared-for” (p. 272) cannot be met.

Addressing critiques of partialism is more challenging, and an area that is important to engage with in the context of postsecondary institutions and concerns for student equity.

Although moral theories of justice due to their emphasis on universal notions (e.g., equity and fairness) can be seen in opposition to an ethics of care, Held pointed out that “most would say that justice is important in caring” (2006, p. 12). Held conceded that how ethics of justice and ethics of care interact is still a work in progress. She emphasized that:

an adequate, comprehensive moral theory will have to include the insights of both the ethics of care and the ethics of justice, among other insights, rather than that either of these can be incorporated into the other in the sense of supposing that it can provide the grounds for the judgments characteristically found in the other. Equitable caring is not necessarily better caring, it is fairer caring. And humane justice is not necessarily better justice, it is more caring justice. (p. 16)

This perspective is further illuminated in Noddings' (2013) discussion of the value that can be added by bringing perspectives of relational caring to issues of justice, as the carer considers the implications of rules and consequences not in the abstract, but within the context of her relationships, and "those in her inner circle" (p. 41). Thus, in response to critiques of partialism, both Held (2006) and Noddings (2013) demonstrated that attention continues to be given to the balancing of issues of justice within the ethics of care.

Before moving on from ethics of care, it is helpful to consider the components of care as described by Noddings (2005), whose work most explicitly is situated within the field of education. As one enters into caring as the carer, they first engage in *engrossment*, a state Nodding has articulated as a deep attentiveness in which carers "really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey" (p. 16). Noddings has termed the experience of putting our own agenda aside as we are moved to help as the carer, *motivational displacement*. In the teaching and learning relationship, Noddings emphasized the importance of attending to the "expressed needs" (2012, p. 272) of the "cared for" (2005, p. 16), rather than our perspective as educators regarding what is needed. The third and final aspect of the caring relationship is the *response of the cared for* (2005). This response is essential to sustaining the caring relationship for the carer. As a conceptual lens with which to examine student well-being within higher education teaching and

learning environments, an ethics of care offers an opportunity to explore the dynamics of caring and how its presence or absence in students' formal learning experiences may help or hinder well-being.

Whole Student Pedagogies

Whole student pedagogies are a second and related conceptual lens used in this study to consider well-being and students' formal learning experiences. Despite frequent presentations within higher education literature that refer to teaching the 'whole student' as a unified ideal, teaching and learning approaches that promote the whole student are somewhat eclectic and broad in nature (Quinlan, 2011). Palmer and Zajonc's (2010) articulation of *integrative education*, while complex and various in its own right, is often recognized within scholarship that addresses the whole student (Schoem, 2017; Quinlan, 2011). According to Palmer and Zajonc, integrative education includes teaching approaches that blend disciplines and real-world learning and aim to nurture the development of students' intellectual and emotional selves alongside their quest for purpose.

In their book, the *Heart of Higher Education*, they challenged what they term "the divided life" (2010, p. 57) of the academy, the traditional Cartesian conceptualizations that separate the intellect from the heart and block our view of the whole student in the teaching and learning enterprise. Although Palmer and Zajonc's book did not explicitly connect integrative education with current research on student well-being, in the telling of his own story as an undergraduate student, disengaged intellectually and challenged by depression, Zajonc demonstrated how higher education's tendency to give primacy to the intellect as separate from "affect" (p. 41), and "meaning and purpose" (p. 57) can take its toll on mental health and student well-being. It is by forming a relationship with a teacher that Zajonc finds his way through and

this story helps to frame a central argument in the book for the development of “carefully crafted relationships of student to teacher, student to student, and teacher and student to subject” (p. 29).

In drawing on Palmer and Zajonc and additional literature that references teaching the whole student, several unified themes within whole student pedagogy emerge. Below I will focus on three that relate to the most prevalent findings within studies on student perspectives of well-being. These are the affective nature of learning (Beard et al., 2007; Schoem, 2017), engaged and purposeful learning (Mondey et al., 2017) and relational learning (Mondey et al., 2017). Each of these themes will be briefly explained below.

Whole student pedagogies resist the traditional dualism within higher education learning of intellect and emotion and advocate for the inclusion of learning that makes space for students’ emotions (Beard et al., 2007). Quinlan (2011) pointed out that university is a time of change whereby students must critically reflect on new conceptual understandings and work through the integration of new modes of thinking and being. Sherman (2020) has emphasized the importance of recognizing that along with this process of “becoming” (p. 14) comes “loss, grief, denial, potential isolation, anxiety, oppression, anguish, dread, even the threat of nonbeing and death” (p. 14). Given the existence of emotions throughout the process of higher education and their deep connections to student well-being, Sherman has argued that existential concerns and emotional ways of knowing are critical to consider within postsecondary institution’s efforts to support student well-being. Although some scholars have critiqued this perspective as a therapeutic turn that drives narratives of a “diminished sense of self” and challenges human agency, (Ecclestone et al., 2007, p. 184), Beard et al. (2007) argued that in attending to “the role of emotions in educational encounters” (p. 235), what is being proposed is simply an acknowledgement of the already occurring affective components of learning whether in formal

or informal learning interactions. Rather than therapeutic, they argued, it is a recognition of students as whole rather than dualistic people (Beard et al., 2007).

Whole student pedagogies have also highlighted the importance of engaged learning. To elaborate, engaged learning draws from theories of adult education, experiential learning, civic engagement, and student development theory (Swaner, 2007). While there are many pathways to engaged learning, from problem-based pedagogies to service learning (Schoem, 2017), taken together engaged learning consists of teaching and learning practices that encourage students to participate actively in their learning, find personal meaning in course content and consider the ways in which learning connects to real-world contexts (Modey et al., 2017).

From the perspective of teaching the whole student, engaged teaching and learning practices also take into account the individual experiences and identities that students bring to the classroom (Schoem, 2017). More recently, discussions of engaged learning have emphasized the importance of the “inclusive engagement of diverse students” (Schoem, 2017, p. 28), similar to the themes of inclusivity that the student-based research discussed above emphasized as important to student well-being (Riva et al., 2020; Shankar et al., 2013).

Lastly relational learning (Modey et al., 2017) in whole student pedagogies stresses the value of community among learners and between teacher and learner. As Modey et al. (2017) described it, relational learning involves teaching approaches that “acknowledge the full humanity of each student and teacher’ and significantly... create communities of learners within their classrooms as part of the pedagogical practice” (p. 340). While presented above as three distinct elements of whole student pedagogies, making space for affect, engaged learning and relational learning are interrelated ways of approaching teaching and learning in higher education. As with an ethics of care, scholars have suggested that whole student pedagogies hold

promise for supporting student well-being (Schoem, 2017; Swaner, 2007). As part of a conceptual framework with which to consider student well-being, whole student pedagogies are complementary to the relational emphasis found within ethics of care theoretical approaches. However, they provide an additional lens to view participants' stories of formal learning by offering perspectives more specific to pedagogy within teaching and learning environments. Below, I discuss scholarship that highlights ethics of care and whole student pedagogical teaching practices within formal learning environments and their relationship to student well-being.

From Interactions to Relationships and an Ethics of Care

In relation to student learning more generally, scholars have demonstrated the value students' place on caring pedagogical stances in their formal learning. In his study of teaching effectiveness, Scott (2015) found a relationship between positive student perceptions of teaching and an ethics of care in the form of "relational acumen" (p. 11), that is, responding to, and taking interest in students as individuals. Scott emphasized that although an ethics of care is often indirectly suggested in practices of good teaching, it is worth considering more directly. Clegg and Rowland (2010), in their framing of care as 'kindness', have also stressed that this form of caring is embedded in teaching excellence and yet is "unremarked" (p. 720) upon. Through an analysis of qualitative student data from earlier research, they demonstrated that students' perceptions of instructor kindness was "a quality that students felt they could describe, and whose lack they perceived" (p. 727) and that students "connected what they perceived as kindness and unkindness to their perception of how they were learning" (p. 727).

While there are few studies that explicitly explore student well-being through the lens of student/ faculty relationships, those studies that do have also associated elements of an ethics of

care with student well-being. As part of a broader, longitudinal study involving students facing financial difficulties from US colleges, Guzzardo et al. (2020) conducted an analysis of frequent references to faculty and student relationships that emerged within the data. Using an ethics of care lens as their conceptual framework, they identified four aspects of care that, depending on their presence or absence, had significant impacts on students' academic success and well-being. These four components include 1) "creating pedagogical space" (p. 41) through flexibility and openness to accommodation, 2) supporting student belonging and opportunities to learn through "being inclusive and aware" (p. 41), 3) fostering student engagement through "being engaged and engaging" (p. 41) and lastly, 4) listening and attending to students through "doing more than just teach[ing]" (p. 41). Through a detailed discussion of the implications of their study, the authors drew on the work of Noddings (2012) to illuminate applicable aspects of an ethics of care within higher education including prioritizing relationships, engaging in attentive listening and balancing flexibility and accommodations while obtaining regular feedback from students. In addition to demonstrating the strength of an ethics of care framework in enhancing our understanding of the interrelated nature of students' well-being and academic experiences within the post-secondary context, this study presents opportunities to explore further ways in which to bridge ethics of care conceptually with teaching and learning practices in ways that have the potential to support well-being.

Crawford and Johns' (2018) study exploring faculty roles in a pre-university access program, offers another example of research on faculty/ student relationships that employed an ethics of care lens. They reported that faculty and academic staff did identify care and support as part of their teaching and learning role, albeit with varying degrees. Participants' responses demonstrated the interrelationship between well-being and academic needs through shared

scenarios in which they were commonly approached by students with academic concerns that then led into more personal support requests. Important in this study, and to the role of care in student well-being, is that participants demonstrated clear boundaries, openly addressed “their limits” (p. 12) and identified appropriate practices of “support and refer on” (p. 11). Crawford and Johns also acknowledged the practical issues involved in current higher education contexts and the employment of ethics of care approaches to students’ well-being, such as research demands for faculty, which can often be more rewarded than teaching work. However, I concur with their conclusion that such concerns should not preclude research that seeks to better understand how students’ well-being may be improved by interactions within formal learning environments in which an ethics of care is or is not present. Further, the frequency with which aspects of care emerged in studies of student well-being discussed above, seems to suggest the need for increased efforts to understand the nuances of how students experience care within the faculty relationships they participate in (Haguaner & Volet, 2014; Riva et al., 2020).

Pedagogical Approaches that Support Student Well-being

Studies that have investigated pedagogical approaches more generally in relation to student well-being are also few in number (Larcombe et al., 2021). In response to this gap, one recent study by Larcombe et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between student well-being and what they termed *course experiences* in an Australian post-secondary institution. Through a combination of questionnaires that explored students’ well-being in relation to course experiences, course workload, assessment anxiety, “faculty autonomy and support” (p. 10), motivation, peer engagement and belonging, they determined that all six course-related experiences had an impact on student well-being, beyond current academic achievement and other demographic and situational factors. This study suggests that research exploring

pedagogical experiences and their impact on student well-being holds promise. While Larcombe et al.'s (2021) broad study of course experiences in relation to well-being is unique, studies within the literature exist that address student well-being in the context of assessment practices, as well as practices involving engaged and relational learning. The literature on these themes and their relationship to whole student pedagogies are discussed below.

Assessment Practices and the Whole Student

In Jones et al.'s (2020) study exploring student perspectives of assessment and well-being discussed above, the threat of “high-stakes” (p. 4) assessment was identified as a particular issue in relation to their well-being concerns. Slavin et al. (2014) found that moving away from high-stakes assessments to adopt a pass/ fail system resulted in higher levels of well-being in medical student cohorts. High-stakes assessment was also identified by Larcombe et al. (2013) as significant for student well-being. Their study demonstrated that students in the study regardless of the law program they participated in, experienced similar challenges in measured well-being. The researchers report this finding as surprising given their hypothesis that the emphasis on cohort learning and “engagement in law school activities” (p. 411) in one program would benefit student well-being. Through focus groups with students the researchers discovered that the high-stakes assessments and competitive, normative grading practices (present in both programs) were significant contributors to well-being challenges according to student participants. In addition to the competitive nature and threat of assessments, student participants in Larcombe et al.'s study also expressed that clear expectations as well as “‘models’ of ‘high quality’ work and increased opportunities for exam practice” (p. 425) would improve well-being.

In a recent case study examining a student as partners approach to assessment and student well-being, Hill et al. (2020) reported on a relational approach to assessment in which instructors

engaged in discussion with students on preliminary drafts of their work. Given their focus on supporting well-being, instructors engaged in the explicit “interplay between emotion and intellect throughout this feedback process” (p. 176). Through a review of qualitative data comprising of student reflections, they concluded that engaging in recurring dialogue about written work supported students’ self-efficacy, transforming “negative emotions...into positive emotions such as enthusiasm and pleasure” (p. 176). Both Larcombe et al.’s (2013) and Hill et al.’s (2020) findings suggest the importance to student well-being of providing “assessment literacy” (Hanesworth, 2019, p. 104) support and in “not assum[ing] all students intuitively understand assessment practices” (Hanesworth et al., 2019, p. 104). In addition, like Hill et al. (2020) Hanesworth et al. (2019) suggests taking a faculty/ student partnership approach to the design and practice of student assessment. Although Hanesworth et al. (2019) is focused on increasing the inclusivity of assessment practices that favour dominant student groups, rather than well-being, their suggestion recalls themes raised by the student-focused well-being literature in relation to flexibility in assessment (Jones et al., 2020) as well as culturally-responsive assessment practices that provide opportunities for more inclusive ways of demonstrating knowledge (Shankar et al., 2013). Cox’s (2010) work, drawn from a number of qualitative studies based on interviews with community college students and classroom observations, highlighted fear of failure in completing academic assessments as a primary factor in students’ inability to succeed. She found that those teachers who made efforts to provide clear directions about academic expectations, while also interacting relationally with students by consistently expressing their belief in students’ abilities to succeed made a significant impact to student persistence.

Engaged and Relational Learning and Well-being

As discussed above, engaged and relational learning refers to learning environments that attempt to engage students in personal meaning-making alongside connections to real-world learning within the context of supportive and inclusive interactions between student and teacher, and student and students (Modey et al., 2017). While a good deal of discussion exists in the literature regarding the potential associations between student well-being and purposeful (Sherman, 2021), engaged (Swaner, 2007) and relational (Modey et al., 2017) learning, original research investigating particular approaches in relation to student well-being is more difficult to locate. In a study that assessed curricular changes designed to promote student well-being through engaged learning, Tang and Ferguson (2014) compared law students' rates of mental health within the final component of law education in an Australian institution to the findings from their earlier study of law school programs in which lower rates of well-being were found. Employing the same measures in both studies, they attributed their finding of higher rates of well-being for participants to program components that included small group mentorship with law practitioners and "real-life experiences" (p. 48) that engaged students personally in the practice of becoming lawyers. Although a considerably different context than Tang and Ferguson's study, Everett's (2017) qualitative study engaging first-year students in an experiential visual storytelling project demonstrated a positive impact on students' well-being through themes that emerged from participants' reflections related to peer connections and increased confidence.

In terms of relational learning and student well-being, there are a number of quantitative studies that explore peer learning relationships. While they do not directly investigate well-being, several studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between students' sense of belonging and learning with peers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Waller et al., 2011). Additionally, in a large-

scale longitudinal study across several institutions, Hanson et al. (2016) found that engagement in peer learning within teaching and learning environments positively impacted student well-being. Although the effects were small, the findings were consistent across student populations. Whether peer to peer learning supports well-being, however, depends on thoughtful teaching considerations regarding inclusivity and ensuring support for all learners. In Larcombe et al.'s (2013) study, discussed in the context of assessment practices above, despite pedagogical structures that aimed to create peer connections, students reported in focus groups that their well-being would be improved if the program did more to “foster a collaborative and inclusive, rather than competitive and elitist, culture” (p. 426) and by including “‘safe’ discussion/learning spaces” (p. 426). The importance of inclusive relational learning was also demonstrated by Shankar et al.'s (2013) study discussed above in which students reported issues with racism and exclusion from peers. Ragoonaden and Meuller's (2017) qualitative study assessing the learning and well-being of Indigenous participants within the context of a course provided evidence that by thoughtfully employing culturally responsive pedagogical practices such as sharing circles, and peer mentorship, students' well-being can be positively affected.

Summary of Chapter Two

Throughout these studies and in parallel to themes that arise in the well-being literature that engage student perspectives, there are linkages to notions of care and whole student pedagogy that can be drawn. These studies suggest that when teaching and learning relationships are characterized by attentiveness and care as well as respect for students' whole selves, well-being can be supported. The literature discussed above also suggests that approaching the design of assessment practices and learning activities in ways that attend to the diversity of students within the classroom and that engage students in active expressions of meaning-making, also present the potential to support well-being. However, it is clear in reviewing the literature that

although existing studies point to promising directions for exploring student well-being within postsecondary teaching and learning environments, more research is needed. Through engaging student voices in stories of well-being, particularly the voices of those students who have experienced academic challenge, this study offers an opportunity to further our understanding of the way in which faculty's ethics of care and whole student pedagogical stances have the potential to support student well-being.

Chapter Three: Methodology

By engaging with students' stories of well-being and academic challenge within the context of their university journeys, this qualitative study sought to explore aspects of formal learning that help or hinder student well-being. The following chapter provides details on the research design, beginning with a discussion of narrative inquiry as situated within qualitative and constructivist research approaches. I then provide a rationale for the particular approach to narrative inquiry employed along with the methods and analysis work that were taken up within the research design. Lastly, I provide an overview of the approaches that were employed to ensure trustworthiness and maintain ethics through the project.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Paradigmatic Orientation: Constructivism

In seeking to understand students' formal learning experiences that support or detract from their well-being, this inquiry is aligned with qualitative research approaches. Qualitative research as described by Merriam and Grenier (2019) aims to study "how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a particular context" (p. 4). Within the broad umbrella of qualitative inquiry, this work is situated within a constructivist paradigm. A paradigm or worldview encompasses a researcher's assumptions of how reality and truth are

defined (ontology), and the nature of knowledge and knowing (epistemology), as well as one's methodological approaches to research (Scotland, 2012). Values and ethics within research (axiology) have also been acknowledged as a critical component of a researcher's worldview (Lincoln et al., 2018).

In considering my worldview as a researcher, I recognize that I continue to be shaped by my role as a student affairs practitioner and educator in higher education. In having the privilege of hearing post-secondary students' experiences in my practice daily, I see the immense potential of attending to student stories; both as a process for enriching our understanding of students' multiple realities within higher education and for enacting change in ways that support movement toward more equitable learning conditions. As a developing researcher, the value I place on the particular, and on students' contextualized experiences as they interact with higher education institutional contexts, closely aligns with constructivist ways of knowing. Constructivism holds that there are multiple realities or truths rather than one singular truth that can be determined by an objective researcher's observations (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Knowledge is constructed through "our lived experiences and through our interactions with others as members of society" (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 114). As this study sought to understand the individual realities of well-being as well as students' dynamic experiences in formal learning environments, a constructive paradigm was well-suited to this inquiry.

Although constructivism is sometimes critiqued for its focus on individual experience to the exclusion of considerations of historical and political ideological influences of knowledge construction (Scotland, 2012), others have argued that research within the interpretive paradigm lies on "a continuum from the more critical to the less critical... with greater and lesser explicit attention to and reflexivity about power issues and the social realities of institutions" (Yanow,

2006, p. 22). Lincoln et al. (2018) have also pointed out an increasing adoption of social action aims within the work of constructivist researchers. Within my selected methodology, narrative inquiry, described below, individual meaning-making and the social elements within the individual's historical and political context are equally attended to (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In approaching this research within the constructivist paradigm, I aimed to collaborate with participants to represent their individual stories of the ways in which their formal postsecondary learning experiences support their well-being while illuminating broader institutional challenges for students within post-secondary education classrooms.

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

In designing a research approach that explored students' experiences of academic challenge and well-being, I was drawn to narrative inquiry as a methodology for several reasons. Perhaps most prominent for me is the way in which student story features in my practice within student affairs. The developmental and holistic advising interactions with students in my work are highly driven by story, as students walk me through an account of events and experiences leading up to their decisions to seek support. Through this relational dialogue between student and advisor, students share stories and events that "provide meaningful information about who [they] are" (Fivush, 1994, p. 136) as well as insights into the university. Although my role as a student affairs professional and my role as a researcher are not one and the same, this experience has provided me with multiple examples of the power of story in understanding the complex realities of individual students, which in turn played a large role in my alignment with narrative methodologies.

Referred to by some scholars as the 'narrative turn' (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Reissman, 2001), the use of narrative methods as a means of understanding human experience

has increased across many disciplines, from education to sociology to name a few (Reisman, 2001). While particular approaches within narrative research practices vary across and within disciplines (Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002), those who pursue narrative research often cite narrative and storytelling as “one of the few human endeavors that is widely spread as a basic aspect of human life and an essential strategy of human expression” (Kim, 2016, p. 7). In particular, researchers across disciplines such as psychology (Josselson, 2011; Leiblich et al., 1998), sociology (Chase, 2016; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), and educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Huber et al., 2013) have emphasized the way in which narrative provides unique avenues into understanding experience and individual meaning making within the context of an individual’s “culture and social world” (Leiblich et al., 1998, p. 9). Finding my way through the prolific narrative scholarly work to determine a particular narrative approach was challenging. Through an iterative process of reflecting on my practice, my particular research query, and the manner I wished to position myself as researcher, this study was primarily guided by the approach to narrative inquiry proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). What spoke to me about their methodological approach, as articulated in their original seminal works (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and further developed in their present-day writings (Caine et al., 2019), is the way in which they explicitly address issues of axiology through the foundational notion of ethical relationality within the narrative inquiry process and their insistence that “stories are not to be treated lightly...[but] must be cared for” (Huber et al., 2013, p. 214). This collaborative and relational method that positions the researcher alongside participants rings true for me in my professional work with students as well as with who I aspire to be as a researcher. Below I review the central tenets of Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach.

Narrative inquiry as Clandinin and Connelly describe it engages in the study of individual experience in context through story as both a “methodology and a phenomenon” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 16). As a methodology, it fundamentally attends to experience, both that of the individual as told through stories as well as those experiences as situated within broader societal narratives (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). In addition to entering research alongside participants *in the midst* of their locally situated experiences, researchers engage *in the midst* of their own experience, continually reflecting on how these experiences past and present, show themselves within the inquiry (Caine et al., 2019). As asserted by Caine et al., “with its relational commitments, narrative inquirers show that it is not the experience of the other that is being studied but their own experience as inquirers in relation with the experiences of participants” (2019, p. 13).

In approaching experience and relationality, narrative inquirers are guided by Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) three ‘commonplaces’, *temporality*, *sociality* and *place*, which they posit as central to understanding experience in narrative inquiry. Deeply informed by Deweyan theoretical conceptualizations of experience as “continuous interaction between human thought and personal, social and material environment” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39), Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define temporality as the continuous nature of experience, influenced by the past and present and informing the future. From an ontological perspective, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) argue, this highlights the inconstancy and interdependent nature of experience and raises the role of the researcher in the process of selection in narrative representation.

