

PAWS YOUR STRESS: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF AN ANIMAL ASSISTED
ACTIVITY PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines an Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) program in a post-secondary setting. Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design (BIQRD) is utilized to provide detailed information about students' experiences of *PAWS Your Stress*, a current AAA program at a Midwestern Canadian university. Four participants were interviewed about their personally significant experiences of the AAA program. Questions centred on three main areas: impact on student stress and coping, perceived meaning gained from experiences of the program, and students' perceptions of "love and support" as part of their participation. Transcriptions from these student interviews were analyzed to identify common themes that emerged from their answers. Through inductive analysis, two overarching categories - stress relief and meaningful interactions – were found to contain five main themes. Three themes – being in the moment, social benefits, and variations in coping ability – are discussed in relation to stress relief and coping. Two themes – personalized interactions and reciprocity are discussed in relation to the meaning participants derived from participation in the program. Findings may improve understanding of certain aspects of the program that enable students to relieve stress and find meaning in their interactions with therapy dogs. Results may impact future implementation of similar programming on campuses and improve the quality of existing AAA programming aimed at similar demographic groups.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter will provide a brief overview and introduction of the current paper. This chapter begins with an outline of the main components of the research, including the research questions, purpose, and research design. The researcher's personally significant experiences related to the research are then discussed, followed by a discussion of relevant definitions and assumptions.

Research Questions

This study examines students' experiences of an Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) program that aims to provide a method of stress relief to university students. In gathering detailed qualitative information from participants of this AAA program, we may better understand how the program impacts students' stress and personally significant experiences. First, the impact that students feel their attendance at AAA programming has had on their levels of stress is explored to investigate changes to individuals' coping mechanisms as a result of participation. Second, the students' personally significant experiences during their attendance at the program will be examined to discover more about how participants create meaning through the human-animal interactions that are central to the program. The study is directed by the following research questions: "How does participation in this program impact student stress and ability to cope with school-related stress?" and "What meaning do students make through their experiences of this AAA program?" The understanding gained through this research may inform both current practice and future implementations of AAA programming, based on what participants view to be helpful or meaningful experiences. This study makes use of Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design (BIQRD) (Merriam, 2002) to gather and evaluate information-rich data from participants.

Literature indicates that the use of animals in care has led to benefits for many populations, in improving health and pain management (Barker, Knisley, Schubert, Green & Ameringer, 2015; Miller et al. 2009), decreasing loneliness in geriatric patients (Banks and Banks, 2002; Holt, Johnson, Yaglom, & Brenner, 2015), aiding in the treatment of individuals with addictions (Chalmers & Dell, 2015), helping rehabilitate at-risk youth (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007), and providing students with an alternative form of coping with stress (Reynolds & Rabschutz, 2011; Bell, 2013; Dell et al. 2015). In recent years, animal assisted programs have emerged as a form of stress relief programming for students enrolled in post-secondary institutions. There is a specific gap in the current literature with regards to the qualitative investigation of the individualized experience of AAA from the university student perspective.

Personal Significance

This topic has meaning for me in a personal manner in two ways. Primarily, as a student, I have a direct understanding of the overwhelming stress that comes with the territory of university life. I found it difficult to gain the courage to access mental health services, particularly throughout the first years of my post-secondary schooling. I found the transition into university to be a challenging one, and at times found myself unaware of how to best cope with my high levels of stress. In recalling my own experience as an undergraduate student, I attempted to access counselling as a preventative way to investigate healthy coping behaviours, only to find that I would have to wait until the list shortened to see a counsellor. Instead of waiting the few weeks to see a professional, I turned to family, friends, pets, and exercise to cope with my stress. In considering the factors that helped me cope, I found it interesting that despite the fact that school itself was the main source of my stress, I did not receive formal support within the educational setting. Informally, I received support through my personal interactions

with professors and classmates, as well as through my interactions with my own friends, family, and pets. I had been fortunate enough to be surrounded by compassionate beings, both human and animal, whose positive influence left me with a decreased stress level. As I pondered what I wanted to research for my graduate thesis, I began to wonder about students who lack a support system. Where do they turn when they have minimal or insufficient social supports? At the Midwestern campus where my research took place, there is a counselling office which offers “short-term professional counselling for students whose concerns are interfering with day-to-day functioning and efforts to deal with the problem have not made enough of a difference” (Student Counselling Services, 2015). Within this description, responsibility is put on students to seek out coping strategies independently. If students are not in crisis, they may have to wait to see a counsellor. If access to a counsellor is possible, the student is assisted in a responsive manner, rather than as a preemptive, ongoing approach to help the student cope with their stressors before they interfere greatly in the student’s life. My research question stems from a curiosity about how students can take care of themselves using existing programming at university to help bridge the gap between self-care and the need for higher levels of crisis support.

The animal assisted activity program “*PAWS Your Stress*” has helped to fill that gap in recent years, providing a potentially preventative, alternative for students to relieve stress on campus. In our current healthcare system, where problems are often dealt with only after they have emerged, a preventative approach could be helpful in providing students with mental health care before stress begins to negatively impact a student’s ability to cope. Preventative programming of this sort could be helpful in not only promoting and encouraging the mental wellbeing of students, but in providing a safe space for students to engage with others who can relate to the student experience. There is value in further examining the *PAWS Your Stress*

program and the experience of the students it aims to support.

Second, I was drawn to this topic because of the type of interaction that exists on my campus, albeit in its early stages. AAAs exist on this campus and are organized by the office of the former Research Chair in Substance Abuse Dr. Colleen Dell. This program is also made possible by the Student Health Services team, which support the program through sponsorship. The St. John Ambulance team of volunteer handlers and their dogs also make AAA possible by supplying volunteers. In addition to organizing the program, Dr. Dell is also a regular volunteer, attending as a handler with her therapy dogs Anna-Belle, Subie, and Kisbey. Sessions usually take place in an enclosed room, big enough for 20-30 people. The handler(s) and their dog(s) arrive prior to the beginning of the session. Participants enter the room and allow the students to pet, cuddle, and play with the dog(s). The program takes a casual approach; students come and go as they please for varying amounts of time. Some students pat the dog gently, while others go for a more whole-hearted approach that includes hugging and affectionate petting.

After attending my first session, I was struck by the visible impact that the interaction with the therapy dogs seemed to have on participants in the program. People were laughing, smiling at the dogs and each other, and talking about their own pet experiences. The program seemed to make sense as a simple way to provide students with a coping strategy for their stress. While stress in the academic environment cannot be eradicated, providing students with engaging ways to cope with their stress may equip them with skills that they can use for future stress in university and beyond.

I have personally turned to my own family pet in times of high stress at school, and continue to do so even after moving away from my parent's home years ago. I continue to feel love, support, and unconditional positive regard from this animal, a Border Collie named Billie.

Before I was aware of the concept of AAAs, I viewed my family's dog as a source of safety, comfort, and relaxation. As my own academic journey has progressed, I have had the experience of stress as a student. At the same time, I have been able to integrate my love of animals into my own coping strategies. Integrating my own personal connection with animals into my academic research has provided a foundational curiosity upon which my research is built.

Lastly, my choice of future profession has guided my interest in this research area. As a student in a counselling program, I hope to be able to provide services to future clients. This might include direct counselling, behavioural intervention, or a myriad of other skills that could be improved by the use of a therapy animal in practice.

I intend to take the information from this study into my profession. AAAs can be used as a tool to develop rapport with clients, establish boundaries, and provide a non-judgmental approach. I am interested in how these animals may also serve as an assessment tool for emotional state in initial sessions with clients, should that be included in my future work. Through my own interest in one day becoming a therapy dog handler myself, I sought to understand how AAAs impact clients' wellbeing.

Definitions

Key concepts related to this study come from two areas; the interaction between humans and animals, and the meaning students attribute to those interactions. There is some confusion with regard to the nomenclature associated with therapeutic interventions involving animals. In a review of the literature, LaJoie, (2003) assembled 20 unique definitions of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) from numerous different academic articles on the subject. Definitions included terms such as pet-facilitated therapy, animal-facilitated counselling, and companion/animal therapy. The Delta Society (2014) defines AAT as a specific goal oriented type of intervention

that is measured and monitored closely by a trained professional. For the purposes of this study, this definition is far too specific for the types of interactions that occur within the examined program. A different term used by the Delta Society (2014) to define recreational, educational, and/or therapeutic activities made possible through various professionals and/or volunteers is Animal Assisted Activities (AAAs). This term accurately describes the type of interactions that occur at the *PAWS Your Stress* program. These interactions between animals and humans occur in a more casual way. AAAs have the potential to be therapeutic, however there is less emphasis on the goal-oriented nature of the intervention. AAAs strengthen the connection between humans and animals, which can be beneficial for the human participant.

The emergent nature of this area of study has led to the common interchange of terms in the literature. The term AAT will be used in my literature review to describe goal-directed interventions in a therapeutic setting. The term AAA will be used in my work to refer to other human-animal interventions in the literature, including the type of interaction between human and animal that occurs within the *PAWS Your Stress* program.

In addition to animal-related terms, further understanding of the term “stress” is helpful in understanding the link to post-secondary students’ experiences. Lazarus’ Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus, 1966) is helpful in conceptualizing how stressors might be perceived and the manner in which one copes with situations that are deemed “stressful”. Lazarus defines stress in two stages of appraisal. First, the individual is confronted with a stressor or threatening event. The individual must evaluate this stressor and determine its potential threat. Second, the individual determines what resources are available to them in order to cope with this stressor, and from there, makes a judgment on the level of stress that the stressor will have on the individual.

The concept of wellbeing among students is important to define because of its use in my participant interviews to discuss mental health, stress, and coping. Diener and Seligman (2004) describe subjective wellbeing as “a necessary ingredient of the healthy life... one value among many, but one that is widespread because it allows people to judge their own lives based on their own values and standards.” (p. 36). Upon examination of this definition, it is clear that wellbeing can be highly subjective to influences such as an individual’s own expectations and values. As such, qualitative research is the best option for an in depth examination of such a highly subjective concept. The term “wellbeing” is used within participant interviews in order to encourage a more open conversation about concepts related to student mental health. Since personal interviews were conducted with individuals whom I had not yet developed a strong rapport, it was important that participants be comfortable. It is my hope that by using a more general term such as wellbeing, participants were more likely to discuss their experiences that may or may not include mental health, stress, and coping strategies.

Assumptions

Within this study, several assumptions are being made. First, I assume that the experience of stress, in terms of academic pressures associated with post secondary schooling, is significant enough to affect a student’s wellbeing. Within this line of thought, an assumption is made that these high stress levels can be mitigated through the use of programming. I am also making the assumption that intervention in the form of AAAs could hold meaning for post secondary students, and in turn, impact their coping strategies and mental health.