The second ‘commonplace’ of narrative inquiry put forward by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) is *sociality*. Sociality acknowledges the equal importance narrative inquiry places on the individual and the context in “which people’s experiences and events are unfolding” (Lessard et

al., 2018, p. 194). The concept of sociality also informs the relational approach with which narrative inquirers come to interact with research participants. As mentioned above narrative inquiry positions the researcher and participant in a collaborative relationship (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), recognizing that as narratives are co-constructed, the researcher also “bring[s] with them a history and worldview” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 14). In attending to *place*, the third commonplace, researchers take interest in the physical locations where participants’ experience takes place (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Physical places within this inquiry included physical and online university classrooms in which participants’ formal learning was situated. This included considerations of classroom layout, technology used for teaching and atmospheric aspects of learning spaces that were noted by participants. The inquirer’s attention to both sociality and place is also guided by Dewey’s (1998) conceptualization of experience as interaction, and thus a focus on situated experience both broadly and locally was also included (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

The nuances of moving between context (place and sociality) and experience in narrative work are taken up in different ways across narrative research and challenge the researcher to consider thoughtfully how to attend to aspects of sociality and place within research design. Zibler et al.’s (2008) discussion of embedded narratives proposes a process of examining texts through a model of contextual levels within narrative work. Through a series of exemplars from their own narrative work, the authors define three contextual levels to consider, the *intersubjective*, relating to the interactional amongst interviewer and interviewee, the *social field*, the way in which the narrator situates their story within a time and social place and *metanarratives*, which are the broader dominant stories potentially embedded within narrators’ tellings. Gubrium and Holstein (2009), in a more ethnographic approach to narrative research,

called for an equal focus on stories as ‘text’ and the environment in which storytelling occurs, weighing the contextual aspects in which the story is told as critical to the research design and analysis. Their articulation of the *narrative environment* is a “reminder to look outside the story itself for traces within the interactional environment that inform the narratives that emerge” (p. 46). Both Zibler et al.’s contextual model for looking within texts and Gubrium and Holstein’s prompting to look outside texts to the narrative environment (both local and organizational), provide helpful articulations of place and sociality to consider within narrative inquiry design.

Through its process of “living and telling, reliving and retelling” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20), of individual experiences in context, narrative inquiry provided a rich opportunity to explore the complex ways in which the formal learning experiences of students who have encountered academic challenge support or fail to support their well-being. In addition, narrative inquiry’s consideration of contextualized story that focuses “not only on individuals’ experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42), provided an opportunity to trouble deficit narratives of academic challenge and attend to issues of institutional adaptation. To elaborate, often the literature on student success and retention is provided in an ‘ahistorized’ and ‘depoliticized’ manner (Harper et al., 2018), emphasizing academic performance deficits, without an articulation of ways in which current systemic issues and “the big stories” within the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 144) of the academy may perpetuate inequities and ultimately impede students’ ability to succeed. That narrative inquiry allows space for both honoring students’ lived experience and the consideration of broader narratives, is something that was essential to the aims of my inquiry, and I entered a narrative inquiry with hopes, as expressed by Huber et al. (2013), of “open[ing] possibilities for

shifting stories” (p. 213). I now turn to a description of the methods for generating field texts throughout the narrative process.

Methods

In adopting Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) reference to data as field texts, I acknowledge as do they, that texts for narrative work “are created” (p. 92) through an interpretive and collaborative process of engagement among researcher, participants and context. Generating field texts for this study involved interviewing participants and engaging with artifacts in the form of publicly available institutional digital content, and my own reflexive journal entries. Approaches for engaging with field texts are described below. Prior to delving into approaches for engaging with field texts, I offer an overview of the research context and the participant sampling and recruitment strategies.

Research Context

The context for this study was a large comprehensive post-secondary institution in Western Canada in which I am employed as a student affairs practitioner. Like other Canadian universities, this university offers students a broad range of student support services that aim to support students’ academic and personal success. Recent efforts to address growing concerns related to student mental health and well-being challenges have been guided by a campus-wide strategy designed to raise awareness of mental health needs, reduce stigma and encourage well-being initiatives both within and outside of the university classroom. The strategy was introduced in 2015 and led to the implementation of several committees including those that focus on proactive and crisis supports programming, teaching and learning initiatives and policy alignment. As a part of the campus community, I am a member of both the implementation committee and the teaching and learning subcommittee.

Alongside and predating mental health initiatives, the university provides an academic support program designed to provide students who would normally be required to withdraw for academic reasons an opportunity to continue their studies. As a collaboratively administered program amongst faculties and student services, students complete a reduced course load and additional academic support seminars facilitated by student affairs staff, myself included. Students who are successful in completing the program and achieving academic success return to pursuing their studies in good academic standing. While the program itself is tangential to this study, it provides important context for the approach to purposeful sampling described below.

In addition, this study is situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Towards the end of the winter 2020 academic term, the university in which this study occurred, along with the vast majority of higher education institutions in Canada, adopted remote learning. Remote learning and various hybrid modalities of course delivery continued throughout the following terms until fall 2022. Thus, while participants' learning experiences occurred prior to the pandemic, their stories also include encounters with post-secondary learning during the period of rapid transition to remote learning.

Participant Sampling and Recruitment

In seeking to understand students' experiences of academic challenge and well-being within teaching and learning contexts, this research employed purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2020) aimed at engaging five participants who have had experience with the phenomenon of academic challenge within a university context. In particular, I employed homogenous sampling as defined by Cresswell and Guetterman (2019) to invite a sub-group of students who had experienced a potential academic dismissal at the identified institution and who were currently continuing their studies in good standing. This sampling approach is in part to address the dearth

of research involving students who faced the possibility of being required to leave post-secondary studies due to issues of academic performance as discussed in earlier chapters. In addition, drawing upon my own professional experience supporting students who have been at-risk of being required to withdraw as well as my examination of relevant literature, I felt that entering a research relationship with students who have this direct experience offered the potential to provide a rich understanding of the aspects of learning environments that support or hinder well-being. From a practical perspective, the sample of participants included only students who were continuing their studies. While this presents potential limitations to the study described elsewhere, the convenience of locating potential participants necessitated engaging with current students of the institution, rather than those who are no longer accessible for outreach due to discontinuing their relationship with the university. Lastly, I also chose to invite only those students who were in good standing within the program. Although this also raises potential limitations for the study, from an ethical standpoint, both professionally and as a researcher, it was important that this inquiry did not place undue burdens on students who were in the midst of academic challenge.

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted via email invitations to students who had successfully completed the academic support program delivered by the university described above. Email invitations were distributed via the program coordinator and instructed interested students to contact me as the researcher by email. In order to avoid concerns of coercion regarding participation, students were notified within recruitment messaging that their decision to participate or not participate would not impact their access or use of any academic support services within the unit in which the program was administered. Students who expressed interest

were provided by email with an informed consent form approved through the university's ethics board as well as an opportunity to have a discussion with me to review the informed consent form and address any potential questions or concerns that could arise related to participating. For those students who agreed to take part in the research, interview dates and times were negotiated based on convenience and availability of participants' as well as the projected timeline of the research project.

Field Texts

Interviews

Given the aim of this research was to understand participants' multi-faceted formal learning experiences in relation to their well-being, qualitative interviewing was the main method used to generate field texts. As a commonly employed method in narrative inquiry methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), qualitative interview designs "provide unique insights into the complex lives of individuals in society" (Kim, 2016, p.157) and are well-suited to questions related to human experience (Brinkmann, 2013). Participants were asked to participate in two interviews occurring approximately three months apart. This time lapse was to facilitate the generation of interim texts based on initial interviews so that they may be shared with participants as part of the secondary interview process and in order to explicitly create space for the collaborative inquiry process. Five out of six participants who completed the first interview also participated in second interviews. One participant chose to leave the study following the first interview due to personal circumstances and their data were removed from the study. Interviews took place either digitally using the institutional video conferencing format (Teams) or in person at a campus location mutually determined by myself and each participant. Drawing on my experience interacting with students as a practitioner in student affairs, I made every effort to first create rapport with interviewees and establish a warm and comfortable

atmosphere throughout each interview (Josselson, 2013). This was particularly important due to the potential for existing power dynamics within the interview/ interviewee relationship (Josselson, 2013) given my professional role, a topic I take up below within the discussion of ethical considerations.

First round interview processes were guided by Brinkmann's (2013) articulation of the four components of semi-structured interviewing in that I, as the researcher, guided the interview *purpose* in relation to the area of inquiry and invited participants to share *descriptions* of experience as lived, (here, Brinkmann employs the phenomenological expression *lifeworld*), engaging in ongoing *interpretation*. Since interviews aimed to be conversational (Clandinin, 2013a) in tone, interpretation also occurred collaboratively within the interview (Brinkmann, 2018). Questions for the first round of interviews were generated from the broader research questions guiding this study, which were informed by a review of the key literature related to post-secondary student well-being, academic persistence and teaching and learning practices. Both initial interview prompts, and follow-up questions aimed to elicit stories relating to academic challenge and well-being in an "experience- near" (Josselson, 2013, p. 47) manner, that is, questions were phrased and posed in ways that were relatable to students' experience as much as possible and limited to broadly interpreted questions that spark discussion. See appendix A for an example of interview questions employed. First round interviews were recorded with each participant's permission, transcribed, and stored securely following the encryption, password protection and related security provisions determined by the institutional ethics board.

As is common practice in narrative inquiry, I engaged participants in secondary interviews. Given narrative inquiry's focus on "relational engagement" (Caine et al., 2019, p. 14) and co-constructed stories, a second interview allowed an opportunity to review "interim texts"

(Caine et al., 2019, p. 9) with participants and ensure that their experience was reflected. The analytic and interpretative process for creating interim texts will be discussed further in the analysis section, however, engaging participants in reviewing interim texts was a key part of the research design. As mentioned above, the related data and interim texts for the one participant who withdrew from the research prior to secondary interviews taking place, was not included in the study. Secondary interviews also allowed for a more fluid, “overlapping and cyclic” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 46) interview process providing an opportunity to revisit stories and themes collaboratively. This also allowed me to return to some questions with participants to gain a more fulsome understanding of their experiences and perspectives. Like initial interviews, secondary interviews were recorded, transcribed, and securely stored to ensure participants’ confidentiality.

Artifacts

In an effort to incorporate considerations of the broader interrelated narratives of well-being and academic performance within the narrative environment (Gubruim & Holstein, 2009), I also generated field texts from digital media located on the institutional website dedicated to mental health initiatives. This included institutional strategy documents, as well as video content, event promotion material and progress updates on the university’s achievements on mental health initiatives. Review of site content took place once prior to interviews, as well as once following initial interviews.

Journal Entries

Lastly, journal entries crafted throughout the process of the study were also involved in the generation of field texts. According to Caine et al. (2019), narrative inquirers “engage in processes of self-facing” (p. 13) continuously throughout the inquiry process. Journal entries

focused on critical reflection of my location as researcher and practitioner and strove to identify the assumptions I brought to the research process. Given my professional role and proximity to working with students, who may on the surface, have had similar experiences to students I have encountered, journaling throughout the inquiry served as a method for identifying the ways in which the participants in my imagination might “shape the inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013a, p. 43). Thus, in part, journal entries functioned as a formalized mode of ongoing self-inquiry to support the trustworthiness of the study as discussed below.

In addition, journal entries formed field texts that documented my experience as a researcher. Locating my experience within the inquiry is foundational to the way in which Clandinin and Connelly define narrative inquiry; emphasizing that the researcher begins with their own stories of experience and continues to engage with experience throughout the process (Clandinin, 2013a). While these stories of experience did not play a role within the final research texts, they are integral to a relational inquiry (Clandinin, 2013b). Thus, reflexive journaling occurred regularly and in an on-going fashion to record my own reflections, experience, and assumptions as they shaped and were shaped by the relational work of narrative inquiry.

Analysis of Field Texts

In approaching the design for analysis of field texts (interview transcriptions, artifacts, and journal entries), I drew first on Polkinghorne’s (1995) distinction regarding the *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis*. Polkinghorne defines *analysis of narratives* as the categorical processes commonly found in qualitative research, such as parsing storied data to identify themes or commonalities. *Narrative analysis* is distinguished by Polkinghorne as the synthesizing activity of crafting holistic narratives from research texts. These researcher-crafted stories serve to unify disparate details across a sequenced plot in such a way that it “provide[s] the reader with

insight and understanding” (p. 20). While Kim (2016) has argued that broadly speaking narrative analysis is now generally considered to involve both of these approaches, and others (McCormack, 2004) have emphasized that the practice of restorying common in narrative work incorporates both *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*, I found the distinction helpful in illuminating what many consider an important feature of narrative work and that is its continual return to the “dynamic whole” (Josselson, 2011, p. 227). Important to my analytic strategy was the notion of attending to and maintaining a continued focus on the wholeness of students’ experiences as an interpretive space to understand the interrelated elements of academic challenge and well-being and their interplay with the university classroom context.

Thus, the notion of attending to the whole story, drew me to a process that was somewhat akin to Polkinghorne’s definition of narrative analysis, and that is narrative inquiry’s holistic analytic process of “restorying” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 9), through the “iterative movements from field, to field texts, to interim and final research texts” (Caine et al., 2019, p. 9). In analyzing interview transcripts, I applied the three-dimensional space method proposed by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002). In Creswell’s framework (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000), research texts are analyzed to identify elements of *sociality*, termed *personal* and *social interactions*, as well as plotted to chart past, present and future experiences. Lastly, elements of *place*, termed *situation* are identified. These elements, as derived from participants’ transcriptions, were used to create a narrative, a retelling of the narrative experiences shared in a unified whole. In the iterative process of analyzing field texts through a three-dimensional lens, field texts were restoried to create interim research texts. During this process the researcher may also periodically step back “from the actual transcript...[and ask] “what it means” and what its “social significance” is (Ollerenshaw &

Cresswell, p. 342). This process guided the analysis for each participant's transcript. I took care to consider elements of context (*sociality* and *place*) at the three levels of context (*intersubjective, social field, metanarrative*) proposed by Zibler et al.'s (2008) model described above. I engaged with journaling throughout the restorying process in order to identify assumptions and challenge my interpretations as they emerged. Individual interim stories were also analyzed internally for *linkages* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), that is, the ways in which narrators connect distinct experiences over time within particular contexts to make meaning.

Once interim texts were refined in collaboration with participants during secondary interviews, I engaged in a thematic analysis to interpret themes across students' narratives of experience. Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative six step reflexive thematic analysis process involving the generating of initial codes and gradual movement toward defined themes. I completed the first step of familiarizing myself with the data and generating initial codes within each student story and prior to second interviews. This provided me with the opportunity to enter into exploratory conversations with participants regarding their perspectives on prospective themes as I was interpreting them, which ultimately supported further analysis phases. These first two stages of thematic analysis were then repeated following the transcription of second interviews. In interpreting themes, I returned to field texts individually and across texts iteratively. Identified themes were then considered within the context of the academic challenge and well-being literature and through the lens of the theoretical framework of the study.

Lastly, looking outside interview texts to identify elements of the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), I also conducted a thematic analysis across the field texts generated from digital material on the institution's mental health strategy website. Specifically digital

material included the online institutional mental health strategy, the main website page for the institutional campus strategy and the most recent webpage sharing strategy updates accessible from the main webpage. Text, images, and videos were included. Overall, analysis of institutional artefacts was again guided by the six-stage process for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Given that artifacts included both video and images, I sought to augment my thematic analysis process by consulting thematic analysis research inclusive of non-textual data. For video content, as with Braun and Carruthers' (2020) approach to vlog data, videos were transcribed, along with notations of broad visual features, and analysis focused primarily on textual content. Further, in considering visual images, I was informed by Trombeta and Cox's (2022) proposed framework for bridging visual content with thematic analysis guided by their four reflective questions they propose to inquire how images present corresponding or contrasting information to textual content.

Trustworthiness

In this section I provide an overview of the way in which I aimed to address issues of validity within my research design. While scholarly discussion relating to the issue of validity in qualitative research has been somewhat contentious, Lincoln and Guba (1989) have frequently been recognized as key contributors for reimagining traditional positivist notions of validity in ways that attempt to speak to the aims of qualitative work (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In shifting the discussion of validity to that of trustworthiness, they proposed *credibility*, *dependability*, *confirmability*, and *transferability* as parallel constructs to established scientific validity norms. Although several other frameworks have emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018), Lincoln and Guba's framework has been taken up by many in the qualitative domain (Loh, 2013) and therefore in this section, I draw on these four established criteria to discuss how

my study attempted to meet standards of trustworthiness. In addition, I attend to the ways in which my selected methodology shaped issues of trustworthiness and the evaluation of research quality (Creswell & Poth, 2013), and include a consideration of the twelve touchstones that Clandinin and Caine (2013) have proposed for determining quality in narrative inquiry. I begin this section with a description of the twelve touchstones. This is followed by a discussion of the research design in relation to Lincoln and Guba's criteria, interwoven with the broad conceptual areas addressed by the touchstones.

Included in Clandinin and Caine's (2013) twelve touchstones are the methodological and relational constructs considered foundational to excellence in narrative inquiry. The first touchstone, "relational responsibilities" (p. 169), refers to the researcher's responsibility to reflect on issues of "equity and social justice" (p. 169) as they engage in relationships with participants throughout the inquiry. The notion of ethical relationality is also drawn out in several other touchstones, such as touchstone three, "negotiation of relationships" (p. 170), in which researchers are called upon to consider ways to "be helpful" (p. 170) in response to participants' needs. Similarly, in touchstones six and seven, "moving from field to field texts" (p. 172) and "moving from field texts to interim and final research texts" (p. 172), Caine and Clandinin emphasized the relational and negotiated ways in which research texts are generated and reported on by researcher and participants. In touchstone nine "relational response communities" (p. 173), Clandinin and Caine extended the relational nature of narrative inquiry to include the importance of sharing insights and receiving input from trusted colleagues as a method for enhancing the researcher's perspectives.

Also underscored throughout several touchstones, is the importance of researcher reflexivity. In putting forward the practice of "narrative beginnings" (p. 171) (touchstone four)

and “justifications—personal, practical and social” (p. 174) (touchstone ten), Clandinin and Caine encouraged researchers to engage in autobiographical work at the onset of the research and throughout the process to attend to the personal origins of one’s inquiry as well as the “so what?” (p. 174) grounding for the work from practical and social perspectives. Considerations of the practical and social are also related to the importance of the researcher being “attentive to audience” (touchstone eleven) in balancing participants’ viewpoints with the needs of the broader community.

Methodological issues emphasized within the touchstones include ensuring the inquiry “represent[s] narratives of experience in ways that show temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 173) (touchstone eight) and that the researcher incorporates the “social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives” (p. 171) when “negotiating entry to the field” (p. 171) (touchstone five). In addition, in touchstone two, “in the midst” (p. 169) and touchstone twelve “commitment to understanding lives in motion” (p. 175), Clandinin and Caine highlighted the importance of the researcher recognizing that there is never a “final story” (p. 175) and that the telling of the story represents a moment in the lives of the researcher and the participants. Taken together with Lincoln and Guba’s criteria, these twelve touchstones provided a helpful guide to addressing questions regarding the validity and quality of the research. I now turn to a discussion of the trustworthiness of the research design beginning with the construct of *credibility*.

Credibility as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1989) refers to the faithfulness of the portrait crafted by the researcher to the experiences of those involved in the study. Given that qualitative research, particularly research within the constructivist and interpretive paradigms, neither accepts the notion of a single truth nor aims to depict experience as such, Lincoln and Guba contended that a more accurate goal within qualitative research is “establishing the match

between the constructed realities of respondents (or stakeholders) and those realities as represented by the evaluator” (p. 241). They have put forward a number of strategies for establishing credibility which have been taken up by several other methodological scholars (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) including the use of *prolonged engagement*, *member checks*, and *reflexivity*. These will be discussed below within the context of the research design and in relation to the relevant touchstones for evaluating narrative inquiry work (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

Prolonged engagement and member checks are often regarded as key strategies for establishing credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In narrative inquiry, the touchstones that emphasize relationality, guide interview practices and research processes that emphasize negotiated meaning between researcher and participants. In this study I aimed to address the criteria of prolonged engagement through the process of conducting multiple interviews and through a recursive, in-depth engagement with field texts. In place of member checks, the research design addressed issues of credibility by incorporating discussions of interim texts where researcher and participants could collaboratively engage in reformulating stories of experience. This process also strove to meet the spirit of co-composition and negotiation as proposed by Clandinin and Caine’s (2013) relational touchstones.

Engaging in reflexivity with the intention of understanding the way in which “one’s biases, dispositions, and assumptions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 249) may shape the research is also a key component to establishing trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a participant in the narrative inquiry process, engaging in the practice of *narrative beginnings* (touchstone four) supports reflexive practices as does engaging in the touchstone of identifying one’s *personal, practical and social justifications*. Reflective journaling as described above was the

key process with which I engaged in reflexivity including engaging in questions of how my study justifications evolve over time. This involved an iterative, ongoing process of crafting journal entries and revisiting previous writings, throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Dependability in Lincoln and Guba's (1989) definition relates to the transparency the researcher provides regarding any changes that occur in a qualitative study. While recognizing the emergent and fluid processes that take place within qualitative inquiry, they emphasized the importance of documenting and providing rationale for changes to processes. Similarly, *confirmability* addresses the traceability of the researcher's interpretations. In particular, it requires that interpretation processes identify researcher assumptions and provide a clear pathway back to original data from which interpretations are drawn from. Taken together, one of the main strategies suggested to address these aspects of trustworthiness is for the researcher to maintain an "audit trail" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 323). In addition to reflective journaling, I addressed dependability and confirmability through the adoption of a separate log to track the way in which both methodological and analysis processes evolved over the course of the project. Although the twelve touchstones do not take up issues of traceability directly, several of the touchstones articulate researcher moves throughout the process that are helpful in guiding the researchers' audit trail. These include the touchstones discussed above of "moving from field to field text" (p. 172) and from "field texts to interim and final research texts" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 172). In addition, the touchstone whereby researchers review field texts through the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality and place, as I did, helps to enhance the confirmability of the researcher's interpretations by providing multiple perspectives from which to view the data.

Lastly, Guba and Lincoln (1989) put forward *transferability* as the qualitative companion to traditional quantitative research's notion of generalizability. Rather than demonstrating external validity based on the generalizability of research findings to the general population, qualitative researchers aim to “develop descriptive, context-related findings that can be applicable to broader contexts” that have similarities (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 205). Narrative inquiry as discussed above takes a stance that experience is storied *in the midst* and therefore there is an acknowledgement that stories are everchanging. However, the outward facing aspect of transferability aligns with Clandinin and Caine's (2013) touchstones of *attention to audience* as well as their emphasis that quality narrative inquiries have practical and social justifications. To ensure this study was informative to others in my field, I aimed to present “depth and richness” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 205) in my representation of context and participants' experiences within the limits of ensuring anonymity.

Ethical Considerations

Closely aligned to issues of trustworthiness and validity within qualitative research are ethical considerations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry work in particular, as Caine et al. (2019) emphasized and as is demonstrated by Clandinin and Caine's (2013) touchstones, involves moving beyond processes of institutional ethics, to considering how the researcher and participants “negotiate research puzzles in ways that reflect mutual regard, a care for each other as inquirers” (Caine et al., 2019, p. 6). It also involves asking questions at the onset regarding “what a narrative inquiry might look like, who the audience for the work may be, why the inquiry is necessary, and the ways that the stories within the inquiry might act upon participants, researchers, and various audience members” (Caine et al. 2019, p. 7). As previously articulated, my hope for this inquiry was that through the co-composition and sharing of participants' stories

of academic challenge and well-being, new understandings and “possibilities for shifting stories” (Huber et al., 2013, p. 213) could be created, ones that challenge deficit narratives and inspire new teaching and learning practices that promote well-being. However, from an ethical perspective, it is important to acknowledge that raising awareness within the institution or within society does not always result in change (Tuck, 2015). Part of an overriding ethical concern for me with this work was to avoid further marginalizing those students who may have already experienced marginalization. I aspired to address these issues by intentionally working to “revers[e] the gaze” (Patel, 2016, p. 35) to focus on institutional issues within current teaching and learning practices, rather than presenting yet another story of students who have been marginalized. I also hoped to address this ethical concern through engaging with participants in collaborative and respectful ways. Below, I describe the specific strategies I employed to meet both the institutional ethical requirements and the broader ethical responsibilities of narrative inquiry approaches.

As mentioned above, I ensured that students were fully informed of the aims of the research, including the collaborative role they were invited to play prior to the onset of the research. This included managing potential concerns of coercion (as described above) within the recruitment process as well as providing written consent and being available for clarifying questions. My relational responsibilities as a researcher were in some ways driven by my professional experience within a helping role, in that interview conversations would be conversational in nature, empathetic and respectful of participants’ boundaries regarding what they would like to share. As is suggested by Clandinin and Caine’s (2013) touchstones, and within the limits of my professional role, I also “negotiat[ed] ways to be helpful” (p. 170) to participants, which as current students at my institution included helping students with referrals

to staff for advising related issues and academic strategy supports. In addition, I saw three other responsibilities that were primary to exhibiting a caring and ethical approach to my relationship to participants as a researcher. The first was to ensure that I have referral information available and that support was offered in the event that a participant's well-being was impacted through the telling and sharing of personal stories. Secondly, I aimed to intentionally and respectfully engage in negotiating interim texts with participants to ensure I had their continued permission to share elements of their experience within the final representation and that from their perspective what was depicted rang true to their experience. Lastly, I made every effort to protect participants' identity through secure storage of all field texts and in ensuring the removal of identifying elements from participants' experiences within field texts.

Limitations

Limitations within the research design relate to a particular focus of the population which includes students within one institution who are continuing their studies and who are in good standing. While it would be very informative to include students who have left the university given the focus of this study, this was not pursued due to the difficulty of locating and recruiting those participants. A related limitation is that only those students who have previously participated in the identified academic support programming were invited to participate. Since these students had access to curriculum related to navigating academic challenges and their personal well-being, stories told within interviews could have been impacted by this earlier experience. Furthermore, although processes to address my biases as a researcher were incorporated through reflexive journaling practices, I acknowledge that as with all narrative inquiry work, findings capture a moment in time, "in the midst" (Caine et al., 2019, p. 7) of participants' and my own experience and this is what is reflected in the final project. Lastly,

although the intent of the study is to engage participants in co-composition where possible, students' wishes in terms of level of involvement were respected and thus, co-composition occurred to varying degrees.

Delimitations

As expressed above, this study was limited to participants who had experienced a significant academic challenge in the form of facing the potential of being required to withdraw from the institution in order to address a gap identified in the literature. In addition, participants numbers were limited to five in order to facilitate the relational responsibilities of the research and the depth of analysis required by a narrative inquiry methodology.

Summary of Chapter Three

Although further developed through my engagement with the literature on student well-being and persistence in higher education, the impetus for this study was drawn from my professional experiences working alongside students who had encountered academic challenge. In alignment with my practice in which individual students' stories of formal learning are central, I adopted a narrative inquiry methodology in the hopes of working collaboratively with participants to enhance our understanding of teaching and learning approaches that support their well-being.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

In this chapter, I present participants' stories developed through a process of narrative analysis and collaborative re-storying. Drawing on these narratives, I share themes that explore students' unique understandings of well-being and experiences with academic challenge. In the second part of this chapter, I present a thematic analysis across participants' narratives of formal learning and well-being, identifying themes of care and support for their learning, their future selves and found within their assessment experiences. Finally, I present an interpretation of the narrative environment, examining themes of well-being within the university in which students' stories take place.

Well-being and Academic Challenge: Participant Narratives

Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1985) conception of narrative analysis and its emphasis on holistic narratives, along with my own aim in this study to honour and value particular student experiences, this chapter begins with a presentation of participants' stories. Guided by Ollerenshaw and Creswell's (2002) three step narrative process, I crafted the original story drafts following preliminary interviews with participants. With students' input upon reviewing their own stories during our second meetings, narratives were reshaped in ways that rang true to the individuals themselves. By beginning with a holistic story for each participant, I aim to provide a contextualized account of the stories shared 'in the midst' of our interactions and honour the 'dynamic whole' of participants' experiences with academic challenge and well-being. Following each story, I present an analysis of my broader understandings of academic challenge and well-being, developed through a thematic analysis across interview texts. Findings of

thematic analysis demonstrated a significant relationship between participants' well-being and experiences of academic challenge. This relationship will be explored in the context of each participant's narrative through a discussion of the following themes: *personal definitions of well-being, moving from disengagement to re-engagement and finding one's path.*

Karim

I met Karim for our two interviews on campus approximately three months apart. Although I commonly meet with students in my professional role, as my first interviewee, I was somewhat nervous for our meeting and was grateful that during the second interview Karim was willing to respond to a few revised questions as they evolved from my experiences with subsequent interviews. Below is Karim's story, edited during our second meeting.

Karim's story. Karim started his first year of university following two years of high school in a middle eastern country. He shared that, although his family relocated from Canada for his father's work, and he was returning on his own to study, Canada and the city he returned to "was familiar...with all [his] friends". Karim also made a number of new close friendships in first year while living in residence, participating in orientation and studying in an engineering program that involved a lot of group work. He describes these friends as important to his success in first year, especially in attending classes, as he found it motivating to know that they would be there to "hang out and talk about stuff" with after class.

Although he was able to maintain his academics in second year, Karim experienced fewer academic connections with these friends, each of them moving on to different programs which meant they "didn't have the same courses anymore". While he describes having lots of opportunities to meet new friends through collaborative coursework in second year, he found that he just "didn't connect to those friends" in the same way.

As Karim entered his third year, he began to experience some significant challenges engaging in his coursework. He found the "courses were a lot more difficult" and he found the way that some of his professors "just read off the slides" made it challenging for him to follow along. He began to skip the classes where the instruction took this form with a plan of reviewing the slides at home, which upon reflection he admitted quickly led to him falling behind and entering a cycle of procrastination and avoidance fueled by intense stress. He shared:

Like you're sitting there, and you have a 'To Do' list, maybe like 30 different lectures that I could go through and just understand. And maybe I would read the first lecture. I wouldn't really understand that and then I'd realize that I have to...spend another 30-40 hours on this [and] that [I] only had like 2-3 days to get this done. So, I was overwhelmed. It was too much work for me. I'm like, yeah, I can't do this. So, I would go and start watching Netflix or do something else instead. That would be more comfortable because there's just too much pressure on me 'cause I couldn't do [it] all.

Along with his roommate, who as an international student was also living away from family, Karim spent late nights watching movies or going out with friends contributing to "terrible sleeping habits". Although he described other aspects of his well-being such as "eating healthy" and "being active" as "pretty good", the stress of "neglecting his university education" had a significant impact. These feelings of stress were intensified when Karim visited his parents between terms after failing a number of courses in the fall semester of his third year. In recognizing his parents support in providing him the opportunity to study, Karim recalled his feelings of guilt "play[ing] a role in messing up again next semester because ...[he] didn't want to disappoint" them again.

Directly after third year, Karim began an internship which he recalled gave him some distance "from all the horrible experience he had" and a chance to engage in "motivating" work where he "met new friends". Following internship, he returned to a significantly changed learning context, one that was fully online due to Covid. Karim told me that online learning supported his return to academic success in two important ways. First, he was able to take classes while living with his parents abroad, which Karim recalled "helped a lot" as they would "make sure [he] was studying". Secondly, the predominantly open book format of online exams significantly reduced the memorization load, which he realized was a significant contributor to his feelings of overwhelm during exams. Now in the homestretch of his degree, Karim shared that he is looking forward to entering the workforce feeling hopeful and confident that he has acquired a strong skillset that will support his chances of attaining employment.

Academic Challenge and Well-being in Karim's Story. In order to fully appreciate the nuances academic challenge can pose for student well-being, I felt it was important to gain a sense of how each participant described well-being for themselves personally. As evident in Karim's story, his definition included a holistic view of well-being pointing to physical aspects such as sleep and healthy eating as well as emotional aspects which he described as being "mentally at ease". Unique to Karim's definition was his sense of meeting responsibilities as an aspect of well-being, as illustrated when he says, "Well-being to me means...fulfilling your responsibilities, like going to classes, doing household chores...just being active, engaged and doing what you're supposed to do."

His reflection on his own well-being during that time illustrates a definition that is multi-faceted, the meeting of his obligations as a student or a sense of 'academic well-being' as distinct from other aspects of well-being as suggested by his comments below:

I was neglecting my university education, so like that part wasn't well, but other than that I was pretty good. I was having fun with my friends and go[ing] out, socializ[ing], ...and hav[ing] fun.

As demonstrated in Karim's story, as he moved further toward distraction behaviours due to his feelings of overwhelm and stress related to his academic courses, he experienced feelings of guilt for not meeting his responsibilities as a student, feelings that impacted his emotional well-being in ways that he hypothesizes affected his ability to succeed in the following term.

Karim's intense emotions brought about by significant academic challenge, set him toward a path of disengagement, which in turn posed further risks to his well-being. For example, his overwhelm led him to "seek comfort" in other activities, fostering academic disengagement such as avoiding studying for tests, which in turn led to choices that he admitted exacerbated the difficulties he was experiencing with academic well-being. He described below:

I remember I deferred one midterm, so I was supposed to write an 80% final, but I didn't even study for that final either because I was overwhelmed...I think that I, I shouldn't have done that. Reflecting back on that one. That's very...it was dangerous.

While Karim maintained strong social connections, he experienced a disengagement with those friends with whom he connected with in first year that supported his academic well-being. This disengagement was brought about by his program's transition in second year, which dispersed students from core programming to distinct areas of study. Maintaining the support he gained from his learning community of academically engaged peers, Karim reflected "would have made a bigger difference."

Also illustrated in Karim’s story, is the way in which his experience with his internship supported his re-engagement with his academics by fostering in him a sense of purpose within his academic experiences. In selecting his area of study, Karim shared with me that although he “didn’t know what else to do”, he had been confident that engineering would provide “the broadest career option” for him, allowing him to pursue a variety of opportunities. With a parent in engineering, he also felt he would also be supported in his future career. However, although Karim felt committed to his degree path, it was his internship that offered him an opportunity to connect his academic learning to a real-world context, reinforcing a sense of purpose in his learning, as demonstrated in his comments below:

And then when I went on internship and came back and just like realized how the things that I learned in school were being used in the field, that really helped me, just motivate myself to go to classes a lot more.

This applied experience, having reignited, and reaffirmed his path, and the conditions of online and blended learning, helped Karim return to focus on successfully completing this degree.

Max

When Max and I met, he was completing a one-year internship. He agreed to meet me online at the end of his workday. I was grateful for Max’s openness in his storytelling, which began with his first experience of academic challenge in high school. In our second interview, Max and I worked together to add more nuance to his story, swapping out and modifying details to more accurately reflect his experience. Below is the revised story.

Max’s story. Max knew early on that he wanted to pursue engineering in university. He shared that as a kid, he was always “taking toys apart and seeing how things work[ed]” and that his dad also shared this “hands-on” interest. Max’s internal curiosity, his sense that engineering

could provide an opportunity to explore his interests in design and his understanding from exposure to his sister's careers, both engineers, that engineering led to financially viable path, guided his academic goals.

Reflecting on middle school and high school, Max described himself as a student who always got good grades without having "to try very much". Things often "clicked" for him in his classes. His first encounter with academic challenge was with a grade twelve chemistry course, which resulted in a disappointing grade of 60%. Being well-versed on the high averages needed to be accepted into an engineering program, Max decided to "enjoy senior year" with the close-knit group of friends he grew up with in his small hometown and upgrade his courses in the following year. Although his plan to upgrade courses to raise his average resulted in him gaining acceptance to an engineering program the next fall, he recalled the difficulty of managing the surprised responses of acquaintances and relatives who questioned why Max, the "smart kid" had not entered university directly from high school. He recalled these encounters as difficult, reinforcing his internal feelings that he was "not on the path that [he was] supposed to be on". In the summer leading up to university, Max and his peers also experienced the loss of a close friend to cancer. Many of Max's friends were "dispersed" studying in other programs or universities, and "going from a small town" to a less familiar city also had an unsettling impact on him as he began university. In his own words, Max recalled that his "struggles in university basically just started right away". As a student with a physical disability, Max proactively connected with accessibility services prior to his first term and was advised to consider taking a modified course load. However, he instead opted for a full course load after feeling discouraged by an academic advisor who emphasized that by choosing that path, he would "essentially fall behind everyone else". Finding the pace of instruction significantly faster and an environment

that seemed competitive to the point of "toxic", Max's experience failing a couple of early quizzes, quickly led to him feeling isolated from the majority of his peers. He recalled:

It was harder to make friends 'cause everyone would be like 'Well, how did you do on this test or that test? How did you do on that lab?' And when you screw up on a few of them, it's like suddenly no one...wants to like hang out with you 'cause your friend group is your study group right?

Max attributed the competitive social and learning environment in his first year in part a result of the structure of his program, in which students vie to get placed in program specializations in their second year, some of which are regarded as ones that "no one actually chooses", such as Geomatics, the program Max ended up being placed in. The intense focus on high academic achievement also created an environment for Max in which he was "terrified to ask questions" and he questioned whether he belonged as illustrated in the moment in class he described below:

I remember this one time in class, I didn't know how to solve the rest of the example, but I knew what question I had to ask to get the answer and someone else had asked it. So, I was like 'Oh thank God, someone else asked it'. And then, I remember the Prof just like stopped and looked at him with that same look...He was like 'You should know how to do this' and then this girl sitting like kind of behind me was like 'He should just drop out' and then like her friends were like 'Yeah', and that's you know, I mean like that's what it's like and I'm just sitting there thinking like 'Should I, should I drop out'?

During this time, Max recalls a decline in his overall well-being. He stopped doing the things he enjoyed, like making music and playing video games. He remembers feeling "really

angry all the time" to the point that his moods started to affect his relationships with family and his childhood friends.

After failing two courses in fall and feeling essentially "derailed", with the help of the accessibility office, he moved to a four course per term structure in an attempt to "save" himself academically and remain in engineering.

Max describes the next several years of university as a challenging time in which he slowly began to turn his academics around through a combination of "brute force" and "small wins". He began studying with a group of peers who were also "all struggling". Although they helped each other by relying on their individual strengths, (Max's was programming), study sessions often ran late, leaving him driving home to his small town dangerously drowsy. Max recalled those times as "just lonely" and a "little bit scary" causing him to ask himself "why am I even doing this degree if I'm almost dying". During this time, despite increased efforts to study and prepare, he also experienced significant test anxiety, which he describes as a kind of "trauma" from earlier past test performances combined with the pressure of exams worth up to 50% of his grade.

One turning point for Max was making the decision to get a dog. While he admitted upon reflection that taking on such a big responsibility was "high risk, high reward", caring for his dog, "kick started" other positive changes and made late night studying no longer possible. He also recalled his decision to enroll in a music class as another turning point, sharing, "...I think just the teacher's passion and my own passion for music, sort of kick started like 'It's fun to learn. It's cool to get information and not understand it and then understand it'."

He was able to take this positivity toward learning to his other courses, sharing that his attitude towards school began to improve and he engaged in clubs and made more connections with peers in his program. He also began engaging in creating music again and meeting his hometown friends nightly at the gym.

Currently on internship, Max is in the final stretch of his program with only a few more classes to take to complete his degree. He credits his perseverance to the fact that he is "incredibly resilient" and "no stranger" to adversity given his lived experience overcoming the barriers of a disability. Although at times, Max experienced moments in which he questioned his self-worth, he also describes himself as having good "self-awareness", cognizant that there was "life after university", and that his own strengths in communication and creativity, although less emphasized in his program of studies, would serve him well in the future.

Academic Challenge and Well-being in Max's Story. When asked about his personal definitions of well-being, Max emphasized the importance of being engaged in things that he liked to do. Unlike Karim, who described an 'academic well-being' as distinct from other areas of his life, Max's perspective demonstrated a more interconnected view of well-being as suggested by his comments "...I almost felt like I don't deserve to be playing video games right now and my grades were dropping. I should be studying right?" Likewise, changes Max made to support his personal well-being, such as his decision to get a dog, and his return to gym evenings with his friends as he described "changed the tone on things, and I just brought that into school".

In addition to disengaging from activities that he enjoyed and that supported his well-being due to low 'academic well-being', Max's emotional well-being, brought on by his feelings

that he didn't belong, led him to disengage from classmates as well as additional learning opportunities. He shared below:

Uh, so I think along with cutting off students, I stopped sort of taking advantage of those study sessions or office hours. I basically wanted no part of anyone in that building...Cause it's like they were just little things that sorta add up right? And that essentially I just felt like I was dumb and didn't belong there.

As demonstrated in Max's story above, his feelings of low self-worth and exclusion at that time influenced his mood and relationships with those close to him.

Max's re-engagement in formal learning, was spurred on by a number of small things over time including his lifestyle changes, the inspirational music class that reignited learning and his own personal work cultivating a more positive attitude towards his studies and getting involved in student activities in his department. In terms of Max's sense of purpose, again like Karim, Max's well-being challenges were not due to difficulties in finding his path, but more as a result of the potentiality of losing his opportunity to become an engineer due to academic challenges. As described in Max's story and as demonstrated in his words below, this is a concern that begins before Max even enters university. He shared:

Things that stand out to me...is [the] idea of 'this is your path, like how you are going progress through life'. And not doing that. And that sort of crumbles, right? Like your ideal life crumbles.

Fortunately, Max was able to sustain his belief in his ability to succeed in his program by maintaining an awareness of his personal strengths and employing the resiliency skills he had developed prior to university.

Darcy

When Darcy reached out to participate, she shared that her interest in education, influenced by her volunteer experience and her future academic goals, inspired her to participate. This led to conversations during our meetings that were more explicitly about teaching and learning, with Darcy presenting insights on her own learning and broader issues in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education more generally. Our collaboratively revised story is presented below.

Darcy's Story. Darcy entered a university STEM program after receiving a prestigious scholarship for high academic achievement and an extensive volunteer record. Studying STEM in university was a goal she had set very early on, recalling that her father had suggested it to "grade five Darcy". Although she described feeling "a little freaked out" coming to "a completely different city" from her hometown in Northern BC at the age of 17, her transition to first year went fairly smoothly. Darcy attributes this to the foresight of her parents in setting her up in a volunteer role with the university two weeks prior to school starting and a residence placement in a dedicated area for high achieving students in her program. Her living arrangements provided her with a "nice group setting" where students in the same classes "were able to study together". She found this was helpful in offsetting the large class sizes and her impression that many of the first-year instructors seemed as though they "were bored" of the content and did not "want to teach first-year". Along with her peer group, Darcy's first year also included meaningful volunteer opportunities introducing kids to STEM learning which she found "really fun" and which landed her a job the following summer.

As she moved through first year and into second year, she began noticing some increased challenges with exams and mid-terms as she described below:

In second year, I was finding exams took me way too long. Basically, exams were like maybe 2 hours, and I still had maybe half of my exam not completed. I got most of everything that I did right, but I couldn't complete my exam 'cause I had a lot of anxiety. I hated it. We have like at least 500 students in the class, tapping their pencils and things like that. And that just kind of made me pretty anxious and everything like that.

At the end of her first term in second year and after consulting with her parents and accessibility services at her university, Darcy engaged in a psycho-educational assessment resulting in a diagnosis of ADHD and anxiety.

Darcy's second year also included a unique learning opportunity, which she flags as particularly supportive of her well-being. In Darcy's second semester of second year, in place of the large lecture halls with two hundred students or more, she participated in a small, cohort-based learning experience consisting of a "core classroom" with a small number of rotating professors that students got to "know really, really well". Linking content across courses, Darcy engaged in "hands-on learning" and assessment that involved collaborative projects with her peers in place of large-scale exams. She recalls a sense of learning in a community, where she "got to know" her fellow peers and experienced feeling "connected" with her professors.

It was in her third semester directly following the cohort learning experience that in Darcy's words she "did terribly". Moving out of residence to live on her own and taking a medication for her ADHD and anxiety "that wasn't the best for [her]", in combination with the return to traditional lecture-based learning and a growing realization that she "didn't really want to do" her STEM program, Darcy saw her well-being decline significantly along with her grades. In addition to having difficulty going to classes, she describes not "going outside as much" and not "keeping active" and feeling isolated without "a lot of friends". Most prominent for Darcy at

this time was feeling "stuck" in a program of study that no longer matched her career goals as she described below:

What I was studying, I didn't really want to do. I realized pretty early on that I wanted to go into education or psychology and I wanted to work with kids with disabilities. Instead of like, creating technology to help kids with disabilities, I learned from working at summer camps that I want to actually work one on one with a kid with a disability. So figuring out that I wasn't studying the right thing definitely affected my well-being.

Working through the process of improving her academics and her well-being for Darcy involved reconciling for herself and with her parents a path that would not include a career in STEM. She describes feeling "bad for past Darcy...childhood Darcy" and a sense of loss for moving on from a life goal that she had identified with for so long. She felt a sense of letting down the faculty that had given her a "full ride scholarship", feeling that they were "expecting [her] to achieve." Also lingering for her in the background was her feeling that she didn't "want to be the girl who drops out and proves that STEM is...a boy-dominated field".

Although she reached out to university advising staff, she describes the support from her parents as the most meaningful in re-evaluating her path.

We had to do a whole goal setting about what we want to do and I had a whole thing about like how to make my life better, how to make my well-being better compared to the courses so I looked into activities that I want to do. So, I did more volunteering 'cause I love volunteering.

Setting a goal of entering an after-degree program in Education "definitely help[ed] with [her] well-being". In addition, the focus on things in her life beyond school that were meaningful became an important way to foster her well-being.

Academic Challenge and Well-being in Darcy's story. Darcy's definition of well-being was fulsome, inclusive of social components such as connecting with others, as well as remaining active and balancing her nutrition. She emphasized meaningful engagement in school and work, such as "enjoying the courses that you want to do [and] enjoying the work that you want to do" as key to her well-being. As her story illustrates the process of realizing that her chosen path, one that she had carried with her since a child, was not the right path for her, was significantly difficult. In addition, her scholarship, an award connected entirely to her previously chosen path, left Darcy feeling, as depicted in her story, overwhelmingly "stuck" in the process of working towards her newfound sense of purpose. This combined with her initial challenges working through her treatment for ADHD and anxiety, led to an overall period of disengagement both academically and socially. Like Max, Darcy described disengaging from things that she knew supported her social and personal well-being, as a self-imposed consequence of not engaging in her academic well-being. She shared. "Yeah, I kind of felt like if I wasn't doing my schoolwork, I shouldn't...hang with friends or like go out as much". This was exacerbated by the loneliness she experienced living on her own during that period, a stark contrast from her close-knit community in residence.

Darcy also disengaged from asking professors for help during this time, something that she did do in first year, despite her fear of approaching professors. Connecting with professors was encouraged by her parents, who stressed that instructors would not "understand you are a person...unless you actually talk to them". Her reasons for not reaching out to instructors during

the period she was experiencing academic challenge were complex. She described that she didn't want to share that she "was having trouble" because she "wasn't studying" and she worried about the possibility of disappointing her faculty, who granted her the scholarship or the instructors who taught her in the cohort program.

Darcy's re-engagement demonstrates a number of self-initiated help seeking experiences that included advisors, strategists and health professionals. As depicted in her story however, it was regaining her sense of purpose academically with the help of her parents that supported her ability to re-engage. While she described needing to finish her degree a bit "annoying", setting a plan for herself that moved her toward her newfound path, ultimately supported her ability to re-engage in her coursework. Her goals and working with others to plan volunteering and engagement opportunities outside of school, also helped to support her "well-being better compared to the courses" she needed to take to finish her degree.

Connor

Connor and I met online for each of our meetings. Connor's story spans a number of years, and he generously shared a fulsome account of the situational factors that influenced his academic challenge and well-being experiences. Below is the final story, edited following our second meeting.