Second, an assumption is being made that experiencing an intervention such as an AAA, has the potential to be effective in modeling healthy coping strategies that could help participants in their daily lives. Goals of the St. John Ambulance therapy dog program are to provide “love

and support”. As such, the intent of the program is to also provide love and support to the students through their interactions with the therapy animals, in addition to providing the students with a healthy way to reduce the instances of unhealthy coping behaviours, such as binge drinking. Exposing a post secondary student group to AAA may provide support within that moment for the students. Additionally, AAA could have longer-term impacts for students in terms of seeking out alternative healthy coping strategies. Through interactions with the therapy dogs, participants of the program may be able to practice healthy coping.

In attending the *PAWS Your Stress* program, students have sought out experiences that have the potential to impact their experience of school related stress. BIQRD involves the assumption that specific experiences that have been facilitated as a result of the program have interpretations that may differ among participants. Through these interactions between participant and animal, potentially meaningful experiences may occur. The personal, lived experience of this AAA program will provide insight into the meanings that participants derive from attendance at the program.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

This chapter will provide an overview of related literature. First, stress and coping is explored, followed by information about stress and student retention. Also shared is information about students' access to mental health care on campus. Lastly, information about varying animal assisted forms of intervention is provided, followed by an overview of future research in the field. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the research direction for the current area of study.

Student Stress and Coping

For a number of university students, stress is part of their academic experience. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) described mental health problems among college age students as “highly prevalent”. As many as 1 in 3 students have reported feeling depressed to the point of finding daily functioning difficult, while nearly 10% of students felt suicidal during a one year period. Students experiencing high stress levels are more likely to have poor physical and mental health and lower academic functioning (Edlin & Golanty, 2014) Though many students have reported stress-related illness, only a small number sought out mental health support at university (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013).

Historically, the transition into university has been developmentally significant for young people (Cohen, Burt, & Bjorck, 1987). Stress has been associated with the developmental transition common among college age students. The transitional nature of university can create stress for students (Arthur & Hiebert, 2011). In particular, the transition into post secondary education can create difficulty for students not because of the increase in academic expectations and with the stresses associated with transitioning into a more challenging social environment. Academic demands, relationships and family, finances, and employment are also among the

stressors that students reported associated with post-secondary education. In providing access to services available on campus, it is important for universities to embrace a strategy to help students cope.

College age students are more vulnerable than their similar aged peers to the effects of stressful events due to the transitional nature of their lives. Despite frequently being perceived as a privileged group, college age students are found to have comparable rates of mental health problems to their non-student, similar aged peers (Blanco, Okuda, Wright, Hasin, Grant, Liu, & Olfson, 2008). In recent years, researchers studying young college students reported that experiences of anxiety, depression, and stress are higher than similar aged peers (Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, & Lennie, 2012).

Towbes and Cohen (1996) described two forms of chronic stress that occur within the college population. First, stress can occur from an ongoing event that stems from one particular occurrence, for example, a student lost a scholarship, or failed a class. As a result of this particular stressful event, chronic stress can develop and last for an extended period of time. Second, stress can occur as a result of constant, ongoing stressors stemming from multiple events. For example, this ongoing stress could happen if a student is constantly struggling to achieve acceptable marks, or if a student is relentlessly questioning their career path. These two forms are not mutually exclusive; some students encounter both forms of chronic stress. Stress can affect students' academic performance, personal relationships, and mental health.

Some argue that Generation Y is a coddled generation (Newbart, 2005). Newbart suggested that modern post secondary students have not been prepared for the stressors of academic life as a result of parenting and socialization. These students have high expectations for their academic performance, yet lack the work ethic necessary to attain success at the university

level. Life for post-secondary students has changed in recent decades, and universities are making efforts to keep up with the shifting landscape (Peters, 2006). Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, and Faruggia (2008) discussed the sense of “academic entitlement” associated with millennial university students. This incongruence between expectations and performance can create stress among students.

Many students in their first years of post-secondary education are in what Arnett (2007) described as “emergent adulthood”. Emergent adulthood is a life stage where an individual is distinctly in between adolescence and adulthood. A current trend associated with Generation Y during the phase of emergent adulthood, is to maintain strong ties with parents. Some students continue to maintain associations with parents during post-secondary education and/or rely on parents for financial and psychological support (Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007). Luyckx et al. (2007) suggested that controlling parents limit exploration and identity formation in their adult children. Due to reliance on parental support, some students may find the transition to independently coping with stressors difficult. This is amplified in college years when paired with the stressors of academic life (Marano, 2004).

Every student has a unique set of stressors in their life. Specific behavioural responses to stress may vary among individuals. The dynamic efforts made by an individual to manage demands created by these stressors is referred to as “coping” (Weiten & McCann, 2006). Coping typically occurs in response to stressors and can be either helpful or detrimental for an individual. Endler and Parker (1990) developed a standardized measurement tool to illustrate the type of varied coping styles among individuals. Those included in the test are task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping, and avoidance-oriented coping. Individuals differ in their approaches to stressful events, and as such, it is important to support all students, regardless of

outwardly perceived stressors. Whether it's financial strain, social isolation, or the pressure of performing to a high academic standard, students experience stress in their daily lives (Towbes & Cohen, 1996; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

In response to stress, college students are not immune to the temptation of unhealthy coping strategies. College students are similarly at risk of alcohol abuse when compared to their non-students peers (Wu, Pilowsky, Schlenger, & Hasin, 2007). In an exploratory study investigating coping strategies of university students, several ways in which students turn to unhealthy approaches in an attempt to manage their stress were identified (Boujut, 2013). Instead of seeking support from family and friends, some students use an avoidance strategy and isolate themselves from others in times of stress. Others turn to moderately addictive behaviours, such as binge eating of unhealthy food and watching television in large quantities. Lastly, a third form of coping was identified which includes coping mechanisms that take place within a social environment, such as binge drinking of alcohol. By providing an alternative method of coping, students have access to healthier options to cope with stress.

Binge drinking is a common form of coping that is often seen in the post secondary setting. In a report of binge drinking across American campuses, Slutske (2005) found that within a one year period, 18% of college students suffered from clinically significant alcohol related problems. Slutske suggested that while college students are less likely to drink on a daily basis, binge drinking in large amounts occurs more frequently within the college population. Binge drinking is a major issue for Canadian students and is a contributor to a myriad of social, interpersonal, academic, health, and financial problems (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

Some specific populations deal with stress differently. In a study of mental health

problems and depression among college students, Weitsman (2004) found that females in particular were more likely to report drinking related harms and the abuse of alcohol. In addition to reporting binge drinking, female college students are at a higher risk of binge eating in response to stress (Sulkowski, Dempsey & Dempsey, 2011; American Psychological Association, 2012). In their investigation of binge eating behaviours associated with stress among 147 female college students, researchers found that students who engaged in emotion-focused and avoidant coping styles were more likely to report binge eating as a response to stress. Certain coping styles were found to have an impact on the student's response to stress. Researchers found that the relationship between emotion-focused coping partially mediated the relationship between stress and coping itself.

Student approaches to stress and coping are mitigated by other factors as well. Researchers have found that belief in one's own ability to cope can moderate the ways that individuals manage stressful events in their lives (Eisenbarth, 2012). Stress, coping styles and susceptibility to depressive symptoms have been linked to self perception. Self efficacy and coping ability have been linked to AAAs in the past (Berget, Ekeberg, & Braastad, 2008.) Within the confines of an animal assisted interaction, it is possible that attendance at the *PAWS* program could increase student exposure to a healthy coping strategy and in turn improve their perceived ability to cope with stressors in their lives.

Student Retention

The post-secondary institution where the 'PAWS' program is facilitated has made student retention a priority in an attempt to keep students enrolled in university throughout the duration of their studies. Undergraduate rates of retention for students between their first and second year in a liberal arts program fall below 75% in some colleges (UView Student Retention, 2014). This

general liberal arts degree program in particular enrolls over 8,000 students, just under half of the undergraduate student population of the entire university (UView Student Headcount, 2014).

Student dropout is seen in startling numbers across the country, especially at the undergraduate level in Canada. Psychological stress and exhaustion are just some of the factors associated with the decrease student retention rates. Some students have been unable to cope with the stressors associated with attendance of university and do not remain enrolled to finish their studies (Law, 2007). The Persistence in Post-Secondary Education in Canada Report (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009) described dropout trends related to undergraduate students in Canada. 14% of Canadian undergraduate first year students drop out of their program. When researchers included second year students, that number jumped to 20%. This is a substantial number of students. With a student body of nearly 20,000 undergraduate students (Enrollment Snapshot, 2014), this university likely loses thousands of students each year due to dropout.

Mental health initiatives are seen across this Midwestern campus, even within the university's long term planning efforts. The Institutional Planning and Assessment department on this campus in particular addresses student wellbeing in long term planning for student retention. Within the Integrated Plan (2012), it is noted that an emphasis on health services for individual students has been an effort of both university and community partnerships made in combination with campus health services to fill student health needs. Though the need for student counselling has been on the rise for years, the level of services offered to students has not increased at the same rate to meet the needs of the student population (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003). Further research into innovative, preventative, and affordable programming can be helpful in finding creative ways to retain and support students in their academic pursuits.

Access to Mental Health Care

At the Midwestern university being examined in this qualitative research, some programs and online resources have been made available to students. Among these are “Healthy U Interactive” an online tracking system and blog for physical fitness. “Peer Health Mentors”, a student-run group that promotes healthy lifestyles on campus, includes information about mental health for students, alongside other information for general student wellness (Student Counselling Services, 2015). A student run program called “*What’s Your Cap*” is an initiative that has been implemented in recent years, and it is linked to the *PAWS Your Stress* program. Through outreach that provides research based information to students, this initiative aims to reduce the amount of binge drinking among students on campus. They provide healthy alternative coping strategies, such as regular pet therapy programming and free massages during exam time (Student Counselling Services, 2015). Students’ access to personally directed mental health services, such as one-on-one counselling, exists for students requiring either short term or crisis support. The course website (Student Counselling Services, 2015) details literature on Self-Help, aimed at equipping students with information to stay healthy. Self-care can be used at a time when students are under stress. Students can access a great deal of this information online, in a format that provides the anonymity that might make it more comfortable for students to access services. It is possible that there could be differences in the experiences of students who research their own methods of stress relief online, and those who engage in more interactive forms of intervention, such as an AAA or individual counselling.

In a study of the stigma associated with access to mental health care, Patrick Corrigan (2004) identified why individuals might be less likely to seek out mental health care in a formal setting. Some individuals may actively be seeking to avoid attaching a label to their identity,

fearing that a diagnosis may change their opportunities in life. Others may be only seeking minimal care, and feel that traditional counselling is “too serious” for their needs. According to Corrigan (2004), many individuals viewed traditional one-on-one counselling as a threatening and intimidating experience, despite their knowledge that they may stand to benefit as a result of attending sessions. MacKinnon (2007) identified stigma, self-stigma, and fear as barriers to accessing counselling services by students attending post secondary institutions. Since access to mental health services can involve stigma and fear for some students, alternative programs that reach out to people in a potentially less intimidating manner must be sought out and supported.