Connor's story. Connor describes a university path that stretches over twelve years and includes frequent periods of balancing near full-time work alongside carrying close to a full course load each term. Entering university at 18, Connor spent a couple of years at an undergraduate university "trying to figure out what [he] wanted to do", before transferring to a physical sciences degree program at his current university. As the first in his immediate family to attend university, Connor's parents were "supportive", letting him "make [his] own decisions"

regarding what to pursue in university. At the same time, Connor recalls "parental pressure...specifically [from] [his] dad...to work and make money". While Connor considers the academic challenges he encountered the result of a series of factors in his life "coming together" and "building" over time, he reflects on his decision to enter a physical science degree "in hindsight", as something he significantly "regrets". Although he had done well in early courses, he recalls the gradual realization that he "didn't enjoy what [he] was doing" and that there was a growing gap between his skills and his second-year courses. He described, "It was just kind of like walking into the ocean off the beach. You're just walking into deeper and deeper water and then...all of a sudden I was drowning."

These learning experiences were in stark contrast to the social science courses he took as electives, where he consistently performed well. Although he began to develop an interest in a social science degree, in a program of study that he didn't know existed when starting university, having taken several science courses, Connor felt he "was so deep into" his physical science degree, he "had to keep going". While Connor made some initial efforts to improve his conceptual understanding by reaching out to course instructors in his program, he did not always find these interactions helpful, describing some as devoid of "empathy or compassion" altogether. He shared:

If you're a PhD in mathematics, I mean, your understanding of math is so deep, and vast compared to an undergrad or most undergrads, right? They come to you with a relatively simplistic question for them, it's probably going to be like, 'yeah, you don't know what you're doing'...But if you're a person talking to another person you kind of have to show a little bit of empathy, little bit of compassion, you know for the struggles that they may be going through.

He described hitting a period of time in which his well-being was at its lowest, where he "self-destructed", disengaging from school to the point of occasionally skipping final exams. Although Connor always needed to work while studying, over the years his need to work intensified. With an intense work schedule, combined with a relationship that necessitated driving long distances each weekend, Connor recalled "feeling spread too thin" and that his lack of personal connection with his program of study made "even wanting to try...a struggle". Often sleep deprived from an early morning work schedule, Connor continued to experience a decline in his grades.

Although upon reflection, Connor admits that he might have benefited from reaching out for help, he shared that his feelings of "shame" held him back from connecting with anyone, including family and friends. When considering whether things might have been different for him if anyone from the university had reached out with an offer of support, Connor shared:

No, I mean if a professor had taken me aside, I guess and asked if I was doing okay, that would have helped. You know, in courses where you have so many people, you'd probably have to have a personal relationship with the professor for them to do anything like that. And I never did. So, it's not something that you know would have been expected.

A turning point for Connor was when he determined that he had "enough" of his physical science degree and decided to transfer to a discipline in social sciences that he "loves", a decision that "100%" made a difference for his current academic success. In addition to finding the course instructors "approachable" and the course structure less focused on heavily weighted finals worth "50%", Connor's interest in his field of study spurred him to reach out to a professor to explore field opportunities, which led to an assistantship role. He also shared that the

flexibility of studying online and having financial security without work, as a result of the pandemic, were significant contributors to his strong GPA. With only a few courses left to complete in his degree, Connor is building his skills by engaging in a field experience he came across through a relationship he made with a faculty member.

Academic Challenge and Well-being in Connor's story. Connor defined well-being as holistic, emphasizing balance amongst “physical, mental and emotional happiness”. Like Karim, Connor’s descriptions of well-being pointed to a conceptualization of ‘academic well-being’, one that at times he considered distinct from other aspects of well-being, sharing “... well-being, academically speaking, it was going okay for a while until it wasn't. But personally, my well-being was good”.

As illustrated in Connor’s story, what began as trying to find his path academically, led to an initial course of study in physical sciences which resulted in experiences of intense overwhelm and low self-efficacy. This was exacerbated by less positive early interactions when trying to access help as well as situational factors such as an increasing necessity to work to support himself and personal relationships that left little time for school. Like Darcy, Connor also shared similar feelings of being stuck in his initial degree path, which he described as the “sunken cost fallacy”, feeling “so deep into it” he just thought he “had to keep going”. Without the insider knowledge from parents who had attended university or making connections with support staff or course instructors, Connor’s ability to reset his course was a slow process, his period of academic disengagement lasting over several years. He shared his sense of personal responsibility and regret over not taking steps during this time to ask for help:

I knew it was coming and I knew that I did this to myself and that's probably the worst part about it. I should have seen it coming and I just did nothing to stop it...I didn't seek

out help from friends, family, anybody at [the University], nothing. I just didn't do anything.

As evident in Connor's story, his feelings of shame about the academic challenges he encountered contributed to his difficulties to move toward help seeking. Connor's re-engagement in academics ultimately stemmed from his decision to make a change in his degree whereby he could fully engage in learning with a renewed sense of purpose. Also linked to his re-engagement, was the move to online learning and his reprieve from a significant work schedule. These situational factors provided Connor the opportunity to focus on academics and manage his engagement in learning at his own pace.

Luis

Luis was the final participant to join the study. Both of our meetings were held online spread apart by five months. While our second meeting did not lead to significant changes to the story below, a broader discussion of the themes across participants' stories sparked further conversations with Luis about the relationship between his well-being and finding his path in university. This provided me with an enriched understanding of his university experience, which I expand upon following the initial story shared below.

Luis' Story. Now in his fourth year of a STEM degree, Luis described his last four years as a gradual process of finding his "path" in university. He began his degree with a move to Canada from Central America after completing high school in 2018. Living away from family for the first time and managing the personal "responsibilit[ies] of living by [him]self" were new challenges that he admitted he sometimes had trouble managing. Although Luis described his persistent "dream to be a scientist", he instead applied to an Economics degree, his "bare

minimum” effort in high school, resulting in “okay grades” and feedback that he was "not good enough to be a scientist".

He reflects on his "first year [as] kind of confusing”, concluding that his experiences with academic challenge were initially related to a degree that was not "motivat[ing] enough", combined with an overall lack of study habits. Socially, he found that while living in residence, he quickly made connections. He described this process of making friends as something that "went too well" in the sense that he found himself "prioritiz[ing] hanging out" over studying. His initial attempts to engage with instructors about course material left him feeling "a little bit dismissed", which he attributes to cultural differences in interacting with professors. In first term, he recalls all of these circumstances leading to him skipping classes, withdrawing from courses and achieving lower grades. However, he distinguishes his lack of success in first term from his experience of failing Calculus during his second term as he shares below:

I feel like it was the first time where I actually felt challenged, that I was like, ‘I don't understand what's happening in this class’... The first realization...that this wasn't going to be as easy as I thought it was gonna be, basically.

While during the first term, he felt that "there was always that stress about failing classes...But [he] didn't see it as important", his difficulty with calculus left him with feelings of sadness and took him down a path of intense self-study of calculus over the spring term to prove to himself that he could meet the challenge. The fall and winter terms that followed for Luis, with restricted course loads and limited class options, were perhaps the most difficult for his well-being. He described feelings of "hostility" toward the university, as well as not being in "a very good place" and taking things too "personal". These feelings he recalled "affected his

academic performance" leading him to again skip lectures or study his own material rather than course content.

However, his failure in Calculus and subsequent self-study of the subject, also "awoke [his] interest in mathematics", a subject that he now feels has taken him closer to achieving his original "frustrated dream" of pursuing science. He also recalls that the supports he was provided in the year of specialized support, including his chance to change his major, attending weekly seminars with a "friendly" staff member and a senior student in his program, gave him a "second chance" that eventually led to success as he describes below.

And that's when I felt the change. Like I just kind of got in the groove of actually studying and in the rhythm of like, okay, this was expected of me, this is what I have to do, turn in assignments, sometimes, do this and then I got into a groove until now.

As Luis wraps up his 4th year, he has been exploring opportunities to extend his courses and "make the most" of his degree with a future goal of pursuing graduate school.

Academic Challenge and Well-being in Luis' Story. Like Connor, Luis' definition of well-being was also one of "balance", although he stressed a balance between "resting" and "working". His reflections on his well-being during his experiences of academic challenge emphasize a distinction between acting in ways in which he felt 'well' in the moment, from behaviours that supported his well-being long term. He states:

If you see it there, like how I saw it...I thought [my well-being] was really well...but if I saw it thinking about the future, it wasn't ideal because I wasn't working to improve my future, I was just thinking about right now. Like what do I want to do right now instead of 10 years from now.

Unique to Luis' consideration of well-being was a sense of learning how to establish the conditions for one's well-being as he described:

It's not ideal because I had bad grades and I wasn't studying, I wasn't sleeping...I had no schedule. I was just talking to my friends, meeting people, going out...But I feel like for well-being just...for myself in general, I feel like because I learned so much about myself, about my limits, about interaction, I met a lot of good people as well, from that perspective, I feel like it...was a positive.

In Luis' story, he began university academically disengaged, less interested in his role as a student, but focused on social engagement. There is a distinction between choosing disengagement by prioritizing trying new things and connecting socially for Luis and experiencing genuine academic challenge as identified in his story with the Calculus class. This experience as Luis described "affected [his] well-being a lot", causing him at times to doubt his "intelligence" and "abilities." Interestingly, the impact of this experience motivated Luis to engage deeply in the subject of calculus as he shares below:

Nothing else in this world motivates me more than challenge because I know it's not personal, but I took it personal and I was like 'why can people pass this class and not me'. I have all these qualities. I know I can do it.

Luis' launch into independent study, while a re-engagement in academics of sorts, did not lead to re-engagement in his overall university studies immediately as his story depicts. However, it did, begin his journey towards discovering his path in university, something essential to Luis' university experience as he described. "I was a kid that...wanted to come to university not to

study something and then get a job in that, but more than anything to discover my path and I feel that was the main thing”.

When asked for his insights on the connection between finding one’s path in university and well-being, Luis offered this insight:

There's just a lot of pressure because when you graduate, we're expected to do this for the rest of our lives and of course...Imagine I wanted to do physics and I just failed the first physics [course], so then my entire plan for my life is being like thrown away because I'm just not good enough, right? So that definitely will affect your well-being...Sometimes it's really discouraging because it's like they take everything that you want in life, and they just throw it [away].

As Luis’ comments illustrate, and as Max’s experience demonstrates, when academic challenge threatens students’ desired path, there are significant impacts on well-being. As Luis gradually begins to find his path and achieve academic success, he becomes highly engaged in his university learning, even considering as he shares in his story, taking courses beyond his degree to continue his learning.

As evident in the stories above, experiences of academic challenge influenced aspects of participants’ well-being in ways unique to each individual. Taking the stories together, however, enabled me to identify patterns across experiences. Participants for instance, saw their ability to succeed academically as an important component of their overall well-being, thus establishing a sense of ‘academic well-being’ as both distinct and integrated into other aspects of their personal well-being. In addition, embedded within their academic challenge experiences were periods of difficult emotions that challenged their personal well-being and contributed to

disengagement in studying, as well as other aspects of their lives. The experience of wayfinding or finding one's path within participants' stories was significantly connected to their well-being in various ways. Whether students found that their chosen path was under threat due to academic performance or changing interests, or that connections to real world contexts were needed to reinforce their path and sense of purpose, this aspect of participants' well-being represented a significant theme across stories. Lastly, implied throughout participants' stories were connections between aspects of formal learning and their well-being, which I turn now to discuss in the following section.

Well-being and Formal Learning

In seeking to understand the ways in which participants saw aspects of formal learning connected to their well-being, I engaged in a thematic analysis across participant interviews. Here, I attempt to honour participants' unique and nuanced stories while also identifying patterns in their depictions of their formal learning experiences and well-being. In this section, I share three broad themes in relation to participant's well-being: *care for student learning*, *care for student as individual* and *caring assessment practices*. In choosing the language of care, I aim to emphasize participants' 'felt sense' of course instructors' intention to fully support them as learners' and individuals. When asked to identify examples of their formal learning that supported their well-being, participants almost exclusively spoke of conditions that supported them as learners. Although this 'felt sense' was articulated differently across participants, the ways in which students' perceived instructors as engaged in the teaching and relational work that created conditions for them to succeed in their learning and in their future, were connected to their ability to engage meaningfully in the university environment and make progress toward their personal goals. And it is this relationship between meaningful participation and care that

appears to be central to participants' sense of well-being. In care for student learning, participants highlighted teaching behaviours and pedagogical stances where their learning felt genuinely supported, which in turn was helpful to their well-being in numerous ways. In exploring the theme of care for student learning, I share participants' perceptions of instructor efforts to support their understanding of course constructs, as well as instructors' responsiveness and student access to individual learning support. In care for student as individual, I identify elements within students' experiences that they perceived to support their wayfinding and future individual goals. Lastly, in caring assessment practices, I turn to a detailed discussion of the stakes and style of assessment and its influence on participants' well-being. As all participants had experienced university learning before and after the global pandemic, (a period of time in which learning was rapidly transitioned to online), their perspectives are uniquely nuanced, informed by their personal experiences with a wide range of instructional stances and practices including traditional in-person university learning, online and/ or blended instruction. These aspects of formal learning are woven throughout each theme discussed below.

Care for student learning

Within participants' unique stories of academic challenge, they shared moments in which they felt their learning was supported, demonstrating a strong relationship between what some termed 'good teachers' or 'good teaching' and their experiences of well-being. Participants identified various ways in which 'good teachers' demonstrated care for their learning and this was frequently contrasted with teaching stances that did not convey care. Across stories, I highlight the ways in which participants perceived care for their learning via the following themes; course instructors' efforts to support understanding, their responsiveness to learner needs and the opportunities provided for learners to access individual learning support.

Effort to Support Student Learning. In describing those formal learning experiences in which course instructors showed care for their learning, participants pointed to examples in which they perceived instructors made genuine efforts to support their deep understanding of course concepts. In STEM courses, participants shared instances of course instructors who worked through problems alongside students in lectures in an effort to support their understanding. In describing the importance of writing notes “with the professor”, Karim elaborated:

Some professors, they have handwritten notes that they have premade, but when they're teaching lectures, they write them down so you can go and understand... It's a lot...smoother to understand concepts.

This was contrasted with teaching styles in STEM in which course instructors as Darcy described, “just talked the slides” or where time wasn’t taken to fully work through the whole problem, as in Max’s example below:

Oftentimes in school...they just assume that you should know how to do it right...That's going back to the pace. So, they'll solve an example, but they won't go all the way through that example...They'll set it up, and then they'll just kind of like ‘okay, you know how to do the rest, just use XYZ’, right?...But if you're someone like me who doesn't know what that is...like I have an example that's half finished right, and I don't know how to do it.

Rather than appearing to rush through content or read off slides, those course instructors who took time to actively and fully work through course content with students in the lecture, were seen to significantly demonstrate care for learning.

A sense of effort on the part of the instructor to support understanding was also perceived by participants when instructors provided students with access to learning materials following lectures. For instance, Darcy shared her appreciation for instructors who posted their slides along with their additional commentary after lectures, which she felt demonstrated instructors' recognition "that people need [the] lecture after" sharing that in her own experience she "can't do both...write notes as well as look at the slides." Across all participants' stories were also comments about the benefits of increased access to lecture materials during the pandemic. Appreciation for instructors who made the effort to record and post lectures afterwards, thus removing the burden of, in Max's words "frantically writing down everything that you can see", was overwhelmingly expressed as supportive for learning. The opportunity that recorded lectures presented to "pause, rewind...and kind of go at your own pace" as Connor explained, was raised several times. In addition, recorded lectures were also regarded as a demonstration of instructors' understanding that learning might require flexibility, as Karim pointed out when speaking about a current instructor's practice of posting lecture recordings following in-person lectures:

...he did a really good job just uploading lectures. He would record them on his own time. And then, he would publish them, and we would watch on our own time and that, like, if...[a] student had work or something else, it didn't interfere with their schedules, 'cause this was an 8 am class.

As implied in students' individual stories, instructional stances that do or do not exhibit effort to support student understanding can impact well-being in a number of ways. When course instructors make assumptions about students' prior knowledge as in Max's example above, students can question whether they belong, while conversely, sharing lecture materials for

students can promote student well-being by fostering a sense of inclusion, and in Darcy's words demonstrate an effort to be "accommodating for everybody."

Perceptions of lack of effort were also linked to academic disengagement for several participants', which in turn posed a concern for well-being. While participants all shared feelings of personal responsibility for their learning behaviours during the periods they experienced academic challenge, there was a strong connection between their perceived sense of the instructor's care for student learning and disengagement behaviours. For example, Karim began his story by explaining his decision to skip classes (something he regretted in retrospect) after learning from friends that "the professor [was] just gonna read off the slides." Despite his almost complete disengagement during that term, however, he continued to attend one class, because the professor "would explain the concepts well" and "would write good notes." As demonstrated in participants' stories above, academic disengagement had a significant impact on their emotional well-being in the form of stress and overwhelm. The impact of low academic performance as a result of disengagement also further affected participants' emotional well-being.

Responsive Teaching Practices. In addition to efforts to support learner understanding, students also highlighted responsive teaching practices in which instructors demonstrated a willingness to respond to their learning needs within the classroom. This includes creating inviting spaces for students to ask questions and engage in learning. For Luis, question and answer was a key component to demonstrating care for student learning, as he shared in his response to what he perceives as good teaching, "Well, they answer questions. They ask if anyone has questions. They stop in the lecture. It's not just them teaching". In being responsive to students' learning needs, Max highlighted his appreciation for instructors in upper year classes that were "flexible with their lectures", willing to move items they don't cover to future lectures

to “make sure [students] know how to do” or achieve an important outcome within the learning. This he contrasted with lecturers who “don't wanna waste time or they don't want to go over things that they have...already been over” focusing on the fact that “time is ticking on the lecture itself”.

Darcy discussed practices in which lecturers organized instruction in ways that were sensitive to students’ abilities to focus cognitively for long periods. She shared:

He got us to do like little 5-minute breaks where we went into partners and had to answer a question during class...He wasn't just lecturing us the whole time. He wasn't just with the slides, talking and talking and talking and not writing anything down or not using the projector or anything else.

In Darcy’s words, these efforts made her perceive that the instructor “understood...maybe we're getting tired. Like it's an hour and a half long course so, in between...he'll give us like a bit of a 5-minute break”. However, although Darcy’s experience with peer learning activities was viewed as positive to well-being, it is important to note that this was not experienced by all participants. Max shared a moment on his first day of class in which pair work necessitated that he reveal to his partner that he “didn’t get” the answer. This left him feeling as though his peer was questioning “what [he was] doing here?” suggesting that pair activities may also have the potential to pose a risk to students’ sense of belonging.

Another important example of responsiveness expressed by participants was when instructors demonstrated an openness to input from students in relation to instructional practices. When sharing a learning experience that he had found supportive of his well-being, for instance, Karim discussed his appreciation of his instructors’ invitation for input from students when

considering how to support learning during the rapid shifts between in-person and online formats during the pandemic.

Lastly, a perceived sense of ‘care’ for the subject being taught, was also intermingled within comments related to the course instructor’s effort to support understanding and their responsiveness to learners’ needs. Some participants referred to this sense of care as passion, while others simply described it as a felt sense that the instructor likes what they are teaching and is invested in students learning it. Luis’ comments below demonstrate the perceived relationship between care for course subject and student learning.

I feel like knowing and wanting to teach you the subject and wanting to make the students learn. That's important...And, not teaching because you have to teach it and just teaching it because that was the section that was assigned to you.

By contrast, when instructors do not demonstrate care for the course subject, students can perceive this as a lack of interest in student learning as illustrated in Darcy’s explanation of what she observed in many of her first-year classes. “They've taught the same course every single semester, so it just seems like they're bored of it...It just doesn’t seem like they’re enjoying the content”. For Darcy, this leaves her with the felt sense that those instructors “don’t want to do first year...’cause they think it is beneath them”. As Luis and Darcy’s comments demonstrate, care or passion for the course subject appears tightly connected to care for student learning and well-being. For example, when course instructors do not seem to convey care for the subject or for student learning, students can experience challenges with their sense of belonging and acceptance. Darcy shared that her experiences with some course instructors in first year who did not demonstrate care for learning, were perceived personally, making her feel “unwanted” and as

though she was assumed to be a “terrible student”. Upon reflection on how she felt this affected her well-being, she articulates the impact on her emotional well-being below:

Like, I understand that they don't like first years because first years, yeah, we do some cruddy stuff, but, not all of first years are like that... And it makes you kind of feel bad as well... You feel bad for the Prof for thinking that like we're terrible students, even if you aren't?...It just kind of makes you feel like I don't know unwanted as well, I guess.

Responsive teaching practices and care for the course subject, for Darcy and Luis was similarly connected to student well-being in relation to finding one's path. As Luis' description of passionate professors conveys:

Well, I really like when you have passionate professors that really like what they're doing. And especially in first year, that's really important because you have introductory level courses and you have a bunch of students who don't know [what] they're doing with their lives, so, if you have a professor that is really passionate about their subject, they may like inspire some student to study...that subject.

Given the prominent role of wayfinding within students' personal stories of academic challenge and well-being, the connections participants' draw to responsive teaching practices and care for subject to finding their path are noteworthy.

Support for Individual Learners. Lastly, included within the theme of care for learning was the importance of individual learning support from course instructors. When course instructors provided opportunities for students to access individual support and were perceived as compassionate, participants' felt care for their learning. Unfortunately, within interviews the number of positive interactions in participants' experiences were limited. At times, as in

Connor's and Max's stories, less positive exchanges with course instructors early on in their studies remained with them and prevented them from reaching out for support for significant stretches of their degree. In addition, as will be discussed further below, for other participants, notions of professor access and approachability also limited them from seeking out support from instructors.

The importance of course instructors adopting a compassionate stance towards providing individual support was emphasized in Connor's story. Connor describes an experience of seeking feedback for further understanding from an instructor as somewhat dehumanizing.

At a point where I was actually like doing well in math, I remember specifically...I'd never seen it before and I was like 'could you explain this?' and then she basically told me I didn't know how to do calculus. But I had done well in 3 calculus courses prior to taking this class...I just I've never seen this before....Not only was it not helpful like it's...I don't know to me it's just not a human way to interact with another human.

Likewise, Max also emphasized the importance of a "human connection". He shared of one positive interaction, "it was more of a human connection, like when she told me...she didn't have that tone as previous profs had kind of...unknowingly mak[ing] you feel bad... like it was 'I'm sorry, like I'm sorry this is happening to you,' right?"

Positive individual exchanges with course instructors also emphasized interactions that were more personal where instructors focused on a student's individual learning process as Max describes:

You could kind of work through a problem with them and say, like, I understand this section, this is what I'm not understanding. And then they would kind of go backwards

and work through it... just like kind of recognize like a teacher would right like, this student obviously understands this aspect, but maybe need[s] the help in understanding the next.

When course instructors make an additional effort to reach out with care to a student to provide feedback, this has a significant impact as demonstrated below in the experience Luis describes receiving feedback on a test.

I failed the test really bad and then the professor was like in the exam. She was like ‘come talk to me’ and I went and I felt like that, that gave me a perspective on like what I was doing wrong and that really helped. I feel that just that contact with the professor, like they acknowledge you and your name. That just helps so much.

Having the course instructor approach a student to offer support as in Luis’ situation, was an experience that rarely appeared in participants’ stories. However, as he makes clear above, it can be very impactful.