Drop-in programs such as *PAWS Your Stress* may be effective because some of the stigma associated with seeking support is relieved. There are no appointments necessary. Some students bring friends. Participants simply walk in, experience what the program has to offer, and walk out. Participation is a social process where no one is singled out as the ‘client’. The pressure associated with accessing a program aimed to help with stress is reduced due to the casual nature of the group. Furthermore, for students who may require more directive services, the *PAWS Your Stress* program can act as an access point for participants to find more information about available counselling services.

Some recommendations have been identified in terms of mental health care for the university student population in question. Kitzrow (2003) described factors that contribute to the need for further support of mental health for students. An increasingly diverse student population presents new challenges for university staff, in supporting more international and first generation students, more female students, and an increasingly aging university population. Current post-secondary mental health workers are facing a “surge in mental health needs” (p. 167) that exists within the college population. There is a need to provide counselling for issues related to

transition, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) issues, and increasingly serious cases of psychological distress. Kitzrow (2003) described the diversity of populations, as well as the increasing presence of mental health issues among students in recent decades.

Recommendations are made in the form of strategies that could be implemented by universities to manage this increasing demand for mental health services. Among her recommendations, several (peer therapy, group therapy, drop-in availability, etc) coincided with the style of programming that AAA offers. An emphasis on preventative strategies and outreach was made within the recommendations, in terms of accessing students whose issues may not have progressed to the point where crisis level intervention would be required. Kitzrow (2003) emphasized the importance of preventative activities including outreach programming. “As the demand for clinical services mounts, counseling centers may be tempted to put all their resources into meeting that need. However, they should not abandon ‘traditional and preventative and developmental’ activities such as outreach” (p. 176).

The preventative nature of these interventions would not only be a financially sound decision for post secondary institutions, but also serve the student body in a way that could impact their lives beyond university. Early intervention for mental health could be extremely helpful for many students. In addition, recommendations are made with a focus on the administrative level to improve support for students on campus. An emphasis on the importance of funding mental health initiatives on campus is made for a variety of programming types. Kitzrow (2003) described a need for universities to “treat mental health issues as an institutional responsibility and priority” (p. 178). It is not enough to simply provide health care in a prescriptive manner. In providing responsible care for students in the future, post secondary institutions need to take the steps required to make mental health a priority for students today.

Animal Assisted Therapy

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic intervention involving the use of an animal (Delta Society, 2015). Within AAT, the introduction of an animal to a therapeutic interaction between animal and human is deliberate. A qualified professional, typically a licensed mental health practitioner, uses AAT to achieve specific client goals (Chandler, 2005). Through a meta-analysis of 49 AAT studies, a range of unique populations for whom AAT can be beneficial were identified (Niemer & Lundahl, 2007). These researchers identified certain populations from which moderately positive impacts of AAT have been empirically measured. Improvements such as strengthening emotional well-being, have been identified in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), individuals with medical difficulties, and behavioural problems.

AAT has been helpful in the medical setting, specifically in the management of pain. Braun, Stangler, Narveson and Pettingell (2009) found that AAT was an effective intervention to treat pain in a pediatric setting to treat acute care patients between the ages of 3 and 17. Children exposed to AAT experienced a significant reduction in pain, when compared to those in a control group. AAT is an effective tool for pain management in adult patients as well (Anson, 2014). Animal visits were helpful in providing a significant reduction in self-reported pain and emotional distress for individuals at an outpatient clinic for adults with chronic pain (Marcus, Bernstein, Constantin, Kunkel, Breuer, & Hanlon, 2012). For patients recovering from joint replacement surgery, a short daily visit with a therapy dog was effective in reducing patients' need for pain medication (Havey, Vlases, Vlases, Ludwig-Beymer, & Hackbarth, 2014).

Among the at-risk youth population, AAT has been used as a tool to integrate socially responsible behaviours into daily life. These therapeutic interventions are effective in supporting

a culturally responsive resiliency approach, as utilized by the Youth Solvent Abuse Committee (YSAC) in their work using equine therapy (Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Suave, & McKinnon, 2008). This culture-based model highlights the value of connections between the individual and their community. Equine therapy fits within this model, as it promotes the healing necessary to move through treatment in a culturally responsive manner. The circle of connections is expanded from the youth in treatment to those in the community.

Animal Assisted Activities

Animal Assisted Activities, or AAAs, vary greatly in their reach and the populations they impact. Benefits have been observed in a variety of settings and have the potential to impact a large number of people. Though it has been described as innovative (Dell, 2015), AAA makes use of the natural bond between human and animal (Wilson, 1984; One Health, 2016).

Researchers agree that flexibility is an advantage of AAA, as its benefits have been seen in many populations. Individuals with ASD have benefitted from social skills training through the use of AAA. In terms of medical difficulties, AAA has been associated with decreases in the stress hormone, cortisol, and increases in the feel good hormone, oxytocin (Miller et al. 2009). Emotional well being in lonely populations (e.g. adults in geriatric care facilities) has been improved through the use of AAAs (Brickel, 1979; Banks & Banks, 2002). These findings are centred on measured interaction that occurs with specific populations.

In the healthcare setting, Friedmann et al. (1983) found that the blood pressure of a child in the presence of a friendly animal lowered when the animal was introduced. In working with children, the presence of the animal made adults seem less threatening, and acted as a social buffer between child and practitioner (Fawcett & Gullone, 2011). Barker and Dawson (1998) also found similar results in their research on adults and animals in a healthcare setting. They

found that on physiological tests, adult psychiatric patients in a health care setting were more relaxed after their interactions with animals. The use of AAAs in improving self-efficacy has been shown to be present for psychiatric patients. A treatment group receiving animal interactions on regular basis showed significant improvement on a measure of perceived self-efficacy (Berget, Ekeberg & Braastad, 2008).

Social benefits of AAA have also been observed. AAAs have been shown to reduce scores on objective measures of loneliness among residents in long-term care (Banks & Banks, 2002). In an observational study of children with disabilities, a child accompanied by a dog was 10 times more likely to engage in peer interaction (Katcher, 1997). Peers were far more likely to engage in verbal discussion, ask questions, and make conversation with the child if there was a dog present. Additionally, some researchers perceive pets as social capital (Wood, Gilles-Corti, & Bulsara, 2005), which contributes positively to overall health.

It is important to make the distinction that the intervention being studied in the present thesis is AAA, a less goal-oriented form of animal interaction. Though AAA and AAT differ in terms of process and results, it is still important to understand the body of research that provides insight into the many forms of human-animal activity that exist.

Animals Involved in AAA

Though interventions involving animals commonly employ the use of canine companions, other animals can be effective in establishing the connection between human and animal. There is an obvious issue with the logistics of implementing equine therapy in schools, urban community settings, and in healthcare settings, due to the size of horses. However, when the space and time is available for the provision of equine services, benefits can be seen among a diverse population of individuals. Children diagnosed with ASD have been shown to respond

well to equine therapy (Borgi, et al., 2015). Benefits to included improvement of social skills, as well as mild improvements in motor skills (Borgi, et al., 2015). Positive outcomes have also been noted in at-risk youth (Burgon, 2011; Dell et al. 2008). As the youth work with the horses both on the ground and mounted, equine therapy encourages the development of social skills, self confidence and a sense of moral responsibility in at-risk youth (Burgon, 2011).

Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) is a small branch within the broader realm of Equine Assisted Therapy, which exists in the yet broader category of AAIs. EAL has been implemented in the treatment of youth recovering from volatile solvent misuse (Dell et al., 2008). The horses help teenagers improve their social wellbeing, improve their communication skills and their ability to build relationships. Positive changes in their behaviour are observed during these interactions. In a study by Dell et al. (2011), it was reported that youth experienced improvements in the way they viewed themselves. The bond created between human and animal, in particular to horses, was culturally significant and tied to spirituality for many of the youth, who identified as Indigenous peoples.

Cats have also emerged as effective partners in clinical settings. In a pilot study investigating social communication of children in speech pathology sessions, researchers compared the level of communication in children with a stuffed animal in the shape of a cat to a live cat. Researchers found that a majority of participants communicated more frequently and effectively in the presence of an animal. The presence of the cat improved rapport with the speech pathologist, similar to the way in which dogs improve rapport among children and therapists in the counselling setting. (Fawcett & Gullone, 2001). Cats have also been used frequently in the past within the geriatric setting, combatting loneliness among patients, and providing comfort to residents struggling with dementia through reality therapy (Brickel, 1979).

The Involvement of Animals in Care

It is suggested that the strong link between human and natural surroundings may be explained by the Biophilia hypothesis, initially proposed by Wilson (1984). Wilson defines biophilia as an innate urge that humans have to associate with other forms of life. It is proposed that in the quest for wellness, humans benefit greatly from being immersed in their natural surroundings. With the constant barrage of technology and stifling working environments, many modern individuals are limited in finding opportunities to connect with nature. In making a connection to the natural environment, through the use of plants and animals, it is thought that individuals can benefit by becoming increasingly connected to our evolutionary roots. Kruger & Sheppel (2006) suggest that the Biophilia hypothesis explains how AAA reduces anxiety, and raises arousal, simultaneously relaxing and engaging individuals. Some settings, including a geriatric care home only a few kilometers away from where the university hosting the 'PAWS' program is located, employ the Eden Alternatives philosophy (Eden Alternatives, 2015). The Eden Alternatives philosophy aims to reduce loneliness and boredom in residents who may not have opportunities to engage with nature regularly. This is apparent through their various gardening programs, as well as their policy allowing both staff members as well as volunteers with St. John Ambulance to bring in animals to engage with residents. The natural link between humans and nature is foundational to AAAs, and can benefit patients in physical, spiritual, emotional and social realms (Kruger & Sheppel, 2006).

Biophilia, centred on the emphasis of the importance of the links made between human and animal, is similar to another approach emphasized by the Centre for Disease Control (2015). The One Health framework acknowledges the connection between the health of humans and the health of the animals and surrounding environment (CDC, 2015). This movement has been

fundamental to researchers in establishing the importance of a human-animal centred framework in studying at-risk youth and Equine therapy (Dell et al., 2008). The link between humans, animals, and the environment is an important part of the One Health framework (Centre for Disease Control, 2015). Chalmers and Dell (2015) discuss the One Health framework in relation to Indigenous worldviews, where humans, animals, and the environment as equal beings.

Looking Forward

As the past decade has progressed, more universities are beginning to acknowledge AAA as a legitimate form of student support. In an environmental scan of 98 universities in Canada, researchers found that over 80% of institutions have implemented some form of pet therapy programming for students during final examinations. In addition, some institutions have also implemented regularly scheduled programming to support students throughout the school year. These programs are typically run by student groups, university health initiatives, or in combination (Gillett, Dell, & Chalmers, 2016). Other Midwestern universities employ similar programs to the one being studied. Pet Therapy, another program in Midwestern Canada, is aimed at providing stress relief to students through human-animal interactions. Similar to the program being studied in this research, their program is made possible through dogs and handlers from a nonprofit group of volunteers (Pet Access League Society, 2015). The *PAWS Your Stress* program implements both regularly scheduled sessions throughout the academic year, as well as multiple successive sessions in a row in the midst of final examinations. This collaborative approach supports the students throughout the term as well as during final exams.

In a pilot study of three similarly organized programs on Canadian campuses, including the one in the present study, Dell et al. (2015) evaluated the nature of support occurring within AAA settings on campuses. This research supports the idea that therapy dog programming can

be meaningful for students. Researchers found that participants experienced both love and support as a result of attending the programming. Respondents in the research defined love in terms of reciprocity between the dog and the student. This feeling improved the positive feelings that the individual has while visiting the dogs. Support was described as a reduction of stress. This was facilitated through the relaxing nature of the interactions with the therapy dog. These qualitative terms of love and support come to life with descriptors that illustrate the impact felt by the students. In my work in interviewing participants of the *PAWS* program, I build upon this research. My use of in depth interviews provided an opportunity for participants to express a deeper understanding of how they come to be loved and supported at this program.

AAAs have been shown to benefit many populations and programs are beginning to be implemented in greater numbers. These types of interactions could be beneficial for students in more ways than are immediately apparent through observation. There is an increasing amount of empirical evidence illustrating the benefits of AAA, and the area is gaining credibility across the country. In building on past AAA research, an investigation of personal experiences provide insight into just how far the reach of positive pet-facilitated interactions can extend.

Research Direction

The most glaring issue with the body of research to date is the small number of studies looking at student stress and AAAs in combination. This area of research is relatively new, which leaves many opportunities for researchers to begin filling in the gaps. While there is research on the effects of stress on university age students, and research on the impact of AAA on various populations (individuals with Autism, at-risk youth, lonely and depressed populations, geriatric populations, etc.), there is minimal overlap between the areas of student stress and AAAs. One study investigates the linkage between animal assisted programming and depression

among university aged students (Folse, Minder, Aycock & Santana, 1994). Moderate impact on scores were found with the implementation of an animal assisted program in conjunction with individual therapy, and this study has been foundational to the empirical support that can be important to the implementation of AAAs. This study emerged in the initial years of study of AAAs, and provides a foundational insight into the link between student stress and AAA, however it may not have the same meaning for us in the way that programs are administered today. In the past, AAA research has focused on specific populations (e.g. Autism), and work that is specifically tailored to the needs of that population through the use of an animal (e.g. social skills training). There is a need for understanding about the experiences and meaning of AAA on a more typically functioning group of individuals, such as students, in a less goal directed setting. The present study focuses on student mental health, stress, and coping. Focusing on the experiences of the student population employs the use of valuable information from the general population of university students. As of yet, no researcher has published a qualitative analysis utilizing one-on-one interviews with participants to gain personally meaningful information taken from these sessions in the post secondary setting.

Given the literature, it is clear that AAAs have the potential to be helpful in providing students with meaningful interactions that offer a strategy for coping with stress. As a result of investigating AAAs and student stress and coping, I hope to gain a more in depth understanding of the meanings students take from their interactions with the therapy dog teams in an effort to reduce their stress. I am interested in the impact of preventative animal facilitated programming for students. In terms of research goals, I am interested in answering two questions; “How do university students perceive their experiences with AAA as impacting their mental health, stress, and coping skills” and “How do students make meaning from their experiences with the

animals?” I hope that by investigating a less intimidating form of accessible mental health support on campus, such as *PAWS Your Stress*, valuable insight into the personal experiences of these programs can be gained.

Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter provides an overview of the research design used in the present study. Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design is defined and explored, followed by an in depth explanation of the procedure, ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations. A discussion of the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness is included, finally followed by an explanation of the significance of the current study.

Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design

This study is guided by the technique Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design (BIQRD) (Merriam, 2002). BIQRD is described as a research method where the main objective is to understand “how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Inductive reasoning is used to gather information to more fully understand the perspectives of the involved participants. The use of BIQRD allows for flexibility in inductive research and data collection. It also ensures that the focus is on the experience of the participant. As such, this method is appropriate for the purposes of this research.

In choosing my methodology, I considered other approaches. I considered a Narrative approach at first, I saw value in creating a narrative to describe the experiences of the student. While there is value in creating an in depth story of each individual participant, I felt that there would be more valuable information if I were able to pull out information that was common among multiple people. Additionally, I saw value in guiding the direction of questioning, and having the ability to delve deeper into experiences of the program that were less about the participants’ past, and more about their experiences in the moment of the program.

Merriam identifies steps that the researcher must go through in order to conduct research through the use of BIQRD. Researchers should begin by collecting data via interviews,

observations, or document analysis. Initial observations are helpful at this stage to gain a better understanding of what is being researched. Interviews allow for the participant voice to exist at the forefront of the data. The use of one-on-one interviews allowed for ethical and relational approach in my interactions with the participants. This allowed for an effective rapport to be built with participants. Detailed answers with regard to participant experiences were given in part because of the relationship built between myself and the participants. In instances when researchers have used BIQRD in creating interview questions to collect data, the questions are typically phrased in an open manner. Questions are intentionally broad to allow the participant to freely respond. Initial questions can also be used to gain a clear understanding of the participant's frame of reference to the questions that will follow. As the interview progresses, more investigative questions may be asked gradually, in order to gain the best understanding of the participant's experience.

From the collected data, researchers can inductively identify commonalities among recurring themes. Data analysis of the interviews involves a process whereby researchers establish categories under which responses fit. In asking questions that allow for detailed responses from participants, data obtained must be thoroughly examined to find commonalities among participants. Merriam (2002) notes that analysis should be explained in a rich, detailed manner. General commonalities can also be identified if researchers uncover recurring themes among multiple participants. Consideration of the participant experience can be understood on both an individual level, however more emphasis is placed on understanding similarities among all participants. After multiple reviews of participant responses, in experiencing the interview, transcribing the interview, arranging responses, and performing several readings of each individual response, themes begin to emerge in the form of commonalities among participants.

Upon identification of common themes, the researcher reports the findings. If there is any disagreement or confusion over the identification of the themes, the researcher should acknowledge this in the discussion of the thesis.

BIQRD has been used in several settings. As is the case with qualitative research, BIQRD is best applied to research investigating the subjective experiences of the participant. This research method has been used at the Masters level in the process of reflecting on participants' past experiences (Kruger, 2009), understanding the student experience of accessing services on campus (MacKinnon, 2007), and gaining valuable insight into the perspectives of those actively involved in regularly scheduled programming (Armstrong, 2014). In order to gain a clear picture of how individuals perceive their experiences within the context of the *PAWS Your Stress* program, a method that observes the perspectives of those most closely involved must be used. Ideally, information gained through participant interviews should come from individuals whose attendance of the program has been frequent and longstanding. BIQRD has potential to be useful in the investigation of the experiences of university students attending the *PAWS Your Stress* program.

Personally significant, specific instances are an efficient way to represent the overall picture of a more generally occurring program. However useful in establishing detailed personal information, this technique is not without its limitations. As is the case with all self-report data, this information is highly personal, and therefore subjected to bias. In addition, recency effects can occur when participants report their experiences (Davelaar, Goshen-Gottstein, Ashkenazi, Haarmann, & Usher, 2005).

. A participant may easily recall a recent experience, while a memory from the past may be more difficult to recall. Participants are more likely to identify these recent instances than those from

further in the past. The passage of time between the participants' last experience with the therapy dogs and the interview itself could also impact the data. Two intentional actions were taken in order to minimize this impact. First, a laptop showing a slideshow of photos of *PAWS Your Stress* events played during participant interviews. The photos included therapy dogs playing with students at a regular program location. Second, efforts were made to arrange interviews in the days after a *PAWS Your Stress* session. All interviews were conducted within 10 days of the participants' last visit to the program.

BIQRD is well suited to the research goals of this study because it allows for open-ended questions to be asked of the participant. This methodology allows for an examination of the respondent's experience, and is brought forth by the participant in his or her own words. It highlights personally relevant experiences as identified by the participant, and as such can be a source of very rich information. This method allows for an individualized response that is not forced or coerced by the researcher. Space is created within interviews for the participant to openly express their thoughts about concepts. Because I want to understand the meaning taken from the experiences at the *PAWS Your Stress* program, I am interested in using BIQRD to understand through interpreting how students take meaning from their interactions through each participant's unique perspective.

Materials and Procedure

In preparation for my data collection I immersed myself in the *PAWS Your Stress* programming. I spent time at the sessions enjoying the company of the therapy dogs and observing others doing the same. I met many individuals associated with the program, including handlers, facilitators, students, and therapy dogs. I attended approximately ten sessions, some of which included a process where I took informal notes detailing my observations of participants,

pets, and handlers. I took informal notes twice, where I kept a list of quotes from students leaving the program. Through my observations, I have seen many students come through the drop-in program and have come to understand more fully the nature of the interactions between the dogs and students in attendance.

Participants were recruited at existing *PAWS Your Stress* programming events. Small handbills detailing information about the interview process were made available for individuals who expressed an interest in participation. Dr. Colleen Dell and the *PAWS Your Stress* team assisted in the process of identifying participants who have attended more frequently. In choosing individuals who have attended many sessions, participants had many experiences from which they could draw on in the interview.. These participants were identified and given information either by the *PAWS Your Stress* team or the researcher in order to maintain confidentiality and comfort. Participants who indicated an interest in taking part in the study were given the contact information of the researcher. Seven people were provided with information about the study, four of which expressed further interest in participation through contacting the researcher. From there, participants and the researcher met at a mutually agreed upon time and date on campus.

In keeping with similar studies using BIQRD (Kruger, 2009; McKinnon 2007; Armstrong, 2014), interview questions were semi-structured (Merriam, 2002). Seven questions were asked of each participant, each with room to probe for further information if necessary. Similar to those who have used BIQRD at the Master's level, four participants were interviewed. Data from four participants who have rich information to share is sufficient for establishing themes from conversations. I preferred to interview students who had attended several sessions, however this was not a requirement due to the recent changes in the program's number of

sessions available during the academic year. All participants identified agreed that they considered themselves to be frequent participants, attending more than four of the eight sessions offered during the term in which data was collected. The program, which occurred weekly in previous years, now runs twice a month. Additionally, sessions were held in one of four locations, compared to one consistent location in past years. As such, it was challenging to obtain interviews with regularly established attendees who previously attended weekly sessions.