Outreach from a course instructor can also support students in overcoming the challenge of connecting with instructors on their own—something that as Darcy shared is “a little scary”. Courses or programs designed to lesson these barriers and support the accessibility of course instructors for individual students were also noted. At his first institution, Connor stressed how valuable he found an informal “math help room” where professors would be “just sitting at a table and you can just go ask them questions.” He shared that upon transferring to his current institution, he missed this “level of access”. Given Max’s earlier lecture experiences in which he witnessed an atmosphere of derision directed towards those asking questions, he appreciated the private opportunities to speak with instructors afforded to him in the context of

online instruction during the pandemic. He explains below, “the Zoom hours were...you don’t have to be worried about other students like listening to your question or something. You can go into a breakout room”. For some students, like Max, easy and private access, (e.g., through an online platform), made a significant difference in supporting re-engagement with instructors.

Max shared:

I think [the pandemic] also unknowingly I guess saved me in a sense too...So I was turning it around, but then that...helped me kind of come out of my shell too and I wasn’t worried about emailing a professor if I wanted to go into a breakout room and talk about something.

There was a clear sense from some participants that conditions exist regarding who can access individual support from course instructors. Luis described feeling dismissed by his early attempts to connect with instructors feeling that they perceived him as “rude”, which he hypothesized was due to cultural differences. This suggests that those without access to cultural norms for engaging with instructors may be prevented from participating in positive interactions. Being behind on coursework or failing to fulfill student responsibilities, for some participants, also meant that seeking out instructor support was not an option. This assumption was emphasized in Karim’s perceptions of what would have occurred if he reached out to an instructor for support.

If I went to them just before the midterm asking them about questions, they would say stuff like ‘we spent the last 5, 6 weeks working on this stuff, why haven’t [you] caught up and why are you asking these questions now’. You should review all that stuff first...I already knew the answers to most of stuff they were going to say, like they couldn’t help

me. The only thing they could say was review the notes which I was too overwhelmed to do.

Likewise, Darcy felt that during the period of time when she was having difficulty doing coursework due to adjustments to medication, her inability to “do the work” held her back from asking for help. This was complicated by her sense of responsibility to uphold the expectations of success she felt existed for those in her cohort and those who received prestigious scholarships. Darcy also expressed her feeling that course instructors were less interested in providing support in later years of her degree. In Darcy’s story, seeking out feedback from course instructors early in her degree was positive, emphasizing that “in first year, the profs at least understand that...we’re transitioning...from high school [and] we’re still having struggles”. However, by third year, based on a shift in course design to mid-terms and finals rather than assignments, her assumption was that course instructors felt that students “should know the university system”, which was one factor that deterred her from reaching out during her period of academic challenge. Max’s felt sense of course instructors’ impatience for students who have difficulty understanding a concept from high school also deterred him from connecting during office hours.

These insights from participants suggest that students hold various nuanced understandings of how and when they can reach out to course instructors for support which can present barriers to accessing help. For some participants being able to connect with course instructors for individual support provided enormous benefits in a number of areas, including understanding and adjusting one’s approach to learning or clarifying key information to enhance learning. Without access to and / or compassionate experiences with individual support for

learning, students often opt to go without help during periods of academic challenge, thus further impacting their well-being.

Throughout student stories, participants presented a clear sense of the ways in which they perceived course instructors to exhibit care for their learning. Interestingly, participants often pointed to small gestures within pedagogical practices that had great impact, whether that be fully solving a mathematical problem all the way to the end or adding in a small break for questions during a lecture. Also notable in participants' comments, was the importance of interactions in which they felt course instructors made an effort to understand their academic struggles in a compassionate and human manner. Embedded in care for learning for some participants then, is an appreciation for being seen as an individual, which will be elaborated on in the following section.

Care for Individual Student

Beyond demonstrating care for learning, participant stories also demonstrated the important ways their well-being and sense of belonging were supported as individuals. Within these stories are moments in participants' experiences where they felt course instructors, programs or members of the institution interacted with them in ways that demonstrated care for their future selves, engaging in conversations aimed at helping them through individual circumstances of academic challenge or supporting opportunities for their wayfinding or professional development. Although there is some overlap here with care for learning, distinguished in this theme is the focus on the individual in matters outside of learning within the context of a course. In this section, we see stories from students where they felt supported in their future aspirations or experienced a level of care in moving through failure that was meaningful to them in terms of their well-being. Conversely, instances in which this recognition

of individual goals or circumstances was absent is also presented. Although, I extend the lens to include interactions outside of formal learning environments to some extent here, I do so to illuminate the important elements identified within student well-being that pertain to participants' broader university goals, including finding one's path and moving through failure. Further, within some participants' recommendations, they envision these elements as part of an ideal formal learning environment. I begin this section by presenting interactions in student stories related to finding one's path. This is followed by instances in which students shared they were helped through significant moments of academic challenge.

Supporting for Wayfinding and Care for Future Self. Participants' individual stories at the onset of this chapter revealed experiences that supported their wayfinding, that is, moments that moved them closer to identifying a path for themselves or reaffirming an existing one. Further, these moments were strongly connected to their well-being. For example, when asked about positive interactions that he felt supported his well-being, Connor shared a connection he made with a course instructor in one of his social science courses. Now engaged in an area of study that he loves, and consistently succeeding academically, Connor sought out his instructor to learn more about opportunities for fieldwork. He described the interaction:

So, I sat down with one of my professors for a...course that I'm taking and was kind of just asking her about, getting more field experience. So, she actually set up a research assistantship for me...I'm doing that this semester and she also...even though she doesn't really know me all that well, she did a recommendation letter...So that was a...pretty positive interaction I would say.

Implied in his emphasis that the professor does not know him that well, is a slight element of surprise regarding the support he is given. The professor's role in supporting his

future goals, particularly in such a direct way, is rewarding for Connor, given his difficult path to finding his current degree. The notion of being known as an individual and an individual who deserves support and recommendation also comes through in Darcy's story. As a result of her cohort experience, one that Darcy directly associates with her positive well-being, she shares the benefit of smaller classes in which "all the profs knew us." She also emphasizes the way being 'known' provided her with an opportunity to access an instructor for a reference. She says, "I asked [the course instructor] for a letter of reference and she's super happy to give it to me 'cause we...connected with each other".

When these connections to individuals or faculty mentors who are willing to support participants' future selves are absent or difficult to establish as in Luis' case, it can result in frustration. Although Luis felt that support for finding his path "would have been easier" with help from an instructor, but that he "didn't need it", as he begins to pursue research as a next step, he finds the lack of mentorship a significant barrier. Of his experience pursuing opportunities for undergraduate research, a goal he has defined as the next step in his path, he shared:

So, I feel like sometimes...I would start having conversations on email with my professors and then they just stop answering my emails. So that happened. Yes, several times...Well, I mean to avoid that, I started to expect it. And I honestly, sometimes I just emailed profs like truly expecting them not to answer. I feel like it's gotten frustrat[ing] recently because I'm trying to get...into research, and maybe it's because I don't have any good research ideas. That's fine, I understand that...but I'm just trying to get in there.... So, it gets pretty frustrating, but at the same time, I understand like they have a lot of classes. They have students emailing them. They have research. They have this. They

have a bunch of things and sometimes maybe my proposal is not as attractive as I think it is, you know, just from my personal perspective. So, a lot of times I don't try to...put it on them or feel bad about it...A lot of times I know it's not personal.

As Luis' comments illustrate, he has learned "to expect" a lack of response in his experiences connecting with instructors and takes an empathetic position recognizing the busyness of his professors. However, his comments also demonstrate his feeling of exclusion, being kept out of opportunities he had determined as personally meaningful in pursuing his path and he questions the value of his ideas. In particular, in relation to trying to pursue research and failing to get support he says, "you just feel like you're alone". His experience attempting to access research opportunities, emphasizes a particular gap in support, which adds to his frustration. In speaking about applying for undergraduate research roles, he shared, "how am I expected to deliver a perfect research proposal when like every idea I have is just immediately shut down rather than being developed or helped". While undergraduate research opportunities are limited and understandably competitive, the lack of opportunity for mentorship that Luis experiences, can result in feelings of exclusion.

In addition to stories where participants felt supported (or unsupported) as individuals in pursuit of their path, students also expressed how helpful wayfinding could be from course instructors within their formal learning environment or as part of their overall program. Darcy shared her thoughts on this when asked what she felt might better support students' well-being. She talks about one course that engaged students in wayfinding in the form of a goal setting exercise completed in lecture. However, she stresses that she felt it was less useful without an opportunity to dialogue with someone about the process meaningfully. She says:

We never had like a whole conversation...I like doing the goal settings, but I was aware of goal settings from high school, but other people wouldn't find that good unless they actually have a conversation with an advisor or have a conversation with the Prof and say like 'hey how are you doing in that course'?

She goes further to emphasize the importance of these conversations to students' well-being when speaking about connecting with an advisor. She shared:

[The] majority of people will not do it [see an advisor] even though it could...save someone's life...if someone is depressed about having to be in a course, it could potentially save someone's life or it just could save them from having to spend thousands of dollars on a degree that they aren't wanting to do.

Max and Karim's stories emphasize the value they found in participating in internships in reaffirming their paths. As Karim shared in his story above, the value of having an opportunity to apply his learning to a real-world context significantly supported re-engagement in his studies. For Max, being selected as part of a competitive internship process and having a successful year of employment "was a little bit of [a] boost to the confidence", re-enforcing his belief that he would be successful after completing the degree. Darcy also shared her appreciation for the opportunity she had to take field trips in her cohort experience to meet people in her field who were able to find careers in "super different things". For Darcy, who wanted to move out of her STEM field, this was especially encouraging as she was able to see that her degree afforded her different possibilities.

Especially interesting in terms of student belonging and support with wayfinding was Luis' comments regarding what he feels are additional challenges in wayfinding for students

who perceive that school is not designed with them in mind in the following description of his experience:

Most people go into university and they're like I'm gonna be an engineer. I'm gonna be a doctor. I'm gonna be a lawyer. But a lot of people, because we also come from a system in high school that doesn't really apply to us, right, we don't know where our talents fit. We don't know where our abilities can take us, so we just choose anything just to get university out of the way. And then you find out you don't like it, right? I feel like it's not ...because they don't like universities...it's because they haven't ever been given an opportunity to see where the talents can take them and see where the abilities can take them.

Luis emphasized that guidance generally from the university would be helpful in terms of understanding “what is happening with your life [and]...how big the decisions you're making affect your life” as a university student.

Given that finding one's path has such significant implications for participants' well-being, and understanding who they will be, interactions with course instructors or programs that support students in moving toward wayfinding hold a unique importance to their sense of well-being. When participants' felt that there was care for their future self and individual goals, they perceived their environment as more supportive and inclusive of their well-being.

Moving Through Failure. As part of participants' experience during their process of overcoming academic challenge, particularly in the year they entered a specialized academic support program, the support some students received while moving through failure was also perceived as a positive influence on their well-being. Darcy, for instance, described her meeting

with a faculty member about her academic situation as understanding and “accepting” of the fact that students may experience failure. Connor also shared a caring meeting he had with a faculty member as part of his process. He described:

She was like ‘if you are struggling with anything like please let me know. You can email me and we'll talk about it and we'll figure something else out’. And even though she didn't really know me, that was kind of nice.

Karim and Luis highlighted that in their experiences, they found the additional academic support program was helpful to their well-being. In particular, Luis appreciated the facilitator’s “really friendly” manner as well as the peer support included in the program. He shared:

I just feel like the program was helpful. I mean in the moment, probably no one likes going into those courses. Everyone feels like bad, because they failed, but I think in the end when you see it years later, I feel like it was for my well-being.

Max shared the significant contribution of speakers in his program who talked about their own academic failures in creating a sense of relief and hope:

But those kind of speakers who will come out and say, ‘Oh yeah, I messed up. I failed this class...I think that boosts a lot of people. I think there's a lot of people in Engineering that don't do well and they just don't say anything because similar to me they don't want to be called out as an idiot or something.

Opportunities to feel acceptance and support in spite of experiences with failure or participating in settings where failure was normalized played a role in students’ ability to move beyond low academic achievement. Additionally, opportunities for personalized support or meaningful learning activities that moved participants toward identifying and/or achieving their future

individual goals were also consistent with their experiences of well-being. Overall, these interactions and experiences played important roles in helping students manage the difficult emotions that accompany academic challenge and facilitated students in pushing on toward academic success. I now return to a discussion of an aspect in the formal learning environment in which themes of well-being were particularly identified throughout participants' stories of academic challenge. An analysis of assessment experiences, both those that were perceived to support or hinder well-being, are shared below.

Caring Assessment

Throughout stories of formal learning, assessment, the formal measurement of students' academic performance, was frequently mentioned in relation to academic challenge and well-being experiences. I frame this discussion under the lens of 'caring assessment' to emphasize the way in which certain assessment experiences, while not framed explicitly by students in the language of caring or uncaring, were perceived to consider or fail to consider students' emotional well-being, particularly in relation to stress. Aspects of assessment that students perceived as supportive of well-being, contributed to learning in meaningful ways and provided opportunities in which participants' felt they could genuinely demonstrate their performance. Students talked about the way in which the stakes of various assessments and the style of assessment influenced their well-being. Below I explore these two sub-themes. Additionally, with the backdrop of the pandemic, embedded within discussions of stake and style are also the elements of assessment adopted during the transition to online learning that participants highlighted as supportive of their well-being. I begin with a discussion of assessment stakes and student well-being.

Assessment Stakes. It was clear from all participants' that the stakes of assessments had significant effects on their well-being ranging from pressure and anxiety to inability to make

progress toward their individual academic and personal paths. In particular, assessments in the form of exams worth 50% of the final grade of the course, or high stakes tests, were highlighted as most challenging for participants and were not uncommon in each students' experience. Connor's comments below describe the risks he perceives in high stakes testing, while in a physical science program:

Oh, I mean from what I remember, most of my finals were 50%...You know, you could potentially make up a lot of your mark on the final, but even if you did well in the first half you could ruin your entire semester, you know in one day.

Max reiterated this when he described the "pressure going into each test" as "walking on this tight rope that you could slip at any moment". He continues, "Like I could have a really good grade in the class but just bomb the final exam." This level of uncertainty of outcome, combined with the impact on future progression academically, were strongly connected to participants' emotional well-being, at times, as for Max, resulting in extreme test anxiety. Further, the practice of shifting missed mid-term grades to the final exam resulting in an even higher stakes test, as Karim experienced, is also noteworthy here. A lack of flexibility in assessment to support students who are sick or required to be absent, increased the already high stakes of exams, with the potential of putting students' well-being at even greater risk.

When stakes are reduced as in the case of multiple assignments or lower stakes tests, participants shared that they found this supportive of their well-being. Darcy, for example, emphasized the importance of assignments in helping her succeed academically. "Not the best at exams", this allowed her to have greater success in first-year courses and during her cohort experience in which assessment was mainly project-based. For example, she shared "I did fail a midterm in second year and I got an A in the course still... 'cause like the assignments [and] the

finals were fine.” She particularly stressed the difficulty in self-assessing her learning once she hit third year and the majority of the courses just had one mid-term and a final. She describes how the lack of assignments in these courses was a partial contributor to her not accessing help during the time she experienced academic challenge. Likewise, Karim’s comments on smaller tests emphasized their benefits in supporting both well-being *and* self-assessment of learning.

It does have impact on well-being because, there's a lot less pressure on you if you're writing a 10% midterm, which there are three of, then one 30% one. And once you write that first midterm, you get an understanding of what the professor is testing you on, what key points he's looking for and...what his testing habits are and that allows you better prepare for the other midterms. And if you do worse on one of them, you can always like study harder and recover on the other two.

Karim’s comments also point to the benefit of multiple assessments in supporting students’ development of assessment literacy, that is, in learning how to perform on assessments through practice. Karim shared that he felt a shift away from high stakes assessment which he attributed to the influence of the pandemic. He shared:

I really haven't had a course with the 50% final since COVID began so I think that is one positive outcome of COVID. And I hope that continues because if it doesn't, then students would be affected...I like those shorter mid-terms.

It is important to note one other element related to high stakes testing within students’ stories. This was the relationship between high stakes testing and degree progression. Mentioned only by Max and Karim, it nonetheless demonstrated the way in which high stakes testing can further impact students’ well-being and academic progression. As Max shares:

But the issue now is the pressure...You know...you have to do it again...It adds an entire year to the degree, so ...going into a test that's worth 50%, thinking that if I mess this up, that's...Now we're going to year 6 or 7 and in the later years.

Karim also pointed to courses that required a passing of the final exam in order to pass the course as problematic and emotionally discouraging. He shared, “so even if you're like at like a C minus or a C, even with your final grade, but you didn't pass the final, you still fail class and get like a D and that is really harmful as well”. Similarly to Max, Karim points out that this can set one back “at least six months to one year”.

In considering how participants’ stories emphasized assessment in relation to their well-being, it was clear that high stakes testing played a significant role. Students’ appreciation of opportunities to show performance via smaller, less weighted, more frequent assessments was an important theme with their comments directly linking the absence of more frequent, less high stakes assessment to issues of stress, discouragement and at times, overwhelming pressure.

Style of Assessment. Beyond the close relationship stressed by participants between assessment stakes and well-being, nuances regarding the style of assessment were also apparent. These comments ranged from how students were expected to demonstrate their performance to conditions of time and place, particularly in reference to final exams. Again, students did not frame styles of assessment as ‘caring’ or otherwise, explicitly, yet their comments do highlight particular challenges to their well-being as a result of some assessment styles over others. I begin by first discussing participants’ insights on the style of assessment, followed by those regarding time and place. Relationships to student well-being are also discussed throughout.

Demonstrations of Performance. As discussed above, students were commonly expected to demonstrate their performance primarily through exams and mid-terms, with assignments serving as an important buffer, but often appearing as a minor role in their formal learning. Connor's recent experience was an exception. His upper year courses in his social sciences degree focused more on a combination of written exams and academic papers. For some participants' the stress and pressure of assessment stakes was exacerbated by the style of the assessment. Both Karim and Max's stories highlighted assessment styles that focused on heavy memorization of content. For Karim, the time involved in memorizing content in the terms he experienced academic challenge contributed significantly to his feelings of overwhelm. He described a shift for himself both in terms of academic success and personal well-being when retaking those courses during the pandemic in which the predominant exam style moved to open book. He described the difference in his experience below:

So, the questions are a little bit more difficult due to it being open book. But there's a lot more information that you don't have to memorize that just makes it easier... You feel more relaxed because you don't [have to] memorize a lot of stuff... And the courses I took during online university, they were all very memorization heavy so it helped me by not having to memorize them.

He and other participants also questioned the meaningfulness of such performances. Max pointed out that this testing style can interfere with learning, suggesting, "It's not for a student... 'do I understand this'? It's just like 'what's going to be on the test and how can I memorize how to do that type of question'?" Upon returning from his internship, Karim also questioned the purpose of assessments that emphasized memorization, which he deemed "not representative in the real

world". He emphasized that while at work he needed to be able to "apply the knowledge" that he had and that returning to reference material was common practice while on the job.

Lack of meaningful learning can also impact student well-being by causing learner frustration as evident in Connor's recounting of a math assessment in which he felt the questions asked were unnecessarily difficult and not in line with how problems are solved in "real life". He shared his experience taking the test and its immediate and long-term impact on his emotional well-being:

Like you know how to do it, but they give you a ton of things where you have to pull out all of these different type of rules to even get the equation into a spot where you can differentiate it or integrate it, you know...And, it's just so just unnecessary...In real life you just plug that into a program...you're not going to do it by hand, right?...Doing the exam, I was not in a place where I'm fit to do this because I was so mad...the well-being after that test tanked.

Also sharing her thoughts on assessment styles that she felt were meaningful and supported her well-being given her anxiety during exam settings, Darcy shared the project-based learning format she participated in during her cohort semester as an example of an assessment style that was supportive of her well-being. She talked about her appreciation of the "more hands-on experience" this opportunity afforded and highlighted the way in which team project assessment styles are more connected to the real world.

They incorporated all the different courses into this project.... But, instead of having a final exam, they gave us a project to do in a group. Which was nice because in [the field] you're not going to work by yourself. Usually, you're going to work as a team.

It is important to note that perceptions of group style assessments in relation to well-being, however, were decidedly mixed. Connor emphasized the difficulties that often occur with unequal participation from group members in which he experienced instances where a few members were left “carrying the team”. Darcy shared an instance in which she “didn't learn because [her] partner did all the work” illustrating a potential flipside to unequal participation in which one or more students may feel excluded from the learning opportunity. Although Luis recognized that working with others was “necessary” in Science he found group work very “hard” and raised it explicitly as something he found had a negative impact on his well-being.

Max’s experiences working with a group illustrated the impact of what he described as the perceived competition amongst students in relation to how they may interact with each other in group projects. For instance, in courses where his skills were strong, such as programming, he shared “people wanted to be in [his] group or work with [him]”. However, as demonstrated below, in some situations where he needed more time than others to understand concepts, he felt excluded. He shared:

Like if you're like working in a group, right and maybe you just don't understand something...some kids will explain it to you, or like try and help you out, but most of the times it's just you just get cut off and they'll sort of just talk over you and figure it out like they don't have time to teach you what's going on. So, it was a tough place to go to school.

Connor also questioned the influence of the competitive environment in his physical science program on students’ willingness to support each other. He shared, “people in some of those classes would be less inclined to help you if you were struggling. So, like I asked for help a couple times from some people and they just you know, said no basically”.

Connor's comments relate more globally to peer-to-peer learning rather than group assessment and this was an important distinction in participants' narratives. Some students deemed peer learning groups outside of formal learning and assessments to be very important to their well-being. Both Darcy and Karim shared instances in which learning with a supportive group of peers outside of classes, Darcy in her first year and Karim during his internship, was very helpful to their academic success and well-being. This was true for Max as well, when he found a group of peers who pooled their strengths to support each other through classes. It is clear from participant stories, that while working with peers both outside of and within formal learning presents the potential for fostering learning and well-being, a variety of factors are involved that can impact its success. Thus, in relation to group assessments, in particular, participants' narratives point to the complexities involved in introducing such styles of assessment while balancing the learning and well-being needs of individual students.

Returning to memorization styles of assessment, although Luis did not reference memorization explicitly in sharing his challenges with assessments, he did emphasize his overall difficulty with multiple choice assessment styles exemplified in his comments, "...I'm terrible [at] multiple choice. Even in the SAT...mathematical [was] my lowest grade." He also points out that despite his high school friends all achieving higher grades on the SAT for math, he is "the only one that's still studying mathematics in university". Now in later courses within his degree, assessment styles have changed to those that he feels are more conducive to him demonstrating his learning. He says:

They read your proof and they grade your process so you can get grades just for process. From ...writing things down that are relevant to finding the solution so...I feel like a lot of times in mathematics, they're trying to test your critical thinking and the process of

actually getting the solution rather than actually getting the solution, because sometimes getting the solution is really, really hard... So, I feel that that's much more constructive for me.

Given that most of Luis' early courses were multiple choice style assessments, his story provides an example of the way in which an emphasis on one assessment style or skill can create conditions that can potentially limit students' ability to participate. Max raises a similar point related to the types of skills that he felt were valued in assessments in the early part of his engineering degree. As he explains below:

...A lot of these classes are geared towards people who do technical problems in their head very quickly and can memorize things right? For me, I was more of a creative person. I did well in the design classes. I did...well in the ones where we had to build little things and present them. And, I was good at presenting and writing essays about topics and stuff. But, the classes weren't geared towards that, it was just how to do math and how to solve problems.

In both Max and Luis' case, until they got to later courses in their degree in which the skills they exhibit strength in started to become emphasized in the style of assessments, they struggled academically. This can lead to feelings of exclusion as Luis expressed below:

I feel like the way the system is set up, it is made for the majority of people that go to your university right? ...even in high school [or] in the elementary school, I felt like the system was never geared for me, for like people like me...I just feel like I've always been like in an outlier situation, but I always figure it out.