Private spaces were booked in the Health Science library, the Education library and in the Arts library. These locations were chosen for their proximity to the current locations of the *PAWS Your Stress* program. Interviews were conducted in these locations because their privacy and accessibility to students. Participants' familiarity with the interview site may have helped to refresh memories of previous sessions. After obtaining verbal and written consent, data was generated through an electronic audio recording of the interview using a small audio recording device. These audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher by hand, and kept on a document in Microsoft Word. The transcripts and audio recordings were kept on a password protected laptop computer and transferred to a secured hard drive following the interviews. Throughout the process of transcription, researcher notes on potential themes from conversation were kept.

After the interviews were completed, audio recordings of the data were transcribed. The transcribed words were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis tool using nodes to establish recurring themes in participant responses. After identifying over 20 nodes to describe participant responses, categories were examined and collapsed together into similar responses. After careful reading of all responses, thematic analysis provided the framework for two categories of responses. Five themes emerged from these two categories of participant responses. These

themes describe the specific experiences that had meaning for the participants. In the event that important nodes were found in some, but not all participants, they were retained for further discussion as additional findings of importance. A list of the seven questions (See Appendix D) outlines the nature of participant interviews. These questions elicited detailed experiences that highlighted what students perceive to be most important about the programming being studied. Insights into their experiences before, during and after sessions were gained. In the sharing of their subjective experiences, participants revealed information-rich data from which meaningful conclusions were derived.

Ethics

All studies that occur at this institution are subject to Research Ethics Board review and approval. Ethics approval was obtained prior to recruitment for this study. In preparation for this review, required graduate student ethics coursework was completed. Despite the investigation of an animal-facilitated program, this study directly involves only human participants. As such, ethics approval was obtained for only human participants. The *PAWS* program itself has obtained REB animal ethics approval to operate.

Recruitment was framed in such a way that participants had time to think about participation, and were contacted further only when they had indicated an interest in being interviewed. In scheduling interviews, locations that ensured participant privacy were specifically chosen. Informed consent was established verbally and in written form prior to the start of the interview. All participants consented to audio recording of interviews. Ongoing informed consent was a part of the process, specifically when students shared information of a personal nature. Students were made aware that the audio recorder could be turned off at any moment. No students felt the need to do so during the interviews. A brief conversation with the

participant was used at the end of each session, so as not to leave the participant feeling exposed after divulging sensitive information during the course of the interview. Participants received a small gift in return to compensate for their time. This gift was respectful of their time, yet not substantial enough to warrant unethical consent due to the size of honorarium offered. No names of participants were included in the electronic filing of participant information. Participants were assigned a unique number to keep their identities confidential. All information obtained was kept on a secured file through the use of a password-protected device.

Measures were taken to ensure that any potential for harm to the participant was minimized. The level of facilitator responsiveness to participant needs depended on what occurred within the context of the interview. The student population itself is not necessarily vulnerable by definition, but the questions may have elicited comments expressing feelings of loneliness, sadness, or depression. This was addressed in order to minimize the harm that could come to participants through their participation in the research. There were no indicators of participant distress, and as such, no participant referrals were made to student counselling services. As the researcher who conducted the interviews, I took several counselling classes that equipped me with the skills needed to provide support in the moment to the participant. Participants involved in this study were also given a card detailing a point of access for individual supports on campus. This was not done in response to participant distress, but rather as a precautionary measure to provide students with an access point of support.

Within the consent form, participants were given the option to be informed about the outcome of the study. All participants selected this option, and as such, will be given this information. An option for students to review their transcript and sign a transcript release was given to all participants. No participants chose this option, and as such transcript releases were

not used in this study. All participants signed the written consent form and participated fully in the interviews.

Limitations

It is impossible to claim that findings from this study will affect every university student, or every university student attending the PAWS program, for that matter. This study in particular is limited by its scope of reach due to the detail rich nature of qualitative data. This limitation, though it illustrates a limited range of applicability, also provides valuable detailed information into the experiences of the participants who attend this specific program.

In conducting interviews only with frequent participants, those who may not have had an initially positive experience may be excluded from the data. If an individual did not have positive experiences at the sessions they may not want have wanted to discuss their experiences with a researcher. It is possible that participants who have had positive experiences at the AAA program were more likely to be present for an increased number of sessions, and therefore more likely to be identified as frequent participants by the *PAWS Your Stress* team. This process of finding participants makes it difficult to obtain a truly unbiased subset of participants. This said, qualitative methods could have a beneficial effect on readers who may feel more connected to the experiences of participants, as told through their stories.

A final limitation exists in the limited understanding of the thoughts and experiences of the therapy dogs themselves. Some researchers discuss the potential for communication between human and animal, through multiple relational ways of knowing (Barrett, 2011). Barrett emphasizes the bidirectional nature of communication between human and non-humans. Animism, the belief that non-human beings have inherent value and legitimacy, integrates Indigenous ways of knowing, as well as non-Western epistemologies. Though they are co-

participants in this research, therapy dogs do not have an included voice. As such, a valuable perspective is omitted. Non-human participation is integral to establishing the human-animal bond that is so important for AAAs. Due to the researcher's inability to communicate through rich verbal language with animals, their voices are lost in the data. Consideration of animal wellbeing is important so that animals involved in therapy are not simply treated as tools used for therapeutic purposes. Rather, therapy animals should be viewed as highly perceptive facilitators of an interactive process.

Delimitations

For the purposes of this study, I am interested in the experiences of a small subsection of university students. As such, only students who have participated in the *PAWS Your Stress* sessions on campus will be interviewed. I wish to investigate the personal experience of the program, and students who have returned multiple times are likely to have had more detailed descriptions of their experiences. Students must be enrolled full time (a minimum of three classes, or two for Disability Services for Students (DSS) students, per term) during the term in which they attended the programming. This parameter has been made to encourage information about students who are experiencing stressors related to their academic pursuits. This is not to say that part-time university students do not experience stress related to academics. Students enrolled in full time classes may be more likely to have stressors related to academic pursuits. The purpose of this requirement is to encourage a subset of participants who are more likely to identify with a stressful academic experience.

With more understanding about the participant's perceptions of their stressors and the way they cope with those stressors, valuable understanding about the student experience can be gained. For those who have been involved with the AAA sessions, it paints a vivid portrait of

their experiences with the therapy dogs. The information gained has the potential to be valuable for future students who may access the program, current administrators, and those who wish to implement similar programming in other settings.

Trustworthiness

Many factors contribute to the trustworthiness of this thesis. The method of BIQRD, involving the focus on participant responses, will contribute to the trustworthiness of this study. The open-ended manner in which questions are posed minimizes the influence of the researcher. In minimizing researcher influence, the focus is kept on the participants' experiences. Additionally, the exploration of this program in its natural setting minimizes the changes that might occur in studying the *PAWS Your Stress* program. Throughout the research process, I engaged myself fully in the program for an extended period of time. This prolonged engagement also contributes to the credibility of the study. The use of these established technique improves the trustworthiness of this qualitative study (Merriam, 2002).

Two forms of data collection are involved in this study; informal process notes, and interview transcripts. Attendance at AAA sessions prior to data collection aided in understanding the timing of sessions, the types of participants who attend, and the nature of the interactions that occurred at the sessions. I have come to understand more about the importance of the program through student comments, made spontaneously throughout the sessions. Familiarity with the functional aspects of the program, such as duration and atmosphere, has improved my understanding of participants' perceived experiences. This gathering of multiple forms of data, also known as triangulation, contributed to establishing trustworthiness of this research.

As a researcher who enjoys the company of animals, I am inherently biased towards positive feedback towards what I currently expect to be a positive experience. The inclusion of

questions that could solicit negative responses, such as “Was there anything that wasn’t helpful about the program?” or “Could you think of any other things that you’d like me to know about your experience?”, serves to increase the trustworthiness of the data gathered. Including these types of questions increased the likelihood that participants expressed themselves more freely in response to the researcher’s questions and felt less pressured to portray the program in a positive light.

The qualitative researcher acts as a sieve through which all information is filtered (Merriam, 2002). As the researcher, I collected, interpreted, and discussed all data and therefore the research is subject to my own biased interpretation. To reduce this, an electronic recording device was used, and word-for-word transcription of the dialogues was made. An open approach involving a brief statement prior to the interview, detailing the researcher’s own interest in the subject area, was used in order to show transparency about the researcher’s background.

With regard to the participant interview process, some steps were taken to ensure the safety of participant information. Prior to giving consent, participants were asked if they had any questions. Interviews were conducted in a private room; far enough away from the administrators of the program in order to ensure the participant felt that they were able to be candid in discussing their experience.

Lastly, scrutiny in all forms was accepted and requested on the part of the researcher. Before participant interviews, input from peers and colleagues who were familiar with the qualitative research process was obtained in terms of question formation. After participant interviews, the researcher met with the supervisor to discuss thematic analysis. Multiple viewpoints can only stand to benefit the trustworthiness of the data.

Conclusion and Significance of Study

Students stand to benefit the most from the investigation of AAA on university campuses and its link to providing students with a coping strategy for stress. This preventative approach could impact students' reaction to both singular stressful events as well as ongoing chronic stressors. Students struggling with a stressful school environment can benefit from detailed exploration of programming that aims to support them in a preventative manner.

The results from this study have the potential to inform others in the early stages of implementing similar programming. Administrators seeking to provide a preventative mental health strategy could benefit from a better understanding of the critical aspects of AAA, experienced through a student lens. Further understanding of this programming could also benefit future students, especially those who attend colleges and universities that have yet to implement some form of AAA programming. An intimate understanding of the student experience is important to implementation of AAA in other post-secondary settings. With findings that illustrate what is helpful for students with regard to their interactions in AAA programming, better understanding of potential benefits can occur.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter will detail the results of this study. A description of the *PAWS Your Stress* program will be followed by a description of the participants interviewed for the study. Thematic findings will then be discussed and presented, followed by a discussion of other relevant findings that existed in the data outside the established themes. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants. In an effort to improve the readability of quotes, some edits have been made. This has been indicated by ellipses when content is absent and square brackets when revised. These efforts have been taken to ensure clarity of the participants' comments, as well as confidentiality of the participants' identities.

Paws Your Stress Program

The *PAWS Your Stress* program is offered through a student-run initiative called *What's Your Cap?* The aim of *What's Your Cap* is to provide students with information surrounding the over consumption of alcohol. Student facilitators of the program provide information about moderate consumption of alcohol to university students in an effort to promote a healthier lifestyle. Knowledge of the risks involved with consumption of alcohol assists students in making informed decisions about their use of alcohol. In addition, *What's Your Cap* organizes programs where healthy alternatives to coping with stress are encouraged. In addition to therapy dog programming, *What's Your Cap* provides massages, healthy snacks, and tips on how to reduce stress during final exam time.