Luis' comments above illustrate, although he brings a self-awareness that he is an "outlier" in the university, he also experienced confidence and a sense of self-efficacy that he can overcome this. Max, too, also is able to retain his confidence in the skills he does excel in, which supported him in maintaining resilience. Both expressed concerns however, for those students who are not able to move forward. As Luis said, below:

I'm more concerned about people that can't really figure it out that they have to like adapt to the system. But like I said, that system is made for the majority of the people, not for like the minority of people that can't really adapt to it.

Max also shared his impression that given the technical emphasis early in the program, "someone who is more creative feels like they are not gonna fit" resulting in, he feels "weed[ing] out a lot of good students who would have made really good engineers." Throughout participants' comments, issues related to assessment styles that focus on one skill over others, such as memorization, presented challenges to students' emotional well-being, increasing stress levels, as in the case of Karim and Darcy, as well as contributing to feelings of exclusion as Max and Luis shared. Lastly, participants raised the connections that they made between what they perceived to be meaningful assessment, assessment that more closely aligned with their perceptions and experiences of the real world. Assessment that is perceived to be meaningful can enhance motivation, while as in Connor's example, when perceived as less meaningful, can lead to frustration and disengagement.

Time and Place. Issues related to the style of assessment in participants' stories also included conditions of time and place in relation to student well-being. Given that participants had the experience of traditional assessments and assessments held online during the pandemic, there were a number of comparisons drawn in terms of which conditions better supported their

well-being. Connor echoed Darcy's depiction of the anxiety of writing exams in a 500-person room, as he described below speaking about his return to in-person exams following the pandemic:

Ah, I would say it's probably the worst during finals when you're trying to navigate through, throngs of people all around...the gym and stuff like that. It's always pretty unpleasant trying to find your seat and...trying to get to class on time...It always just feels like a little bit of added pressure.

Writing an exam from the comfort of one's own home, for Connor was also significant to reducing the stress of exams. He appreciated the flexibility and freedom, such as the opportunity to "listen to music" that online exams provided.

Lastly, in terms of time, a few participants discussed the introduction of the 24-hour exam window during the pandemic as introducing a welcome flexibility. Again, Connor found this most helpful in reducing the stress of exams as he compared the differences between in-person exams and the online 24-window exam:

To be where you need to be exactly on time, you know, do I have time to review? Like should I review, you know...is cramming for the exam a bad idea? Like, am I gonna throw myself off? Versus during the pandemic, you have 24 hours to write an exam. If you're not ready on the day like you can take an extra hour or two for some extra review and you can write it on your own schedule. Like are you a morning person? Are you better in the afternoon or are you a night owl?

Participants' stories demonstrate how innovations in assessment styles and settings introduced during the pandemic offer potential to more caring assessment practices that students perceive as helpful to their well-being.

As participants' stories demonstrate experiences within the context of formal learning can be support well-being when students perceive that instructors make effort to support their learning and offer access to learning opportunities that allow students to engage meaningfully and without risk to their sense of belonging or self-efficacy. Interactions with faculty that are relational and support students' future goals and /or their ability to move through failure are also experienced as supportive of well-being. Lastly, assessment practices play a significant role in student well-being. Care for students' emotional well-being in assessment entails lower assessment risk by providing multiple and various assessment opportunities for students to demonstrate their performance

Institutional Narratives of Well-being and Care

In this final section of study findings, I make an intentional turn to place and the environment in which storytelling occurs (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In order to further contextualize participants' stories, I present a thematic analysis of institutional stories of well-being and care within the university in which their narratives take place. Several years prior to this study, a public institutional strategy designed to support mental health was adopted within the institution. Although the strategy is bound by the overriding concept of 'mental health', well-being is presented as its partner, (e.g., "mental health and well-being") suggesting an inextricable link between the two. Well-being is also referred to within the strategy as a multi-faceted construct of health, as in "physical, social and mental" well-being and of mental health, drawing on Keyes' (2002) articulation of emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Although well-

being is undefined explicitly, the broader use of the term within the strategy, suggests its achievement as a valued and aspirational goal for the university. Admittedly, there are many possible artifacts that could be selected to inform a contextualized understanding of the narrative environment surrounding this study. However, I selected the strategy and its associated webpages as a meaningful complement to participants' stories of well-being given the explicit depiction these artifacts present of the institution's aspirations toward well-being. Through an analysis of three key artifacts; the original strategy document, the public strategy website, and the 2021 progress report, the following three themes were identified: narratives of *risk and performance*, *cultural change*, and *care as a way to well-being*. Each of these themes is explained further below.

Risk and Performance

As the strategy draws from literature on post-secondary mental health and National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data, referenced in Chapters One and Two, there is a sense of student well-being at risk. To elaborate, the strategy indicates that there is an inherent risk to well-being in environments with an intense focus on performance. University environments are depicted as places in which the "stress of being a university student" makes one "vulnerable". Despite the emphasis on performance conditions as a potential risk to student well-being, the minimal focus on formal learning in the original strategy document, discussed in more detail below, is surprising.

Alongside the emphasis on performance within the strategy, is an acknowledgement of the relationship between well-being and environments that facilitate the performance of individuals. The strategy highlights well-being as connected to conditions, which enable members to "realize potential." Thus, while the connection is made between the pressure to

perform and risks to well-being, the strategy also emphasizes enabling environments that support the achievement and performance of individuals as essential for well-being.

Potentially unique to the institutional narrative of this particular university is the depiction of well-being as urgently at risk. This is conveyed through multiple references within the strategy document to a mental health related tragedy experienced by the institution and is again referenced indirectly several years later by a member of senior leadership during a recorded progress report presentation. The strategy as a response to risk provides a potential explanation for the heavy emphasis on the development of resiliency, which will be discussed further below.

Individual, Community and Cultural Change

In addition to pointing to the postsecondary environment as a place that puts well-being at risk, the strategy also foregrounds the educational potential of the university, stressing its role in enabling change through learning for individuals, as a community and a culture in support of well-being aspirations. Individual and community well-being are presented as intricately connected through the strategy's core image, a stylized illustration of a tree composed of unique, individual branches coming together to form a solid and unified trunk. Building the capacity of community and individual is emphasized in the strategy through the heavy focus on the mental health literacy initiatives referenced. Programs and services that provide members of community with skills to manage one's own mental health and support the well-being of others are significantly emphasized within each recommendation. The language on the strategy website categorizing campus supports as 'help for self', 'help for others' and 'building my capacity', further supports the way in which the well-being of individual and community are connected.

Change towards increased resiliency is also heavily emphasized within the strategy's well-being narrative, stressing that mental health "includes the development of resiliency and the ability to overcome challenges". The two lived experiences highlighted on the website also focus on building resilience and the recorded progress event, accessible on the progress update webpage, features an expert speaker on resilience, followed by three panelists sharing their experiences of resilience during the pandemic. Although there are some references to resilience within the institutional narrative as a collective activity, there is a strong theme of change to self with regard to resilience. The student story highlights the risks to well-being within an academic environment as well as the need to develop resilience. The speaker shares "nights of not sleeping" and question whether they are "good enough" as well as identify their "need to change". Likewise, the student stories included within the progress event also place a heavy emphasis on actions that they took to be resilient. Raising awareness of individual lived experiences is identified as an important goal within the institutional strategy and highlighted as a success within the progress report. There is a particular focus within the stories showcased, however, on the individual seeking sustaining activities outside of the university campus, suggesting a primary path to resilience, and well-being is to change oneself.

Juxtaposed with the individual change narrative with respect to resilience is an institutional narrative of well-being as cultural change. The strategy document references the need for an institutional "commitment" to "encourage campus culture" and "align policies and procedures with the vision" of supporting mental health and well-being. Strategy recommendations include a focus on "reducing stigma", ensuring "crisis management" processes and awareness raising through mental health literacy. The strategy sets out a goal of "continuous improvement" and the progress report emphasizes culture shifting as an ongoing "journey". It

shares metrics of campus community members who have received mental health training as well as new structures to support access to mental health. Evidence of progress in cultural change is also measured in the number of institutional policies that have been reviewed through a “mental health lens”.

Despite the emphasis on the connection between learning performance and well-being within the original strategy discussed above, strategy recommendations offer very few references to cultural changes related to formal learning. There is one direct reference to the impact of “curriculum and instructional design” on student well-being within the recommendations. This is followed by a singular suggested action to promote “inclusive curriculum and pedagogy” and integrate mental health literacy within formal learning. Other less direct references to formal learning within recommendations such as “assess[ing] workloads and academic expectations” or creating “respectful, warm and welcoming learning and working environments” appear to be linked to current initiatives offered by student services programming such as academic support workshops or orientation rather than classroom initiatives. The progress report and the latest review of the strategy webpage, however, demonstrate an increased focus on formal learning and well-being. For example, there is one event offered focusing on teaching and learning practices and student well-being. In addition, the recorded progress report features a faculty panelist who speaks specifically to the ways in which the pandemic had increased instructor “flexibility” and offered opportunities to respond to students’ needs to connect with each other or ask instructors questions privately. This suggests a potential link to the pandemic and a greater focus on supporting student well-being in formal learning.

Care as Central to Well-being

Lastly, care as a central component for supporting well-being is a theme demonstrated throughout the institutional narrative. The phrasing - “community of caring” - is presented as a tagline to the strategy and is prominent across all artifacts. Care is featured as a “guiding principle” of the strategy itself and is associated with promoting “well-being” and accompanying “success” of the campus community. Being “responsive” to well-being needs, a key component of care, is also identified as a core principle. The strategy webpage refers to the Institution as a “family” connoting an expectation of a high-level of personal care as one would care for a family member. In the recorded progress event, the initial status report provided by a member of senior leadership emphasizes the “creation of a culture of caring and compassion” as part of work being done by the strategy. Similarly, statements related to cultivating “compassion” and recognizing that “everyone is human” within the same webinar further foregrounds a narrative of care and humanization as part of the institutional story of well-being. Given the influence and references to being in the midst of the pandemic when the event was recorded, there are also common refrains of being “in it together”, including direct references to students and faculty in “reciprocal relationship” with one another.

Reinforcing care for well-being, are references to fostering an inclusive environment in which all are “valued” within the strategy. Recommendations include providing additional supports to international and Indigenous students, suggesting a recognition of the way in which students’ well-being needs may differ depending on their lived experiences. The recorded progress event also highlights the way in which individuals may experience mental health and well-being constructs and supports differently depending on their social location.

Conclusion

Through an examination of participants' narratives of well-being and academic challenge, well-being appears as holistic and multi-faceted and strongly tied to both the pressure to perform and ability to succeed. Themes of risk to well-being, when students experience learning challenges, align with themes identified in the institutional narrative of risk and performance. Across participants' stories, care is linked to perceptions of course instructors' efforts to support learning, exhibit care for the course subject, and promote students' access to learning responsively. As students' individual narratives demonstrate, wayfinding is a key component to personal well-being and compassionate interactions with course instructors can play an important role in supporting students in achieving their academic and personal goals. When this care is absent within formal learning, assessment practices, and /or support for students' future selves, impacts to students' sense of belonging and overall well-being can be significantly impacted.

The focus on care within the institutional narrative of well-being suggests an institutional recognition of the importance of perceptions of care within postsecondary environments to the well-being of individuals who learn and work within them. This story of care as a way to well-being aligns with themes identified within participants' narratives. In my final chapter, I turn to a discussion of these themes and elaborate on findings implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

In pursuing this inquiry, I sought to enhance my understanding of the ways in which formal learning environments might better support the well-being of students who had experienced academic challenge. As a narrative study, collaborating with each participant to share stories that attended to their unique lived experiences was of particular importance. Through the crafting and analysis of the rich and varied stories shared by participants in this study, I sought to address the following research question: *for postsecondary students who have encountered academic challenge, what aspects of their formal learning experiences help or hinder their well-being?* Supporting my inquiry of this primary question were the following sub-questions:

- How do notions of well-being appear in students' stories of formal learning within their experiences of academic challenge?
- What do students' stories tell us about how ethic of care and whole student pedagogical stances are demonstrated by faculty within their teaching and learning approaches?
- How do students perceive learning experiences in which faculty adopt ethic of care or whole student pedagogical stances as contributing to their well-being?

Narrative and thematic analysis pointed to several findings in relation to students' well-being and experiences of academic challenge within formal learning environments. Findings presented in Chapter Four illustrate the way in which the well-being of participants influenced by academic challenge played a significant role in their movement along disengagement and re-engagement pathways and that this was influenced by their sense of life purpose and formal learning

environment. In relation to student well-being and ethics of care and whole student pedagogical stances, my analysis pointed to three broad themes: care for student learning, care for individual student and caring assessment.

In the discussion below, I explore these findings further taking into consideration research drawn upon in Chapter Two as well as additional relevant scholarship. I begin with a discussion of how well-being appears in student stories of academic challenge, further illuminating the relationship between student well-being, academic performance, and life purpose. I then turn to a presentation of findings through an ethics of care lens highlighting salient aspects of student stories in which care was experienced in ways that participants deemed helpful to their well-being and learning. To conclude this chapter, I provide some potential implications for practical applications and future research.

Emotional Well-being and Academic Challenge

Participants' stories of academic challenge offer a rich depiction of the intricate manner in which well-being and academic challenge are tightly intertwined. They both support and provide important context for repeated American College Health Association (ACHA) findings of the high number of students who find their academic work "traumatic or difficult to handle" (American College Health Association, 2019, p.15). Illustrating prominent associations between low emotional well-being and academic challenge in particular, participants' negative emotions, such as overwhelm, anger, loneliness, shame, and fear of failure were frequently seen to decrease their engagement in formal learning. Kahu et al. (2015) described this relationship between emotional well-being and engagement as a process of "spiraling" (p. 488), emotions and academic experiences moving increasingly towards or away from engagement depending on whether they are experienced as positive or negative. In their qualitative study including distance university learners over the age of 24, they concluded:

Also clearly seen are the reciprocal relationships between student, emotions and engagement. Interest and enjoyment influence engagement, leading to positive outcome emotions, and these cycle back to further increase motivation and self-efficacy, which further increase engagement. Similarly, frustration and anxiety can trigger disengagement, leading to poor outcomes and disappointment that reduce motivation and subsequent engagement. (p. 494)

Participants' narratives support both positive emotional academic experiences moving them toward further engagement, as well as negative experiences influencing further disengagement. For example, Connor's frustration and shame with low academic performance resulted in instances where he did not attend finals at all. Alternatively, Max's ability to transfer his positive learning experience in his music class to other courses demonstrates an upward spiral toward continued success and engagement.

Further, this study provides insight into how low affect due to academic difficulties can influence other aspects of participants' lives and thus their overall well-being. While Connor, Luis and Karim's perspectives on well-being illustrated a sense of 'academic well-being' distinct from their overall well-being, both Max and Darcy shared experiences of disengagement from other aspects of their lives, often those that they associated with maintaining their overall well-being. In addition, low emotional well-being resulting from academic challenge was tied to participants' social well-being in different ways. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, some participants hid their academic difficulties from those close to them or recalled the way negative emotions such as guilt or anger impacted relationships with their friends or parents. In addition, as Max's story demonstrates, negative emotional experiences about academic

performance can also influence one's engagement with peers in the formal learning environment, particularly in those settings that are academically competitive.

The intensity of negative emotions related to participants' experiences with high stakes testing confirms what Jones et al.'s 2020 study referred to as the "threat of assessment" (p. 3). This was particularly true for those assessments that posed significant risk to students' academic progress if completed unsuccessfully. Negative emotional responses to assessment have been documented extensively (Wass et al., 2020; Falchikov & Boud, 2007; Pekrun et al., 2002). Pekrun et al. (2002) argued that it is important to understand the complexities of negative emotions rather than simply characterizing them as 'bad', contending that both "anxiety and shame can be beneficial" (p. 103) to student learning and performance. This study illustrates that academic failure can in some cases, as in Luis' story, be a strong motivator for learning. However, Luis' experience also demonstrates the way in which difficult emotions due to failure can negatively affect well-being and ongoing academic performance. For example, his anger caused him to study calculus topics outside of the course to the detriment of his academic success. Indeed, Wass et al., 2020 emphasized the importance of reflecting on the role of emotions in assessment as helpful in making assessment choices that are "not detrimental to [students'] learning and well-being" (p. 190). Based on the stories of students in this study, it is clear that the negative emotions they experienced related to assessment failures or fear of failures impacted their learning and well-being significantly in different ways. In addition to low emotional well-being related to Max's test anxiety, as mentioned above, he also experienced low social well-being, his ability to connect with others limited by the way in which grades operated as social currency. For Connor and Darcy, feelings of shame and not meeting the expectations of others respectively, prevented them from making moves towards improving their academic

circumstances, thus impacting their psychological well-being with respect to environmental mastery (Keyes, 2007).

Participant narratives also provide support for Falchikov and Boud's claim that "emotional responses have the power to undermine the validity of assessment processes that apparently have face validity" (2007, p. 144). This aligns with Cox's (2011) findings that fear of failure had a significant impact on students' ability to engage in academic tasks and at times led some students to avoid submitting assessments altogether as a strategy for managing their fear. Recall Karim's reflection, that the guilt he felt from disappointing his parents with a low academic performance in one semester, played a role in his academic achievement in the subsequent semester. Max's perception that the "trauma" of previous failures in assessments impacted his ability to perform in the moment on future assessments is also noteworthy in this regard. These experiences demonstrate the potential cumulative impact of low academic performance and associated low emotional well-being on future academic performance.

The impact of instructors' care for student learning and for the subject of instruction itself on participants' engagement and well-being is also a significant finding in this study. As discussed in Chapter Four, students frequently pointed to behaviours that demonstrated effort to aid their understanding or active engagement in class as supportive to well-being. Instructors' efforts to foster interest, in the way Max's music class reminded him of how much he enjoyed learning, or Darcy's cohort experience engaged her in real world learning, was reinforcing of positive emotional well-being and engagement. Kahu et al. (2015) also identified positive affect resulting from 'interest' as a key to participants' further engagement. Similarly, Hews et al.'s (2022) more recent study involving students' pandemic experiences concluded that it was "the

power of educators showing genuine care for students and enthusiasm for teaching that had the greatest effect on student engagement” (p. 137).

Therefore, as theorized by Beard et al., (2007), this study provides evidence that students’ emotional well-being plays a critical role in learning. It suggests that as whole people, students have emotional responses within and in relation to formal learning environments and that these emotions have powerful ties to their well-being, engagement, and academic achievement. This study suggests that without care for emotional well-being within formal learning environments, students can experience significant impacts to their well-being and delays to their academic progression. It is also important here to highlight participants’ perseverance and ultimate academic success, through their own efforts to cultivate interest and increase their level of engagement as well as the learning environments that supported these efforts which will be discussed further below. The unique perspective of participants’ experiences in this study, that is, overcoming periods of significant academic challenge, both supports and provides additional context to the current literature regarding the mutually influencing nature of well-being and academic challenge. Their stories not only provide critical context for illuminating the cumulative effect on well-being accompanied by ongoing low academic performance, they also offer important insights into formal learning conditions that support processes of re-engagement one of which is establishing purpose. This is discussed further below.

Well-being, Life Purpose, and Academic Challenge

The relationship between a felt sense of purpose in their academic pursuits and participants’ well-being is another key finding of this study. Damon et al. (2003) defined purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). Thus, life purpose is an experience that is goal-oriented and involves engaging over time in a meaningful activity toward

an achievement. Although Damon et al. argued, in defining life purpose, that it need not always be connected to well-being, they surmised that strong connections between a felt sense of moving toward purpose in life and overall well-being are likely. Ryff and Keye (1995) identified purpose in life as one of six key constructs encompassed in psychological well-being. Further studies involving post-secondary students have demonstrated the connection between life purpose and well-being (Hill et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2014, van der Walt, 2019), as well as life purpose and resilience and academic progression (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020). Participants' stories in this study illuminate these quantitative findings, providing insight into how purpose influences academic achievement and well-being in varied ways. As described in Chapter Four, participants entered university at different locations along the path to finding their purpose. Out of all participants, Darcy's story demonstrated movement from a stable sense of purpose when entering university to one that evolves through her volunteer experiences and personal growth. This evolving sense of purpose impacted her well-being as she manages a sense of loss for her former purpose and negotiates feelings of being 'stuck' in her current area of study, which no longer moves her toward life purpose. Conversely, Connor and Luis' journeys toward purpose begin in a much more exploratory way, Connor recognizing that when starting out, he hadn't "given [it] a lot of consideration" and Luis, sharing his explicit goal of finding his "path" in university. All three of their experiences demonstrate challenges in wayfinding that influence periods of academic disengagement and low well-being.

Extending the research on life purpose above is the notion of risk of losing the opportunity to pursue one's purpose and its impact on well-being. Karim and Max both entered university with the goal of becoming engineers and experienced a threat to purpose resulting

from academic challenge, which impacted their well-being directly. Max richly illustrated this with his description of this experience as a sense of his “ideal life crumb[ing].”

Luis’ response to academic challenge through self-study of math demonstrates most clearly what Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma term “awakening of purpose.” (2020, p. 3). They defined this as the “extent to which people are actively engaging in the process of gaining clarity and exploring their purpose in life” (p. 2). Their study involving first-year students found that awakening of purpose was specifically associated with students’ commitment to institution and their choice of study, which in turn, correlated with academic performance.

In exploring further how participants move toward a more stable sense of life purpose, the notion of purpose as contributing to “matters larger than self” encompassed in Damon et al.’s (2003) definition is also suggested. Influenced by her volunteer experiences working with children, Darcy entered university with a pre-existing sense of purpose that included external contributions. As she became more engaged in volunteering in STEM education while in university this purpose became more refined. Her experience and those of other participants suggest that extra-curricular activities connected to academic study, such as volunteering or participating in internships, fieldwork or research seem to support their development of academic purpose as it relates to the world. Karim articulates his perspective on the importance of internships in this regard, sharing that they “allow students [to] understand the engineer and helping people, creating things”. As part of a conscious effort to force himself to engage more deeply in his program of study, Max decided to attend a learning trip with his cohort. In addition to his internship, the trip supports his pathway to greater engagement in his program. Connor and Luis’ stories demonstrate that locating ones’ passion and interest for an area of study, supported their sense of purpose in university and influenced their exploration of opportunities beyond their

courses such as fieldwork and research. Lastly, in Max's second interview, he shared a sense of connection to his program, finding purpose through a newfound informal mentorship role with students in his department who are looking for support with finding internships.

Additionally, participants' narratives point to the value of mentorship and support in determining life purpose. Some students provided evidence of drawing on family members, either those in the same field or those with university experience, in the process of establishing or refining life purpose. Darcy's story provides a clear picture of the important role that family can provide in supporting wayfinding through the goal setting process her parents supported her with, which was key to her academic re-engagement. Connor's story suggests that faculty mentorship in supporting life purpose can also be very impactful when he describes his process of connecting with a professor to pursue fieldwork and lands a research role. McCreary and Miller-Perrin's (2019) study exploring life purpose and faculty mentoring demonstrated both that relationships with faculty supported students' life purpose and that first-year students were less likely to have access to faculty compared to students further in their degrees. They suggested more purposeful approaches from faculty to support first-year students in determining purpose. This recalls Darcy's emphasis on the importance of "conversations" with faculty or advisors that facilitate goal setting. Despite this recommendation, it is essential to acknowledge that there are challenges to providing this type of support in current postsecondary institutional structures and this will be taken up further below. In contrast to Darcy, who was able to access this support from her family, Connor's story and the regret he shares over his time spent in a physical sciences degree, raises awareness of the criticality of these kinds of earlier interactions for students whose parents have not attended university. Although one on one mentoring relationships with faculty were rare in the experiences of students within this study, their

comments demonstrated how conveyed interest in course subject from instructors during formal learning supported their sense of purpose and well-being. This points to the need for further considerations regarding the role that students' formal learning and relationships with course instructors might play in supporting life purpose as a critical component of their well-being.