What's Your Cap and *PAWS Your Stress*, among other initiatives, are part of the work that is done by the Addictions Research Chair in Substance Abuse. Funded by the provincial government, the mandate of the Research Chair was to improve knowledge and research about issues surrounding substance abuse in the province. Dr. Colleen Dell, a researcher who has three

therapy dogs of her own, held this position at the time of data collection. It is from Dr. Dell's own connection with nature and animals that the idea for the *PAWS Your Stress* program came about on this campus. This program is a collaborative effort, involving many organizations and individuals, including the Research Chair in Substance Abuse, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, Student Health Services, the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, the AAI & Wellness Research Project, and both human and canine volunteers from the St. John Ambulance therapy dog program (Addiction Research Chair Website, 2016)

The St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program provides volunteer teams to facilitate AAAs. Program goals of the organization are to provide love and support to individuals visited by the teams (St. John Ambulance, 2016). Both the human and animal member of therapy dog teams go through assessment to measure their suitability for participation in the program. The handler is screened for character and ability to handle the animal. The dog is screened for temperament and responsivity to their handler. Therapy dog teams are placed in a testing environment in order to assess the temperament of the animal in situations that vary in difficulty. This testing environment ensures that the dogs who pass are able to work safely in the community. A number of dogs are unable to pass this testing and are not eligible to become therapy dogs. Once the dogs have passed the temperamental assessment, they go through an orientation process and are placed by a representative into a suitable setting where a therapy dog team is needed. Handlers must provide ongoing documentation of any issues with regards to the animal's behaviour, along with a record of vaccinations (St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program, 2016). All teams at the *PAWS Your Stress* program are evaluated through this process and part of the St. John Ambulance team of volunteers.

Therapy dog sessions occur in a group setting. Volunteer facilitators arrange chairs into

small circles to accommodate groups of people. The amount of time that each participant spends in the rooms varies. Some stay for the entire duration of the sessions, while others only stay for a few minutes. Therapy dog handlers occasionally speak with participants during the interactions; usually the topic of discussion is the dog. Facilitators offer *What's Your Cap* information handouts, stress balls, and other promotional items for participants as they leave. In an effort to reduce the risk of allergens following the sessions, remaining dog hair is swept and removed from the location. Facilitators also provide hand sanitizer and lint rollers to help participants clean their hands and clothing after interacting with the dogs.

Several changes have been implemented since the inception of *PAWS Your Stress*. When the program began, sessions were held each week. Sessions are now held twice per month, with eight sessions in total during the academic term. Since the same therapy dog teams were volunteering for the program week after week, facilitators chose to make this change to keep from exhausting their volunteers. Another change has been made to the program location, which was previously held in one fixed location near student health services on an upper floor of a main university building. After encountering issues with accessibility and allergens in the previous location, facilitators found a new home for the program in the libraries on campus. Today, sessions are held in four different libraries on campus. During the time of data collection, each library hosted two successive sessions before the program moved to the next location. Additionally, improved accessibility and an increased number of participants were among the reasons for the change in location. As a program in its early years, more changes can be anticipated as further understanding about participant needs, volunteer availability and scheduling arise.

Findings

In an effort to gain a better idea of the types of interactions that occur at the *PAWS Your Stress* program, I attended 10 sessions. I sometimes took informal notes about the interactions at the program, as well as some of the more memorable quotes from people at the program. As I attended the sessions, I observed the way that students, animals, and handlers interacted. Some participants took time to visit with each therapy dog, while others chose to spend their time with one dog in particular. Some individuals arrived in groups with friends and classmates, while others attended alone. Occasionally, students would strike up conversations with each other, engaging in interactions with those in their immediate surroundings. Students' interactions with the therapy dog handlers was minimal; it was clear that their intent to interact with the dogs was primary. I became familiar with some of the therapy dog handlers throughout this process. One discussed the nature of her interactions with the students: "They don't actually ask for my name very often, but they always want to know [my dog]'s." Variations in therapy dog handlers existed as well. Some were very quiet and allowed their dogs to interact more freely with the students, while others took a more active role in facilitating the interactions by guiding the dog to the students and doing tricks. Interactions between participants and dogs brought about comments from the participants that were complimentary in nature. Comments such as, "Oh, you're so handsome!", "Aren't you just the cutest girl I ever did see?" and "Oh, I just love you so much" were observed during sessions. Comments such as "Oh that was so great" and "I've got to get to this midterm, but now I feel like 5 billion times better!" were overheard from students leaving the program. Observations were consistent with the positive nature of the experiences shared by the participants.

The Participants

My first participant was recruited after being identified as a frequent participant. “Mira” is a female student studying a science-related field. Mira is originally from the continent of Africa, where her experiences led her to develop a careful approach in interacting with dogs. In her descriptions of her experiences, Mira talked about many different sessions she had attended. Mira had a strong connection to one of the volunteer therapy dogs in particular, and shared photos of her and the therapy dog that she kept with her on her cell phone. She heard about the program through advertised posters.

My second participant “Dominique” was also recruited after being identified as a frequent participant. Dominique is a female student, studying a science-related field. Similar to Mira, Dominique also came from a country in Africa, and had a similarly hesitant approach to dogs when she first arrived in Canada. Dominique described in detail her struggle not only in viewing dogs in a new way, but also in connecting socially with her Canadian peers. Dominique described experiences from many different sessions, and described finding out about the program through a friend. It was not until after our interview that it was discovered that Mira and Dominique frequently attend the program together, and encourage each other to attend.

My third participant, “Jenaya” was recruited at the very end of the last Health Science library session. Jenaya, a female student from a neighbouring province, is studying a science-related field. Jenaya was identified as a frequent participant, and would have been missed if I had not approached her as quickly as I did. Typically, I was able to sit on the sidelines and slowly come into a small group to recruit an individual in particular. Jenaya was in the room for only 10 minutes before she had to leave to attend a class. It was clear that even with a very busy schedule, she made an effort to carve out a few minutes to see the dogs. After giving Jenaya my

contact information, she indicated an interest in discussing her experiences from over the past year of attending the program and made some time in her schedule to be interviewed. She heard about the program through a friend.

“Crystal”, my fourth participant, was recruited at an evening session in the Education library. Crystal is a first year university student from a neighbouring province. She is currently completing courses towards a liberal arts degree, and hopes to be accepted into the college of Education. Crystal has frequently attended the program this year with a friend. Within our conversation, Crystal indicated that she identified as part of the Queer community. Crystal discussed the link between non-judgment and her participation in the *PAWS Your Stress* program, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5. Crystal found out about the program through speaking with a student representative for *What’s Your Cap* at a booth during her student orientation.

Some commonalities exist among the participants. All participants were females. Recruitment of males would have been welcomed, however no male participants were identified as frequent visitors by the program staff. The absence of male participants will be addressed within the discussion section of this paper. All participants had predominantly positive experiences during their time at the program. Some barriers to pet ownership were discussed in participants’ lives, such as money, time, and limitations of living arrangements. All participants identified themselves as fond of animals and discussed the feeling of being connected to dogs. All participants participated fully and contributed greatly to the findings.

Themes

As a past participant of the program, I’ve experienced the stress relief firsthand in my own interactions with the animals. During my interviews with participants, some responses

highlighted some of my own experiences, while others were unexpected. Through these interviews, themes emerged to address my research questions addressing stress relief through attendance and the meaning that participants made within their interactions (see Appendix E). Two overarching categories containing five themes in total were identified. First, stress relief was identified as a common experience of the program. From this category, three themes were identified in contribution to stress relief and coping – being in the moment, social benefits, and variations in coping ability. Second, participants identified personal meaning obtained through their experience of the program. From this category of meaning, two themes were identified – personalized interactions and reciprocity.

Stress Relief

A common experience shared by the participants involved in this study was the feeling of stress relief. This experience has led to three separate themes being identified – being in the moment, social interactions, and variations in coping ability for participants. Certain aspects of stress relief were experienced immediately within the context of the sessions themselves, while others were found in reflection on participants' perception of the program's impact on their ability to cope with stressors. Other findings describe the latent functions of the program, such as the facilitation of social interaction with dogs, as well as their handlers, program staff, and other attendees of the program. While the primary goal of the program is to provide students with an alternative form of stress relief through interaction with animals, students have been able to interpret their experiences in unique ways to suit their needs for stress relief.

Theme 1: Being in the moment

Participants described stress relief through immediate interactions, such as the ability to simply focus in the moment with the animals. Being in the moment allowed participants to set

aside their worries for the day and concentrate of the moment of the interaction with the dog. Some researchers suggest that dogs provide a focus point for individuals that by interacting with them, humans are forced to live in the present moment (Henry & Crowley, 2015). Participants discussed this feeling by sharing their experiences.

Mira described her stress associated with student life. Her mind was constantly racing with thoughts and questions about her assignments. She found that having a moment to simply sit with the dogs relieved some of her stress. She described her experience as follows:

When I'm studying I'm always like 'why do we have to do this? What's the meaning of this? What is this going to be with?' ... I'm always thinking of the answer. It's just nice to turn your brain off for like 10 or 15 minutes and just pet the dogs and let the dogs do the thinking.

Mira returned to this idea of resting her mind many times in her discussion of petting the dogs. I found her discussion of this state of 'brain rest' to be interesting, as Mira is involved in a highly competitive college, where thinking is valued. Mira's experience of resting her mind gives insight into the necessity of stress relief for students. In the next chapter, neurocognitive and biochemical components of stress relief as a result of participation in AAA programming will be explored. As Mira saw it, there was value in taking an opportunity to take in the interactions without thinking too much about the process itself:

I don't really think too much when I'm petting the dogs. I'm just like 'I gotta feel nice, I gotta feel good... [When] you're with the dog, you're not really thinking about anything...I felt like I was putting my worries away. I wasn't really thinking, I was just petting him in the moment. Just petting.

Forgetting about problems in the moment appeared to be important for Dominique as well. She had an understanding that while her problems weren't going to be eliminated, having some time to forget them for a moment was helpful in relieving stress:

I forget about – I kind of forget about my problems for a bit. Because it's just there –it's time to just forget about everything and have fun playing with a dog.

Jenaya talked about her difficulty in leaving the state of mind that she associated with school. While on campus, she found it difficult to not think about her main source of stress - school. As she attended the program, she began to think of it as a change in both her environment and her state of mind. The changes made to the environment in turn influenced changes to her state of mind in that moment:

My mind is somewhere else now, instead of focused on whatever I was stressing about. Now it's just on like 'Wow, look at this dog.' And that, I think the main thing is they really help me not think about what was very stress[ful], which is huge. Sometimes in the school setting you're in the same environment, and it's very hard to get out of that, because you're in the same environment. But yeah, in the program, wherever I [attend], it's like 'Okay, it's with dogs, it's different. I just want to be here at this moment'.