Findings discussed above demonstrate a number of ways that well-being appears in student stories of academic challenge. Within the unique stories shared by participants, well-being, academic challenge and the ability to engage in academic pursuits are connected in complex and dynamic ways. Reflecting on their experiences through the lens of Keyes' (2002) emotional, social and psychological model of well-being, it is clear that when students encounter significant academic difficulties all aspects of well-being are impacted. Highlighted in this study, however, are the particular impacts on emotional well-being and psychological well-being, in the form of life purpose, and the manner in which they intermingle with academic achievement and engagement. Taken together, these insights provide support for whole student and caring pedagogical approaches inclusive of affective considerations as well as matters concerning students' wayfinding towards personal meaning and life purpose. In the discussion below I turn to a fuller consideration of the insights presented in participants' experiences in relation to notions of care in formal learning environments and well-being.

Ethics of Care, Student Wellbeing and Academic Challenge

To further interpret students' narratives, I employ the lens of ethics of care, and perspectives from more recent scholarship on relational pedagogy. As discussed in Chapter Two, ethics of care emphasizes care for "particular others" (Held, 2006, p. 11) as a moral ethic. Resisting universal, rational moral norms, ethics of care stances value contextualized relationships between the *one caring* and the *cared-for* (Held, 2006). Noddings' (2005) ethics of

care application to educational environments illuminated three aspects of the caring relationship. *Engrossment* involves the *one caring* being fully present in the effort to understand the needs of the one being cared for. This is followed by a stage of *motivational displacement*, necessitating the carer to put aside their own needs and interests to provide care that responds to the “expressed needs” (Noddings, 2012, p. 22) of the individual. The *response* from the *cared-for* resolves the caring engagement, leaving the carer to know that the one receiving care has been supported. Relational pedagogy, emerging out of Noddings and others’ work in ethics of care (Gravett & Winstone, 2022), further explicates the “notion that humans are relational beings, and that education is essentially a relational process” (Aspelin & Eklöf, 2022, p. 3). In the discussion below, I first discuss the findings in relation to how care is perceived by students who have experienced academic challenge in the context of relevant literature. I then turn to a focus on scarcity of care, explicating the ways in which students can experience barriers to accessing care in their formal learning.

Perceptions of Care in Formal Learning

As discussed in Chapter Four, students in this study generally associated instructor care with demonstrated efforts to support their learning or personal goals. As with findings from Guzzardo et al. (2020) and Gravett and Winstone (2022), students particularly valued when instructors knew their names and appeared friendly and approachable. Being known by name in particular was referenced several times. Cooper et al. (2017) found that using names in a large enrollment class (facilitated by the use of tent name cards) increased student perceptions of instructor care and their reported comfort for approaching instructors for help. In the current study, participants also expressed a felt sense of care when instructors showed acceptance of academic challenges and responded relationally and empathetically when offering help.

Although rare in this study, similar to Guzzardo et al.'s (2022) findings, participants appreciated when course instructors did “more than teaching” (p. 51) whether that was providing them with references or offering other opportunities to engage personally in conversation. Students remarked on course instructors’ actions that they felt encouraged connection, such as “being okay” with being called by their first name (Connor) or inviting them to office hours just to “chat” and “have a conversation with an actual person” (Darcy). This aligns with relational pedagogy scholars such as Hickey et al. who advocate for a “reflexive scrutiny of teacher and student practices” (2021, p. 12), particularly in relation to power differentials. Although Connor clearly recognized that course instructors were not “peers”, he appreciated when they made efforts to reduce “the power dynamic” through invitations to address them by their first names, stressing that this made for “easier communication”.

Instructional stances that demonstrated an interest in the subject and made efforts to engage students in lectures were also commonly perceived as a demonstration of caring. This effort to share one’s own interest and nurture it in students was keenly felt by participants. In contrast, the absence of efforts to engage students in relational learning was commented on frequently. As discussed in Chapter Four, when students experienced teaching stances where instructors read off the slides, they perceived this as a lack of interest in not only the subject but also in themselves as learners, impacting their ability to engage and at times causing them to question their sense of belonging or value as in Max and Darcy’s stories respectively. This aligns with Guzzardo et al.’s (2020) findings relating to students’ appreciation of instructors’ attempts to engage. However, participants in this study also made explicit connections between what they perceived as teaching approaches that lacked relational qualities and various impacts on their well-being, such as feeling unwanted, disengaging in learning, or causing them to question their

chosen academic path. The notion of reading off the slides that several students referenced reinforces Hickey et al.'s (2020) observation that in the absence of relational engagement, teaching “risks becoming prescriptive and removed from the immediate concerns of learners” (Hickey et al. 2020, p. 4). On the subject of relational teaching and nurturing interest, Noddings (2004) illuminates the dynamic between teaching relationally and students’ own academic interests:

Recognition of the relational nature of teaching should enhance the experience of both students and teachers. The reactions of students invited into a caring relation often include increased interest in the subject matter (if she is interested, it must be worth exploring); enhanced self-esteem (if she sees something in me, I must be worth something); and concern for others (if she cares about them, perhaps I should too). (vii)

This study also confirms Stanton et al.'s (2016) findings that students do align engaged teaching with their personal well-being. Participants’ experiences further illustrate the nuanced relationship between instructors’ efforts to engage students and their perceptions of being cared for.

As illuminated in Gravett and Winstone’s (2022) study involving undergraduate students, care is also demonstrated through attunement, that is, a focus on being present with students’ expressed needs and an acknowledgment of them as individuals. For instance, they concluded that “students repeatedly positioned themselves as looking for understanding of their distinctness from others” (p. 369) and being acknowledged for their individual needs and circumstances. This attunement to the individual is demonstrated through this study’s participants’ stories of accessing help from instructors, particularly when teachers took time to understand their individual needs and tailored their helping response accordingly.

Conversely, as referenced in Chapter Four, participants also shared stories of encounters with course instructors in which their expressed needs were not responded to or situations where they perceived that the instructor had assumptions about them as individuals that did not match their lived experience. These situations resulted in them feeling less supported as demonstrated by Connor's experience of alienation when seeking Calculus help. For example, when the instructor made the incorrect assumption that Connor was unfamiliar with Calculus, rather than engage responsively with his particular question, Connor perceived this as a lack of care. Asked to share what would have been supportive from course instructors in the early years of his degree, Max shared:

Honestly, if they could just have went back and said 'hey that's fine if you don't remember this little random integral from high school and then just showed me how to do it that would have been enough to jog my memory and like I said, I wasn't in Engineering for no reason...I understood how to do math.

This desired interaction contrasted Max's early observations in lectures where he perceived students being ridiculed when asking for help. It's interesting to consider attunement also from the perspective of students' emotional needs in help seeking encounters. Aspelin and Eklöf's (2022) work in defining relational competence identified the critical role in positive teacher / student relations of supporting face (based on the concept from Goffman); that is the student's sense of value as an individual. Sensing that negative assumptions are being made about their academic abilities, students may experience a sense of losing face leading to negative emotions that can impact the learning relationship. Thus, this study suggests that both attuning to students' expressed needs and avoiding assumptions about individuals' learning experiences are key to supporting caring pedagogical relationships.

Further in relation to attunement, students in this study expressed their appreciation for instructors who both asked for input and listened as reflected when Karim shares below about a professor he described as supportive his well-being:

So, I think this is a prof who really cares about his students...Having a professor who listens and cares about your opinion really shows that he cares a lot. He cares a lot more than just getting the course material done.

As Karim's comments illustrate, asking students for their perspectives and actively listening to those insights is a powerful way for course instructors to demonstrate care.

As Guzzardo et al., 2020 emphasized in the findings of their study, attunement and doing "more than teaching" (p. 51) also involves "thinking through the issues or experiences that students bring up and having a dialogue with them" (p. 54). This raises the continued importance of maintaining a focus on ethics in caring as Held (2006) has emphasized. What does care look like for instance, when a student comes to a course instructor stressed, overwhelmed and unable to sleep, asking for a few more days to prepare for a midterm as in Karim's experience? Caring in this case may require entering into a dialogue to fully understand a student's needs. Caring may also include resisting a "generalised", "rehearsed" response (Gravett & Winstone, 2020, p. 363) such as reallocating mid-term marks to the final exam.

Adding to the limited scholarship on how students perceive care, this study further demonstrates that care is valued in formal learning environments and that students' equally notice its absence. When course instructors cultivate approachability, make efforts to minimize power dynamics, and engage with students in learning, students perceive a sense of care. Further, as with Gravett and Winstone's findings, students feel cared for and supported when instructors

see them as individuals and fully attend within interactions. Relational approaches to teaching and learning provide “pedagogical space” (Guzzardo et al., 2020, p. 48) to consider students both as individuals and as whole beings with various past learning experiences that impact their cognitive and emotional engagement. Taken together with the findings discussed earlier regarding the interrelationship between well-being and academic challenge, this study demonstrates that experiencing caring relationships with course instructors plays a critical role in student well-being and academic success.

Caring Pedagogical Choices

Adopting a philosophy of relational pedagogy also influences teachers’ pedagogical choices...They are also likely to vary teaching methods and resist accepting one best way. The recognition of relation, not a fixed ideal of teaching, steers the teacher’s choice of methods. (Noddings, 2004, xi)

This study also suggests that there is a relationship between perceived pedagogical stances of care and an instructor’s effort to increase access to learning. As Toblin and Behling (2008) pointed out by broadening our focus to incorporate access rather than solely accommodation processes, “we free ourselves to create colleges and universities that truly serve the needs of an increasingly diverse population of learners” (p.1). Participants’ stories highlighted learning conditions that at times limited their access to learn and created difficulty for them to demonstrate their learning. Further, efforts to increase access to learning or create responsive learning environments were connected to their perceived sense of instructor care and personal well-being. As shared within their stories, students with documented disabilities did receive important and necessary accommodations, such as when Darcy and Max received extra time for writing exams. However, across all participants’ stories were significant challenges and

corresponding impacts to well-being that demonstrated challenges with a “one size fits all” (Hickey et al., 2021, p. 1) approach to post-secondary instruction. For example, predominant methods for testing performance (e.g., multiple choice, focus on memorization) or a heavy emphasis on one of many skillsets can delay students’ progress and / or threaten their ability to follow their academic path. Recall both Luis and Max’s experiences in which their ability to succeed early in their program was limited by their program’s focus on technical skills. This was contrasted by an emphasis later in their programs in which skills they felt stronger in, such as critical thinking (Luis) and communication (Max), became increasingly valued.

As Noddings’ (2004) words above demonstrate, teaching in relation with students calls on course instructors to think about the needs of individual students. Hawk and Lyons (2008) also emphasized the need to “recognize that your students do not all learn the same way and provide different approaches to learning in the course” (p. 334). As student stories illustrate, although the pandemic posed challenges for student learning in many ways, it also presented them with new learning modalities that they found supportive to learning and well-being such as recorded lectures, variations in exam structures, greater flexibility with assignment deadlines and opportunities for flexible timing and exam locations. These perspectives are in line with recent studies exploring post-secondary students’ experiences during the pandemic (Lindsay et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2022). As scholars, in sharing their lessons learned from teaching in higher education during the pandemic, have pointed out “potentially, this has been one of the most humanising global shifts in our lifetime, as it has increased our understanding of students (and educators) as humans, each with unique lifeloads, emotions and well-being” (Hews et al., 2022, p. 136). Prominent for me as a researcher and educator in listening to participants was the way in which commonly accepted teaching and learning practices prior to the pandemic impacted their

learning and well-being in such detrimental ways. Practices, such as providing course content in one modality (live lecture), determining 50% of a student's academic performance in a course in one exam or requiring students to make their way through hordes of students to sit an exam in a large and bustling exam room, gave me pause to reflect on the kinds of stress-inducing learning conditions that are commonly viewed as acceptable in higher education. As Darcy pointed out "I don't' think anyone wants to do their exam...with 500 people."

High-stakes exams were deemed particularly problematic. In contrast, smaller assignments or low-stakes testing was viewed as significantly more helpful for both learning and well-being. This was also a predominant theme in Brittany et al.'s (2022) study with undergraduates, with a focus on interviews, which demonstrated that low-stakes testing was beneficial for student mental health. While many students, including participants of this study, do find ways to overcome these challenges in their learning, Covid has provided us with an opportunity for stepping back to consider whether these learning conditions are ideal for anyone. As Gravett et al. (2021) noted in their discussion of relational pedagogy based on their experiences teaching through Covid, there is an opportunity to "push further...to move beyond assessment as something which is considered as primarily cognitive, rational and technical toward a more complex understanding of affective, embodied, and relational processes" (p. 12). The narrative structure of this study adds to our complex understanding of the challenges that formal learning environments adopting 'one best way' present for student learning and well-being. The study also points to examples of the benefits experienced by students when increased access to learning takes place. For instance, Luis' feeling that school is not geared for him due to the predominance of multiple-choice testing, necessitates his engagement in additional bridging work on top of his learning to find pathways to "figure it out" to ensure his belonging and

academic achievement. In contrast, Karim's story is an example that demonstrates the way in which the shift away from exams that emphasized heavy memorization to open book exams, improved his well-being and his ability to engage in academic work significantly. Results suggest that providing students with flexible deadlines, additional ways to access lecture materials, and variation to the ways they demonstrate academic performance shows care. Thus, an important aspect of caring pedagogy as Noddings (2004) and Hawk and Lyons (2008) pointed out and as students' stories in this study illuminate, is considering the variation of needs across the students they are teaching.

Scarcity of Care in Formal Learning

Participants' stories also highlighted a sense of scarcity of care, both in terms of the limited frequency of caring interactions with course instructors throughout their narratives and in their perceptions of limited access to such relationships. Like Gravett and Winstone's (2022) study, students clearly conveyed an understanding of the 'busyness' of instructors and the volume of students to support, and this seemed to influence their views in relation to the types of interactions they could reasonably expect. For example, Luis came to expect a lack of response from course instructors when attempting to connect with them about pursuing research, excusing this absence as instructor busyness. In addition, Connor expressed surprise when he received individual care and support from instructors, expecting that only to be given to students who know instructors personally. The appreciation for and the lack of caring faculty interactions experienced by students in this study, align with Gravett and Winstone's (2022) findings that "students still often experience alienation within the learning environment, and that there exists for many a desire for more authentic connections with others" (p. 360).

In addition, a significant limiting contributor to accessing care was the challenge students experienced approaching instructors. For some participants there was a connection between instructors' pedagogical stance within the classroom and their willingness to approach them during office hours. Although Darcy for instance, confirmed that faculty were helpful if you went to see them, reaching out to those instructors who she perceived as particularly disinterested was significantly more difficult for her. Similarly, the instructional environment in which disdain was demonstrated for some student questions (by peers and / or instructors) created a barrier for Max in reaching out for support of any kind. Conversely, when instructor care and genuine interest in students' learning are perceived by students within classroom teaching, it can reduce barriers to overall engagement including accessing course instructors.

Acknowledging the importance of these relational interactions, particularly in relation to wayfinding, some participants provided suggestions for how to overcome issues of access and approachability. For example, Darcy suggested that course instructors could have meetings with students in smaller groups to facilitate approachability, while at the same time engage students in conversations about academic goals. Darcy also pointed to more emphasis on students accessing advisors, while Karim suggested workshops be offered to students focused on well-being. Both participants also pointed out the challenges of students not being aware and /or not accessing these types of supports outside of formal learning. As Wass et al. (2020) have argued, external campus well-being programs rely on "students self-identifying that they need assistance, which they may or may not be able to do" (p. 190) and that the additional time commitment seeking out and attending such sessions may enhance student stress.

Lastly, and unique to this study, student perceptions of who gets access to personal, caring interactions pointed to potential inequities. As discussed in Chapter Four, Darcy's story

demonstrates that students whose parents have university experiences may learn from them about the importance of engaging in face-to-face encounters with course instructors as a way to ensure achievement. This advice, she shared, played a key role in pushing her to access instructors despite her discomfort in doing so. In contrast, Connor, who shared that his parents had not attended university, perceived personal interactions or being known by an instructor as highly unlikely, particularly when asked if anyone had reached out to him to offer support during the years he was academically struggling. He also shared his view that instructors were much more likely to connect with a student who “is very high performing”. While Connor recognized his own role in not seeking help, he had no expectations of receiving an offer of help from a course instructor at any time. In addition, without parental support in wayfinding, as Darcy experienced, Connor’s process of finding a sense of purpose in university occurred over a much longer period of time. This provides evidence that those students who are first in their family to attend university might require more personalized, caring outreach from course instructors to reduce time spent wayfinding and support academic success and degree progression. There may also be a significant role for proactive offers of caring support from faculty for those students who are struggling academically. Finally, as discussed in Chapter Four, as students became further disengaged, failing to fulfil their responsibilities regarding what they felt was expected of them as a university student, also presented a significant barrier to help seeking from instructors. Recall both Karim and Darcy’s reluctance to ask for help for fear of losing face for not studying, or being told to review content, which at the time, due to challenges to their well-being, they were unable to do.

In comparison to the institutional narrative of well-being discussed in Chapter Four, which stressed the importance of care as central to well-being, the themes of scarcity of care

discussed above present an interesting contrast. Further, some participants identified an institutional narrative counter to care, the narrative of ‘weeding out’. As the expression implies weeding out from students’ perspective refers to a process of distinguishing students based on academic achievement with the goal of ensuring that those with lower academic achievement do not move on beyond their first year of academic study. The matter-of-fact nature in which this metanarrative was shared within the stories of three participants suggests a pervasiveness. Its connotations are interesting to consider from the perspective of belonging and willingness to engage in caring relationships with instructors. If those who do not succeed academically are considered a weed and thus undesirable, to be removed and discarded, this sheds light on the reluctance that some participants expressed reaching out to course instructors while experiencing academic challenge.

The discussion above demonstrates a number of challenges for students in seeking out and establishing caring relationships with course instructors. In addition to recognizing practical barriers in relation to class size and stretched faculty resources, findings suggest that students may also hold underlying beliefs regarding who can access those caring relationships. This highlights the importance of relational pedagogical stances that foster a sense of approachability within formal learning environments and that intentionally extend invitations to students who may be struggling academically.

Linking Well-being to Faculty Pedagogical Stances

This study points to the critical role that faculty pedagogical stances of care for the whole student can play in supporting postsecondary student well-being. Insights from participants’ narratives demonstrate the intertwined nature of academic challenge, well-being and engagement and provide a rich portrait of well-being within the lives of students in relation to their formal

learning. The profound influence of emotions on learning and well-being, offer a unique lens with which to understand the importance of care and the connection participants make between feeling supported in their learning and purpose and the formal environments they perceive as caring. This study adds to the emerging pandemic-focused scholarship that emphasizes the importance of responsive, relational, and caring pedagogical stances in higher education. Participants' narratives, alongside the current literature, highlight relational moves such as referring to students' names, attuning to the whole student, withholding assumptions during interactions, and fostering interest in the course subject as critically meaningful to student well-being. This study also illustrates the individual and varied ways that formal learning environments devoid of care affect students' academic goals and ability to maintain their well-being. The insights provided by each participant's unique story in relation to what they perceived as care and its absence suggest several ways forward.

Implications of this study discussed more fully below include supporting faculty development in understanding learner experiences and an expansion of pedagogical approaches that integrate principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2022). As a precursor to presenting study implications below, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that teaching with care can pose for course instructors in current models of Canadian higher education. These challenges range from large class sizes, traditional assessment norms, intense workloads (Gravett & Winstone, 2021) and/ or academic cultures where the labour of care-based pedagogy largely goes unseen and unrecognized (Brewster et al., 2022). Additionally, as Gravett and Winstone (2021) argue, it is equally important to consider "the responsibilities of students to also actively engage within pedagogical relationships" (p. 369). Therefore, although much of the focus on implications below is in relation to developing faculty capacity for care-based pedagogies,

alongside this discussion is the need to continually reflect on ways care-based pedagogies draw attention to the “tensions and challenges in the broader institutional contexts and neoliberal discourses” (Crawford & Kift, 2019, p. 166). Therefore, I conclude by offering a broader focus on facilitating institutional cultures that foster care for faculty, staff, and students.

Implications for Practice

Supporting Faculty Awareness of Care and Student Experience

Implications of this study include raising faculty awareness of students’ diverse experiences and how caring pedagogical behaviours, such as learning students’ names or asking for student input can have profound impacts. As Gutierrez (2022) has suggested in a recent discussion piece, course instructors are not always aware of the way small behaviours influence students’ well-being, particularly in terms of belonging. Introducing the term ‘imposterization’, Guitierrez highlights actions by which course instructors (or institutional practices) may inadvertently support students’ sense of imposter syndrome, that is, students’ internal doubts regarding their competence and abilities to succeed (Cox, 2022). In addition to participants’ sense of belonging and feelings of self-efficacy, this study provides a number of examples in which course instructors’ ways of being can unknowingly affect students’ ability to engage in learning and maintaining well-being. Enhancing understanding of the broad range of students’ diverse lived experiences, I would argue is foundational to approaching teaching practices with care. Because care-based pedagogies are relational in nature and require interaction in the moment, rather than a set of techniques for demonstrating care (Aspelin & Eklöf, 2022), continual “work on empathizing with them” (Guzzardo et al., 2021, p. 45) and reflecting on “ourselves, our students and our systems” (Chardin & Novak, 2020, p.) are key starting points. As Guzzardo et al. (2021) has suggested, educators “may be unintentionally reproducing the same pedagogies that are most often attuned to the needs of traditional students, and that may

carry over biases” (p. 53). Relational pedagogy includes a process of learning about self and student (Hickey et al., 2021) and requires a continual engagement in learning from interactions (Hickey et al., 2021) and / or professional development opportunities (Guzzardo et al., 2021).

Given the challenge that large classes pose for course instructors to engage individually with students, access to the types of one-on-one interactions that can build deep understanding of diverse student needs are limited. And as demonstrated in this study in relation to a scarcity of care, without increased access to those opportunities and caring pedagogical stances from course instructors, students who may need the most support may feel unable or unworthy to reach out. This suggests that faculty opportunities to build awareness of the needs and experiences of those students who encounter academic challenge may be even further reduced. Considering ways to enhance access to individual student experience is critical. The growing scholarship exploring student perspectives on caring pedagogies that support well-being, particularly in large classes and with students who are beginning their university studies, offers an important source of information. In addition, the insights of post-secondary student services staff whose roles afford them frequent one-on-one opportunities to learn from student stories is another valuable resource. These partners in learning on campus are often the recipients of the nuanced personal learning journeys of individual students. Taken together, these sources of information can augment programs and resources aimed at faculty development. However, finding meaningful ways to distill and engage faculty with such knowledge is also critical. Collaborations between student affairs and teaching and learning staff to develop professional development resources for faculty that highlight students’ varied learning and well-being challenges is one potential way forward. In my own role, this became a primary strategy during the pandemic in which through a coming together of academic support staff, (those receiving student stories), and teaching and

learning staff, (those supporting faculty in complex and dynamic teaching circumstances), we were able to produce responsive and contextualized faculty resources. Translating research into powerful, fulsome student portraits is another method for supporting course instructors' understanding of student experience. For example, Lister et al. (2021) shared a project in which they developed student vignettes based on earlier narratives on student well-being to support awareness. They argued that the vignettes, which included student personas crafted from their research with students, were an engaging way to invite faculty into conversations about ways in which the learning environment could be supportive of student mental health.