Crystal described the difference between her state of mind prior and after attending the program. Mira sustained her attention and focus for long periods of time in studying for her exams. Further discussion of how AAA might facilitate a period of rest from this hyper-focused state will be included in the next chapter. Her description is related to stress associated with being a student and having many tasks to accomplish. Her participation provided her with a momentary relief from those thoughts of worry about studying and deadlines:

Beforehand I'm very in my mind, thinking about what I have to do, and what I have to study, and afterwards that's kind of gone away because I can focus on something else - something very in the moment.

During sessions, Crystal found the presence of the dog to assist her in keeping her focus on the session. Keeping her attention focused on the dogs helped her think more about her experiences with the animals and less about her stressors. She described her shift in focus:

It's just like if - while I'm sitting there, if I notice that I'm starting to worry about anything related to school, this is something that I can just let go of because they're right there. So I can focus on the dog instead of school.

Theme 2: Social Benefits

Participants spoke of the social benefits of attending programming. These social benefits enabled participants to be greater connected to the process, and empowered them to take charge of their experiences. In describing their experiences, participants felt social connections to different individuals involved in the process of providing therapy dog programming.

In addition to describing her interactions with the animals, Mira described the interactions with the handlers as especially friendly and welcoming. She found that while she was able to connect well with the animals, the therapy dog handlers provided her with positive interactions as well.

When I go there, they're always smiling. Nobody seems to be in a bad mood... And the owners of the dogs, they don't say 'oh don't touch her' or nothing, they say 'Oh! Tickle him behind this, that's his favorite spot!'

Dominique discussed the struggle to make social connections. As a new Canadian, she found it difficult to connect culturally at first, "I just couldn't connect with people as well because there's a cultural difference, priorities, things like that." As she gained experience within Canadian culture, and moved from a larger city in Eastern Canada, she became more comfortable with her social surroundings. This experience gave Dominique a unique perspective of the *PAWS Your Stress* program as a social conduit for people new to the city:

A lot of people struggle. It's a big city – a big university – a lot of people struggle to meet people here. So *PAWS Your Stress*, you don't only relieve stress, but you get to meet people on campus, and you might meet people that way so I think it's good. It's double – like two good things.

Dominique described her interactions with the animals and handlers at the same time. While scratching a particular dog, she found she had shared in some humour with the dog's handler, in laughing at the reaction that the dog took to her affection:

I just started scratching [the dog's] neck and she kind of started twisting and apparently

she was lifting her leg and I just saw the people that were facing the part of her that was lifting her leg. I just saw them all talk and start laughing! They were like ‘Oh, you found her spot!’

Social benefits were especially important to Jenaya. In her discussion of her experience, she made reference to the social interactions that the program facilitated with her friends, classmates, handlers, as well as the therapy dogs themselves. In discussion of the program as a way for her friends to interact while engaging in a helpful activity, she stated:

It gave me a little bit of socializing time, because with friends... for example, the friend who told me [about the program], usually we go for lunch, but also we like going there and socializing... That was also good and I saw other friends that I knew, so it was just nice.

Jenaya enjoyed her interactions with handlers, and frequently engaged in discussions with them about their pets. Jenaya recalled a conversation where she was able to speak with a handler about her family pet back home, Lola, who she was missed greatly:

I [said] ‘Oh Lola does that too!’ and I’ll be like ‘Oh that’s what she does’... sometimes I’ll be talking with the owner of the dog, and they’ll be like ‘This is her nature’, and I’ll be like ‘Oh my dog is completely the opposite’ you know? Like all that, so I guess that too, it gives something to talk about.... If I want to take a break and go and maybe talk to the owner, and maybe [I can say] something to the other person... about their own experiences with dog.

With regards to the program, Jenaya described the wide variety of interactions that occur as a result of its presence on campus. Not only did she discuss the impact of the therapy dogs, Jenaya found the program to be helpful in other ways:

Yeah, it’s not just like ‘Oh – dogs – therapy-’ there’s so much more to it. Like meeting new people, maybe the owner, the student [who might] have dogs like me. They can share stories, like this kind of stuff comes up, like if you want to talk about your dog, it’s basically, you have to look for one, but because the setting is like that, you can just talk.

Crystal described a kind of stress relief that she experienced in her attendance of the program, associated with establishing social connections. Part of the stress relief that Crystal

discussed was being able to make connections socially in an environment where judgment was not imposed. She described how knowing that a dog wouldn't judge her for being queer empowered her to attend without feeling as if that was something she needed to address upfront in terms of making social connections.

This [identifying as a member of the Queer community] isn't something that I necessarily tell every person I meet the moment I meet them... as times goes on I might start thinking, like if I tell this person now, how would they feel and how would that impact the relationship that we've built? You don't have that with dogs so it's easier to just approach them and be there because they're not going to care. So it's very – it takes that level of stress off in terms of meeting other beings.

Crystal also discussed the lessening of pressure to be perfect. She described the feeling that dogs will accept you without judgment.

I think it's just the concept that as long as you're a good person... they'll be okay with you at the very minimum, and some dogs will even be happy to see you and be with you.

Theme 3: Variations in Coping Ability

The third theme involves participants' experiences with stress relief, with variations in their coping abilities. Many responses indicated that their interactions with the therapy dogs made them feel supported as they relieved their stress. Within our interviews, all participants discussed the coping mechanisms they typically used to deal with school related stress. Participants came up with answers such as exercise, napping, taking breaks, and socializing with friends. These answers indicated primarily healthy coping strategies in the lives of the participants. One response which could indicate an avoidant coping style was described by Crystal as "procrastination through organizing", however, it became clear that this tactic benefited her more than it impeded her progress. If this indeed was considered an unhealthy coping strategy, it existed far away from other unhealthy coping strategies on the spectrum of

stress relievers common among students, such as binge drinking. These students already engage in preventative methods to combat stress, such as exercise. They use the program in combination with other existing approaches in coping with stress. In total, all participants have implemented strategies to cope with stress, and use the *PAWS Your Stress* program as one of many tools in combatting stress in their lives.

Mira described her ability to cope with stress well. She felt that while she was able to deal with stress well, the program provided her with an additional means of coping with her stress. Mira talked about a few things that she used to cope with her stress – napping, exercising, and spending time petting dogs at her place of work when customers would come by with their animals. Due to her positive experiences with animals, Mira began to view dogs as a source of stress relief, and described how she sought out animals as a safe place to connect, “I see a dog and I pet them... or I’ll start petting random strangers’ dogs!”

Additionally, Mira discussed the way she felt the program provided her stress relief, in that it relieved her of some of the worrisome thoughts she experienced,

I thought of it as a stress reliever because I thought I have too [many] things that I was thinking of and about school... what am I going to do with my life? The whole meaning of life? Existential problems, those kind of questions, you know – I was thinking about those things.

Dominique saw herself as better able to cope after accessing the program, although she had already established healthy coping in her own life too. Exercise and listening to music were two ways that Dominique coped with stress. Dominique did not always view dogs as part of her array of coping strategies. Similar to Mira, she was once fearful of dogs.

If I were new in Canada, I would not play with people’s dogs. Dogs back home bite. You do not touch someone else’s dog... I was so scared of dogs there [in Africa], I still played with them, but it’s just the caution... You have to be careful in approaching them. And it took me a while to get over that here.

As she became more comfortable with dogs, she began to see them as a source of stress relief. Her attitudes around the usefulness of animals to cope with stress changed as she became more familiar with the way Canadians interact with their pets.

I eventually got used to the temperament of dogs here [in Canada] as opposed to there [in Africa].

Dominique conceptualized her stress relief as feelings of support from the animals. In having positive interactions with the dogs, she noticed her mood changed. Dominique also discussed that the dogs had insight into her stress levels, and supported her because of an instinctive knowledge that she was stressed:

I think it's just a good feeling to be supported by the dog. I go in, if I'm in a bad mood – well I might be excited, but I might be in a bad mood from something else because life happens – but if I'm there and the dog is coming to play with me, maybe sometimes they sense it as well. So it makes me feel a lot better. It improves my day; it makes it memorable.

Jenaya discussed a clear link for her between stress relief and getting support from the dogs. While she acknowledged that there are many ways of getting support, the program was a big factor in how Jenaya coped with stress. It is from that support that helped Jenaya gain relief from her stress.

There's different ways of getting support, and for me, it's just like getting relief from the stress... that's another support for me.

Jenaya also described observing changes to her ability to cope with stress. Though she is busy with school, she values the time she spent with the dogs because she knows that the benefits are worth the time she spent.

Oh, [it's] definitely easier to cope with the stress. Because as I said, even with 15 minutes there, and then when I'm out, I feel so much better. My mood is so much more positive, and because it doesn't even feel like 'Oh I wasted this much time now.' ... Now I feel like 'Okay, let's get back to work'.

In her participation, Jenaya discussed learning lessons about stress relief and coping as part of her own observations of the dogs. She discussed her observations of how the dogs changed as the sessions progressed. Within the 90 minutes of her attendance, Jenaya attended for a short time at the beginning, left to study, and came back for a short time near the end. What she saw in the difference in energy level of the therapy dogs taught her a lesson about being able to accept that breaks are important in dealing with stress.

At first they'll be very hyper. You can see their energy level too. Sometimes I'll be going to the end of the session and they're very calm. That's obviously because they've interacted with so many people and now they just want to relax too. You see that shift... And you realize that it's normal. You can relate it to yourself, like maybe their energy is [drained] and now they need rest. Same as us.

Crystal described the lasting effects of her attendance of the program. After her participation, she felt better able to cope with stressors as they arose in the days following her attendance of the program. Crystal feel better during attendance and the program helped her to feel calm when school stress began to bother her later on.

I think just in general usually at least for a couple days after going to these sessions it helps me, like I always feel calmer and it also helps me when I'm not feeling calm, like when I get worried or anxious I find it's easier to bring myself down from that.

Meaningful Participant Experiences

The second category from which two themes emerge is centred on the meaning participants make from their interactions with the therapy dogs themselves. Though they are two separate themes, personalized interactions and reciprocity have similarities that may make them difficult to conceptualize separately. Personally significant experiences can be any interaction that is experienced as meaningful by the participant on behalf of the animal. For example, a personally significant experience could involve a therapy dog wagging his tail upon seeing a student enter the circle, leading the student to interpret that action on behalf of the animal to

mean that the dog personally remembered the student. In some cases, participants made comments that implied an understanding of the dog's thoughts toward them, such as, "Oh, you must be stressed today." Personally significant experiences occurred when participants understood a message through their own interpretations of the therapy dogs' actions. Reciprocity is described any interaction that is perceived to be bidirectional in nature. An example of a reciprocal interaction is if a student pets a dog, and the dog licks the student's hand in return. This expression is meaningful to participants because of the bidirectional nature of affection that is being shared. Both themes describe the intimate nature of contact between a human and an animal, which has emerged as one of the more personally meaningful findings for the participants involved in this study.