Further, several scholars exploring pedagogies of care have suggested the need to engage students directly in dialogue about formal learning. As is demonstrated in this study, students' unique insights are a critical component to enhancing our understanding of the ways in which formal learning environments may or may not support them. This might include incorporating practices in formal learning environments that allow students to anonymously share information that they determine would be relevant for course instructors in supporting their learning (Guzzardo et al., 2021). In addition, regular invitations to students to provide feedback on the course (Hawks & Lyons, 2008), is perceived by students in this study and others as supportive of their well-being (Stanton et al., 2016) and as a strong indication of care. However, adopting feedback practices that help to mitigate the potential challenges that anonymous feedback processes might pose for course instructors' well-being, such as managing extreme, negative comments, is important to consider. Implementing relational and transparent mechanisms for student input can help to support productive and meaningful dialogue between course instructors and students. For example, Hoon et al. (2014) in their study of feedback processes found that structured feedback prompts such as ones which ask students to share what they would like the

instructor to START, STOP and CONTINUE resulted in more productive feedback. Similarly, Brookfield (2015) put forward a regular practice for collecting constructive feedback through an anonymous Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ). This practice of collecting input is embedded within an overall approach to teaching that Brookfield calls being an “authoritative ally” (2015, p. 42). In this role, course instructors cultivate *credibility* and *authenticity* through among other pedagogical moves, *transparency*, *expertise*, and *responsiveness*. Brookfield also emphasized the practice of engaging with the feedback collected in conversation with students in the course, pointing to the importance of establishing feedback processes that are relational.

Lastly, engaging with using a ‘students as partners’ approach has also been suggested as a relational way to grow understanding between faculty and students. Students as partners approaches involve moving beyond inviting their feedback on courses to partner with students to “study and design teaching and learning together” (Cook-Sather, 2014, p.1). The relational emphasis in students as partner designs presents the potential for meaningful engagement opportunities that invite faculty understanding of student perspectives and enhance student empathy for instructors’ perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2018). Institutional support for building faculty awareness of student experience in order to enact relational pedagogy is also essential. As Gravett et al. (2021) point out, there is a need for dialogue and reflection that more broadly enables post-secondary environments to gain “a better understanding of the normalizing practices that obstruct the development of positive relationships” (Pearce & Down, 2011, p.15). This is discussed further below.

Caring Pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning

A second and related implication of this study and other recent studies (Lindsay et al., 2022) is the need for a greater focus on teaching and learning practices that attend to variations

in learning needs within current post-secondary classrooms. Embedded within an ethics of care framework is the notion that teaching and learning environments support individual learners' needs (Hawk & Lyons, 2008). Thus, as a conceptual framework designed with the aim of supporting access to learning environments for all learners (La et al., 2018), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers the potential for systematically moving toward more inclusive learning environments, which in turn support student well-being. Originating from the goals of Universal Design, which emphasize the accessibility of physical environments, UDL aims to create learning conditions which provide students with multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to “ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities” (CAST, 2022, para. 3). Providing multiple means of engagement means considering built-in course structures that support students' interest, motivation, and regulation while multiple representation focusses on providing learning materials in various formats to enhance their accessibility (CASTb, 2022). Lastly, incorporating opportunities for multiple means of expression aims to “differentiate the ways that students can express what they know” (CAST, 2022, para. 4). Although Fovet (2020) points out that a “paucity of literature” (p. 3) exploring the relationship between mental health and the implementation of UDL principles exists, student responses to traditional learning practices as articulated in findings from this and other recent studies (Lindsay, et al., 2022) suggest that further attention to UDL in postsecondary environments has promise.

Results of this study, in particular, point to an urgency to re-consider traditional assessment practices to support student mental health and well-being. The focus on ‘high stakes assessment’ within student stories along with the anxiety it produces and the risks it affords in terms of students' ability to engage meaningfully and make progress in their academic

endeavours, is one area in which course design could benefit significantly from UDL, especially when taken alongside perspectives of care for the whole student. Boud and Falchikov (2007) have pointed out the importance of considering higher education assessment practices focusing on “assessment for learning” (p. 4), rather than solely assessment for “certification” (p. 11). ‘Assessment for learning,’ or formative assessment, emphasizes practices that aim to support the ability for learners to use feedback to improve learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). As evidenced in this study, students found that assessment design that incorporated multiple opportunities to perform either through assignments or smaller, more frequent tests supported their ability to self-regulate their learning and approach academic work with less stress. Although formative assessment discussions are not new in higher education, Leenknecht et al. (2021) pointed out “these approaches to assessment have only been minimally adopted” (p. 236). Findings suggest that students in this study predominantly faced summative assessments, some of which carried substantially significant consequences to their future progression in their degrees.

Challenges to traditional assessment models inspired by discussions aimed at supporting student learning during the pandemic are receiving considerably more attention, whether in the form of calls for introducing formative assessment practices (Lindsay et al., 2022; Hews et al., 2020), assessment choice (Craddock & Mathias, 2008) or in advocating for supporting students with the emotional impacts of feedback on learning (Leighton et al., 2018). In particular, fostering conversations related to academic challenge either through a course instructors’ own experience (Carless & Boud, 2018) or through the experiences of speakers or student mentors, can be critical to helping students manage the emotional well-being impacts of potential or actual performance failure. Despite the slow adoption of UDL principles, the current climate in post-secondary and emergent pedagogies of care conversations following the pandemic (Gravett et al.,

2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2020; Hews et al., 2020), provide a unique opportunity to pursue UDL at the postsecondary level more earnestly. The findings of this study, alongside other recent scholarship on student learning experiences and well-being provide important starting points to inform this work more broadly in higher education.

Additionally, the focus on multiple means of engagement in UDL principles, presents a unique way to re-visit conversations of life purpose in the higher education classroom. Although highly valued in whole student pedagogy perspectives, supporting students' sense of purpose in higher education has tended to be relegated to the domain of student affairs (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). As demonstrated in this study, opportunities for wayfinding were limited in early coursework and often did not present themselves until much later in the degree via internships or mentorship relationships with faculty if at all. Life purpose in this study, however, remains a central influence over students' well-being and academic engagement. This intricate relationship is further supported by a growing body of research (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022a; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020; Hill, 2014; Damon, 2003). Embracing pedagogical stances that aspire to ethics of care, therefore, must involve a consideration of supporting students' in identifying life purpose. For instance, Sharma and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2022b) argue that "to assume that all students are seeking the same knowledge-content without receiving opportunities to reflect upon the value of that knowledge in achieving their life's most cherished goals is dehumanizing" (p. 67). With its focus on multiple means of engagement, UDL presents an opportunity to critically reflect on the way course work and assignments engage students in meaningful ways that support learning and personal values. Activities that provide space for caring dialogue where students can reflect on and develop life purpose in the context of course content offers an additional and potentially powerful means of engagement. These considerations

point to the need for further research and practice sharing that explores practical implementation of UDL principles in higher education and their impact to student well-being and performance.

Facilitating Institutional Cultures that Foster Care for Faculty, Staff, and Students

A final implication of this study is the need to approach well-being and academic success from a whole campus perspective as has been suggested by many post-secondary mental health strategies (see University of Calgary, 2016 as an example). Developing care-based models of teaching and learning means as Felton and Lambert (2020) have suggested, explicitly valuing the relational work of academic staff. Branskamp (2010) made a similar point in relation to whole student pedagogical stances below:

The development of the whole student requires the development of the whole faculty member or staff member. Faculty need to be better recognized, evaluated, and nurtured for their contributions in meeting the holistic needs of today’s college students. (p. 171)

Providing space to participate in relational work is also key in nurturing faculty’s efforts to engage in care-based pedagogy (Hickey et al., 2021). As Gravett and Winstone (2022) concluded it is necessary to have broader institutional conversations related to “who and what matters within higher education, as well as acknowledging the importance of the relational”, arguing that this “may be the first steps in moving towards creating opportunities for supporting staff to prioritize their connections with students” (p. 371).

Creating relational faculty communities such as the one described by Segel et al. (2021) can aid open and supportive teaching and learning conversations. They described the ‘power’ of establishing a regular online space for faculty to engage relationally about teaching and learning practices, policies, campus resources and training needs. In relation to UDL implementation in post-secondary, Fovett (2020) has emphasized the benefits of interdisciplinary work that brings

together those working in Student Accessibility Offices, Instructional Design teams and faculty. Bringing campus partners together, faculty, student affairs staff and students is essential to a whole campus approach. Key to faculty success in ‘caring’, particularly for students’ personal well-being needs, is knowing who can support them to support their students. In equity-based trauma informed pedagogy, Venet (2021) emphasized the need for teachers to play the role of “connection makers” (p. 115), recognizing boundaries, while at the same time demonstrating care by supporting students to develop relationships with others. Recognizing that the work of supporting the whole student is shared institutionally means actively creating networks where knowledge can be shared and relationships to other caring partners on campus can be built. In practice, from my own experience during the pandemic, this may include bringing students services staff and faculty together regularly for conversations around broader teaching and learning issues or faculty development and student affairs practitioners working together on paired faculty-facing and student-facing resources as suggested above.

Lastly, in supporting student well-being in formal learning there are important implications about ensuring comparable supports are available for faculty well-being (Lindsay et al.). As Brewster et al. (2022) pointed out,

Dominant sectoral narratives frame student and staff well-being as oppositional, with initiatives to support student well-being positioned as creating additional practical and emotional demands on staff time and resource. (p. 548)

In their discussions with staff and students however, they conclude that student and staff well-being are realized as “co-dependent” (p. 551). In lieu of their findings, they advocate for ensuring that well-being literacy learning opportunities exist for faculty as well (rather than exclusively for students) and that faculty well-being is also discussed regularly in the context of

“institutional structures” (p. 552). The interdependent nature of faculty and student well-being posed by Brewster et al. (2022) raises interesting and poignant questions with regard to what ‘caring’ institutions look like and how institutions more broadly take steps to achieve a caring environment.

Considerations for Course Instructors

Before moving on to a discussion of future research, I present considerations for course instructors who are interested in exploring ways to support student well-being through care-based pedagogical approaches. Noteworthy in this study’s findings were the small, remembered gestures performed by instructors that participants found supportive of their well-being and learning. It is in this spirit that I highlight a few suggestions for practice drawn from student narratives, recommendations from relevant scholarship and my own practice. Recognizing that context is critically important to teaching and learning approaches, my aim in providing these suggestions is to spark a generative conversation about the small ways in which we can amplify care in the post-secondary classroom.

Consider Making Space for Relational Teaching within Scheduled Class Meetings

As Guzzardo et al. put forward, making space for “doing more than just teach[ing]” (2021, p.41) is a necessary first step in adopting care-based pedagogical stances. As seen in students’ narratives, care can be communicated by instructors and perceived by students in surprisingly short relational moments, such as when a five-minute break is offered by the instructor or a little extra time is spent going over the solution to a particular problem. Reviewing course design to identify small windows of time (e.g., five to fifteen minutes) to integrate relational moments across various course lectures or class meetings is one way to create space

without sacrificing essential course content. Below, I include some potential suggestions for relational moments.

Relational Moments that Demonstrate Care for Learning. As participants equated care for their learning as supportive of their well-being, short relational activities that aim to help students understand how to succeed in the course can be impactful. For example, Nilson (2013) suggested engaging students in an activity to collaboratively generate ways to succeed in the course while reviewing the course outline. Taking a few minutes to collectively map out the smaller steps involved to successfully complete an upcoming assignment or providing students with the first five minutes of class to review their lecture notes with each other are other examples of creating relational moments that demonstrate care for learning. To help students develop assessment literacy, instructors could also dedicate a few minutes across several lectures leading up to a mid-term or final exam to provide students with opportunities to attempt practice test questions. This could be followed up by a walkthrough of how the instructor will approach the grading of questions using sample responses to each question.

Relational Moments that Demonstrate Care for the Individual. As illustrated in this study, students felt their well-being was supported when they perceived that course instructors cared for their future selves and were open and empathetic to supporting them through academic challenges. While many of their narratives pointed to experiences that occurred outside of the classroom, students' comments also serve as a guide for how we might demonstrate individual care within class meetings. In terms of supporting students' future selves, engaging them in reflective wayfinding activities that allow them to consider their goals for university, and how those goals may or may not align with the course, can be a helpful starting point to normalizing the potentially confusing and emotionally unsettling process that finding one's path in university

can be. Perhaps sharing one's own path or inviting a few senior students into class to share theirs might also help students feel supported as they work through developing their interests and values in connection with their studies. Reminding students of the support of academic advisors and other university services that can help them further in this exploratory stage can also be a supportive relational moment that demonstrates care for students as whole people.

One of the most compelling results of this study is the interrelationship between emotional well-being and academic difficulty and this challenges us to consider how we might create relational moments within the classroom that address powerful difficult emotions around disappointing academic performance. As discussed above, Cox's (2011) work on fear in the community college classroom suggests that a combination of instructor expertise, high and clearly articulated expectations for students, approachability, and a continual expression of belief in students' abilities is essential to responding to the emotional needs that enable students to succeed academically. Leighton et al.'s (2018) study which explored students' well-being in relation to an instructional intervention pointing to the value of mistakes in learning, emphasized the importance of instructor-led conversations that address fear of making mistakes. Relational moments in the class could involve course instructors engaging students in private, individual written reflections on how they are feeling emotionally about their learning in the course. This could be followed by conversations normalizing mistakes as part of learning and expressing confidence in students' ability to succeed. Sharing an invitation to access support as well as sharing other steps that students could take to learn from mistakes, possibly from the instructor's own experience, may also go some way in supporting students' emotional needs and perceptions of instructor care.

Leaning on the Support of University Partners. While some course instructors may see a reflection of themselves in the ways of being and doing suggested in the relational moments above, I acknowledge that for many, due to the ways that traditional university classroom teaching norms exclude issues of ‘learning how to learn’ and emotional well-being, our experiences as students, graduate students and course instructors may have left us feeling unprepared for implementing such relational moments as described above. University partners can play a large support role for course instructors in designing and implementing academic and emotional well-being moments within the classroom. Beyond academic development centres, student affairs, particularly, student wellness and learning support centres, can often support course instructors in planning and/or delivering such relational conversations and activities. In my experience, these relationships have tremendous multi-directional benefits as course instructors see relational activities modeled in their classroom from practitioners who regularly engage with students on these matters, student affairs practitioners build their disciplinary knowledge as they work with instructors to design embedded activities in course content and students gain awareness of the existence of support services as well as begin to see such services as an important part of their university success.

Increase Access to Learning with a ‘Plus-One Approach’

It is clear from this and other studies (Lindsay et al., 2022) that students’ wellbeing is enhanced when instructors provide more than one way for students to access learning, whether that be offering multiple means to access course content or through the provision of varied or frequent assessments. As discussed in the implications above, universal design for learning (UDL) offers a potentially valuable framework to support increased access to learning. However, Toblin and Behling (2018) have pointed out that course instructors are understandably

challenged with the notion of taking on broad UDL course redesigns given restrictions on their time and their potentially limited knowledge of UDL concepts or technology. To address these issues, they suggested an intentional “Plus-One” (p.128) approach that focuses on identifying “pinch points” (p.109) or areas of challenge for learners as they interact with the course and focusing on creating one additional access point that aims to address each of these issues. As they explained, pinpointing particular concepts that students commonly struggle with and adding one additional method for communicating those concepts (e.g., captioned videos, visual displays of content or detailed written descriptions), alongside instructors’ current delivery would be one example of a ‘Plus-One’ approach. If instructors typically provide PowerPoint slides to accompany their lectures, for example, for content is more challenging for students, they might add an additional note-taking template to support students in structuring their notes in ways that help them to identify the important content. Likewise, to increase access to course engagement, a course instructor might add an additional checklist tool alongside the course outline to guide students in acknowledging their learning and accomplishments throughout the course as well as provide them with an opportunity to identify gaps in their learning. For assessments that rely on memorization, increasing access by allowing students to have a one page set of notes or a front and back index card in the exam is an example of creating an additional option for students to support their expression of course concepts within assessments. Considering one alternative assignment format (e.g., a written assignment in lieu of a multiple-choice exam or a video submission in lieu of a written essay) provides students options for how they express their learning within the course. Although Toblin and Behling (2018) acknowledged the risk of oversimplification with ‘Plus-One’ methods, they argued that when done over time and with a

problem-solving focus on the most important course interactions, this UDL approach can present a manageable way with which to meaningfully increase access for a variety of learners.

Focus on Predictability and Flexibility

In *Equity-centred and trauma-informed education*, Alex Venet (2021) highlighted the importance of both predictability and flexibility for better supporting not only those students who have experienced trauma, but for all learners. Although her work is centred within the K-12 sector, the importance of holding both of these principles as guides for supporting student well-being in post-secondary was illustrated through participants' narratives in this study. Activities fostering predictability within teaching and learning aim to support student well-being by helping learners know what to expect and what is expected. One activity to enhance predictability could include sending a welcome message to students prior to the course introducing the instructor, providing students with a sense of how in-class meetings will be structured and in what way the instructor plans to support their learning in the course. Providing students with examples of assessment questions and opportunities to experience 'test-like' conditions during class prior to a mid-term or exam can be another way to support predictability.

Flexibility, Venet (2021) argued, sits in partnership with the concept of predictability in supporting student well-being and learning. One example to build flexibility into course design is integrating a late bank practice (Schroeder et al. 2019), that is, providing students with a number of flex days that they can use optionally to submit late work should they encounter unanticipated life events or multiple course deadlines. Another way to enhance flexibility could be to design a comparable alternate assessment for students who miss an assessment due to illness (rather than shifting percentages for missed work to the final exam for instance). Beyond flexibility that is embedded in course design, establishing a clear and low-barrier mechanism for students to

contact instructors directly when experiencing a life challenge (e.g., email with an established subject-line; assigned teaching assistants for smaller groups of students within the class) is essential. Also critical is reflecting on the ways we can respond to students in these circumstances with care and without assumption, and work with them in partnership to support their continued access to learning. Again, reaching out to university partners for support in these circumstances to facilitate a warm and direct referral for students can also demonstrate care for student well-being.

Addressing High-Stakes Assessments

Lastly, one of the most powerful findings in this study is the exceptional negative impact on student well-being that high-stakes assessments presented. Given the practical considerations that are involved in course assessment design (e.g., class sizes, etc.), shifting away from assessment models that incorporate a small number of high-stakes assessments in lieu of more formative assessments may be one of the more challenging pedagogical changes to consider. Admittedly, finding ways to incorporate formative and recursive assessment opportunities that do not overwhelm course instructors and subsequently negatively impact their own well-being requires significant creativity. As mentioned above, supporting students' assessment literacy through sharing expectations and providing practice alongside integrating flexible deadlines can facilitate more caring assessment. However, multiple opportunities for students to learn from assessments without the fear of significant impacts to their academic participation and progression is an essential component to assessment that supports well-being. One possible way to address this is to provide a few assignments throughout the course which are awarded completion grades but also include a built-in component that requires students to self-grade their efforts (supported by a rubric or answer key) and provide a reflection on their performance.

Leveraging opportunities for automatically graded quizzes partnered with student reflection on where they require further learning for mastery might also be helpful. Collaboratively working with partners in academic development units and teaching colleagues to support the development of more frequent, less high-stakes assessment approaches is likely necessary for creating greater opportunities for students to learn from assessment without significant risks to their well-being.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study adds to current emerging literature on how care is perceived and connected to student well-being within formal learning, it points to several directions for future research. In terms of participants selected for my research, this study remains one of very few that includes the experiences of students who have had encounters with significant academic challenge. Given the nature of care and its focus on the ‘particular other’ (Held, 2006), research that furthers our understanding of individual student experiences, particularly for those students who, despite a desire to succeed academically, are unable to, is needed. Although practically challenging, engaging students in research who are not able to return to good standing academically and are ultimately required to withdraw would also add valuable and important perspectives to future inquiries into well-being and formal learning.

Participants’ narratives in this study provides support for the efficacy of further research exploring the relational moves that foster care and student well-being within postsecondary formal learning environments. More recent studies on care have been contextualized within the ‘pandemic university experience’, a time where arguably the ‘wholeness’ of people, faculty, students and staff was most visible. This suggests a critical period for engagement in research that focuses on this new attention to the care and attunement of the whole person in higher education. Alongside research that seeks to illuminate diverse student experiences of well-being

in formal learning, research exploring positive, care-centred pedagogical practices, institutional policies and higher education narratives emerging during the pandemic have the potential to provide an important and meaningful lens for supporting systemic change.

Scholarship on teaching and learning (SOTL) research initiated by faculty that shares their own and student experiences with care-based practices would also augment our understanding of caring pedagogical stances in important ways. Exploring how ‘care’ can be authentically and sustainably practiced by course instructors, alongside investigations of how students experience it, would add considerable value to supporting movement toward care-based pedagogical stances. Although as suggested in the implications above, developing faculty awareness of diverse student learning experiences is foundational, scholarship on practical and meaningful ways to enact care by course instructors within the context of their teaching is essential to enabling teacher development. SOTL projects such as Cooper et al.’s (2017) study examining students’ perceptions of having their names known in a large class via the use of name tents, offers both a tangible practice that instructors could adopt alongside evidence of the meaningful impact such small efforts have on student experience within formal learning. Continued efforts to explore these practices and share results to those who support faculty development would be valuable. This could include an exploration of the nuances of caring and relational stances such as examining power dynamics within caring relationships, face saving in interactions as well as impacts to faculty well-being.

Further to teaching practices that intentionally aim to foster care one important area of future research suggested by this study is related to assessment practices. There is very little published research that speaks to the value of offering students assessment choice. A notable exception to this is the study by Craddock and Mathias (2008), in which course instructors

reported the benefits to student performance and well-being resulting from a project that offered students two distinct options for demonstrating their performance within a course at the end of the term. Opportunities for multiple modes of expression is an essential area of research for moving higher education towards Universal Design for learning practices. An associated area for future research would also be investigating ways to support students' emotional responses to learning, particularly grade disappointment. This would add significant value to teaching and learning conversations and student well-being given the findings from this study and the large body of research discussed above that demonstrates the link between academic performance in assessments and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand how formal learning environments help or hinder student well-being from the perspective of students who had experienced significant academic challenge. By sharing participants' narratives of well-being and academic challenge along with a subsequent thematic analysis through the lens of ethics of care and whole student pedagogy, this study demonstrated a strong relationship between caring instructional stances and enhanced student well-being. It also illustrated that students make connections between well-being and formal learning environments that they perceive as caring for their learning and their future goals and that employ caring assessment practices. As a student affairs practitioner who has benefited immensely in my own personal growth and learning as an educator through my interactions with individual students, it was my aim for this study to illuminate the importance of individual learning stories of post-secondary students, particularly those students who have experienced academic and personal difficulties in finding their way through higher education to meaningful, successful learning experiences.

It is hoped that this study will help to inform and further advance institutional conversations of care within higher education. For those engaged in faculty development work the findings and student stories from this study could help to inform professional development programming. Additionally, for members of the higher education community involved in forwarding campus mental health strategies, particularly ones framed by care narratives, this study may serve to help provide evidence for the importance of care-based practices. Ideally, this study will play a role in inspiring further research and practice that leads to meaningful, positive changes in postsecondary formal learning environments.

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Appendix A Sample Interview Questions

- 1) Let's start with the time leading up to when you were required to withdraw. Tell me about what was going on for you during that time?
 - Did you find that what was happening at school affected other areas of your life?
 - What would you consider to be the factors contributing to the difficulties you experienced academically?
- 2) Can you describe your experiences in some of the classes you were taking at that time?
 - What courses/aspects of your courses were going well in your classes? Why do you think that was?
 - What courses/aspects of your courses were more difficult for you? Why do you think that was?
- 3) What were your experiences like with the instructors that you had for the classes you were taking during that time?
 - Did you have any individual interactions with any of your instructors? (e.g., one-on-one in office hours, via email)?
 - If so, what were those like? If not, why do you think that was?
- 4) Can you think of anything that might have made a difference for you during that time, either in helping you to avoid RTW or feeling supported?

- In relation to the classes you were taking?
- With your relationships with instructors?