Three of the four participants described feeling as if the dogs have some form of understanding or knowledge of the participants' elevated stress level. Some described it as a feeling of being supported or understood, while others described it in terms of the messages of support that they imagined the dog saying to them. Mira felt as if one animal in particular was able to connect with her emotionally,

He seems to be able to sense my emotions, like you know 'Oh she's stressed already'." She also described the sense that the dogs give attention where it's needed by participants who are stressed, "I just felt like he was giving me his attention like "You're pretty stressed..."

Mira also talked about how she felt that animals have the ability to sense when something isn't going well, in this case, when students are under stress.

Yeah, it's pretty strange because you don't really think animals would be able to sense things. But they can. They can sense when something is going wrong, when something isn't right.

Dominique described her experience with the dogs as if the dogs, in sensing her mood,

would make a decision on how much attention to give her:

Yeah, they sense it. If I was in a bad mood, they'd sense it. Then it's like 'Okay, do we go play with her or do we leave her alone?' ... You can tell just by how much attention they give you too, it's like 'Okay, you had a bad day, we should go play with you'.

Jenaya also described her experiences with individual dogs, making comments that indicated that she felt they had an innate understanding of her stressful experiences. Jenaya expressed that she felt understood by the dogs, and described her feelings in detail:

I always feel like they understand. Yeah I always feel that. With some many people, when there's a smaller group I think when they sit and you're petting. I think they do understand. That's why they're maybe like stopping and staying there in that position. Yeah, I do feel like maybe they know. There might be something in them – like maybe by staying there, they're helping... yeah I really notice when they stay. It's like they know maybe they're like 'Okay, let's just stay here for a little bit'.

Though these experiences are from a small number of participants, my own discussions with facilitators and therapy dog handlers as well as my casual observations of participants over the months at *PAWS Your Stress* sessions, confirmed this idea that the animals have some form of immeasurable understanding of students' stress. The experiences shared by these four participants have also contributed to my own understanding of the meaning students take from their interactions with animals and the genuine form of love and support that students interpreted from their interactions.

Theme 4: Personalized Interactions

Due to the group nature of the program, interactions frequently occur with a larger number of individuals. It is within these instances, when the dog individually seeks out participants, where they feel a special connection to the animal. Individuals described feeling sought out by the dogs, as if the dogs had an understanding that in that moment, they wanted the participant to feel special. Some of the participants also discussed the significance of feeling that

a dog remembered them from a previously attended session. This feeling of being remembered made participants feel special and adored. The connections that participants made to animals were meaningful to them in that participants were able to establish longstanding connections to dogs who provided them with a space to relieve stress.

Mira's personalized interactions involved a special connection with one dog in particular. She remembered the dog's color, breed, and name. Mira even took time to show me photos of herself and the dog that she kept on her cell phone. It was clear that while she enjoyed her time with all the dogs, she had a special connection to this one in particular.

This dog, the black boxer, Subie, any time I got pet that dog, he remembers me. He always leaps on me and one time he almost wanted to sit on my lap... Anytime I go there, he always sees me... he remembers me. It feels like maybe we have a connection that maybe he doesn't have with other people. It makes me feel special.

Dominique also felt a special connection, but to a few different dogs within the program. She initially didn't expect to be remembered by the therapy dogs, but was surprised when she seemed to connect with one of the dogs. Dominique discussed the feeling she experienced when she felt that a dog remembered her from a previous session, similar to seeing an old friend again after some time apart.

The black one, Winnie, She remembered me! I wasn't sure she would... It makes me feel really good because of their energy level. They're like 'I know you! I know you!', and I'm like 'Yeah, you know me! You know me!' So it's pretty good – I love it.

Jenaya talked about her own experiences within a group setting, feeling special when a therapy dog singled her out. While in a larger group, Jenaya felt that being approached by a dog meant that the dog was showing her specific affection. Jenaya also linked it to being loved by the dog in particular.

With the dogs, definitely when they come to me it's like 'Oh I feel special'... I'm like 'Okay, maybe she really likes me', there's that component too.

Jenaya spoke about her interactions with a dog who she felt became her 'special dog'.

The connection to this animal became something that Jenaya looked forward to when she spotted that animal in particular at the sessions.

There was one dog, Brita? Yeah, last year she especially was very, she would come to the university and there was a certain spot I would scratch and she would just be like 'yeah...' and then I'm like 'Okay, you're my special dog now in here!'

While Crystal appreciated the one-on-one nature of interactions with the dogs, she did not have the same experience as the first three participants in terms of feeling that any of the dogs recognized her. She was not convinced that the dogs had any inclination that she had previously attended, and felt that it did not matter whether or not the dogs recognized her. She had different expectations of the animals, and expressed that she understood the large number of individuals that see the dogs. In her opinion, it did not matter if the dogs likely did not remember her, the benefits of interaction were enough for Crystal. The manner in which the dogs interacted with her was more important than being recognized.

I don't know if the dogs recognize me - therapy dogs go to a lot of places - so I'd understand it if, I guess it's like being a teacher and you know, having tons of students, you're not necessarily going to remember all of them. But I don't think that's a huge impact as long as they're still happy to be there...

Crystal described the feeling of having a dog come back to her after she was no longer the new person in the circle. She felt special when the dogs came back to interact with her, despite newer students having joined the circle.

I usually stay as long as I can so usually like 10 or 20 minutes in, it feels very - that you've stopped being a novelty, so it's exciting when you get there and the dogs are excited to see you... but if they keep coming back to you after however long that you've been there - that you're no longer this new thing - it feels very loving that they're still glad that you're there even though you're not like a new person.

Participants made meaning through their interactions with the therapy dogs. They

interpreted the affectionate behaviour, attention, and interaction to mean certain things about how they were perceived by the animal. Participants described these interactions upon being asked about if they felt loved or supported during sessions. Participants internalized loving and supportive messages on behalf of the therapy dog, interpreting these messages as truth.

Theme 5: Reciprocity

Interactions between person and animal are complex. Participants had different experiences with the animals, each with their own unique view of what a reciprocal interaction could look like in this setting. Some focused on reciprocation of affection, while others focused more on the attention and energy brought forth by both the dogs and participants themselves. In order to be effective, this back and forth between human and animal requests an empathetic response on the part of the student. Through these reciprocal exchanges of perceived empathy, participants found meaningful experiences that helped them feel loved and supported by the therapy dogs.

Mira indicated that the relationship between her and the animals was more complex than she initially had expressed. She discussed her affection as part of a cycle between herself and the therapy dogs:

I just feel like they're reciprocating the affection, and giving [it] back, the dog's giving back that affection, you know, smiling and all that.

Mira also discussed the sense that the nature of the relationship is not only from dog to human. She discussed the possibility of an interaction that occurred that could have been important for the dog and the human alike. To Mira, the link between human and animal was bidirectional in nature.

I just feel like it's just two people – not two people, rather, two beings – a human being and a dog, just coming together and the dog can sense you are stressed.

Dominique found that the dogs influenced her own energy levels. In turn, she felt that her energy levels influenced how the dogs acted. In this interaction, a mutual interchange was meaningful to her.

I know it's definitely a good feeling... if I sense, if I see the animal, the way they show affection, it's almost like their energy level [shifts] and the way they react kind of reciprocates.

Jenaya discussed the nature of seeking out affection from the dogs, while the dogs seek out affection from participants. This interaction encouraged an empathetic response that was part of her interpretation of meaning.

Okay, for me, it's as much as I want to interact with them too. It kind of goes in a mutual way...I feel like as much as they're trying to please you, you're trying to please them too. To come and be [seeking] the attention, now your goal is to be like 'Okay, that dog, I want to pet him, so that it gives me attention too.' And when it happens it's like 'Oh, this is nice'. You're just more focused on that.

Crystal described feeding off the energy of the dogs at the session. In her interactions, she felt a connection to the animals in terms of being influenced by the calming energy. This was not always the case, since each therapy dog has a unique personality. While some dogs jump and have high energy during the sessions, others take a less energetic approach. Crystal felt connected to these dogs in that she found them to influence her energy levels. In particular, Crystal felt calmed by the presence of a dog with a more laid-back approach.

I find it very calming, when the dog isn't necessarily super excited. If they're there and just content to lie with you and let you pet them that's always really nice... it's a reminder that there are good things in this world. That they're there for you, they're happy to see you, and they're glad that you're around. It feels very nice.

Additional Findings of Importance

Some additional findings were uncovered through data analysis that did not fit within the above five categories. This additional information is still of importance in consideration of the

participants' experiences of the *PAWS Your Stress* program.

Transition to Canada

Two individuals involved in the study had emigrated from Africa before becoming Canadian citizens. As part of their journey, both Mira and Dominique described changes to their own views of animals. While animals were part of their lives in Africa, neither had relied on pets to provide them with stress relief. In discussing her transition from Africa to Canada, Dominique shared that animals had been part of her transition. Though Dominique eventually befriended two dogs in her landlady's home, this was not always the case. Dominique described her first encounter with animals in Canada after arriving to her new house from the airport:

I refused to get out of the car. I'm used to wild dogs, right? So there was one when I was 12 [and] so much smaller, there's a dog about half my size and I didn't want to risk finding out if it could bite.

After a brief adjustment period, both participants felt that their approach to dogs shifted. Each went from having a cautious, fearful manner in which they approached dogs, to being excited and happy to see dogs in the public setting. Both women discussed seeking out affection from strangers' dogs, and making an effort to connect with animals when they had the opportunity. Mira and Dominique began to view pets as beings that could provide comfort.

All participants described the program as a coping strategy for a particular longing that they felt in their life. Each person had a special connection to a dog in another place, one that participants once relied on for their own comfort. Mira described her family dog in Africa, "Sam", who she had to give away when she moved. Dominique also described her pet in Africa, "Diesel", who she also had to leave behind in moving to Canada. Jenaya discussed missing her family pet back home "Lola", a Lhasa-Apso/Border Collie mix. Crystal described missing her Shih-Tzu back home who, despite his occasional irritability, had a presence which Crystal found

comforting. In attending the program, participants were provided with interaction that appeared to temporarily supplement these individuals' need for connection with their animals. Participants described missing the presence of an animal, and for some, this was a solution until they could either be reunited with their pets at home, or would be in a situation where adopting or buying themselves a new pet was possible.

Summary

The process of conducting these interviews assisted in furthering my own understanding of the program through participants' viewpoints. Though I had been a participant myself at one point, my own experiences were different than those of the individuals I had interviewed. All students emphasized their appreciation for the program, and its important role in providing a safe space for them to relieve stress in their life. All students mentioned a desire to continue attending, and a hope for the continuation of the program for their studies and for other students in the future.

These participants were able to use the program to their advantage in filling in their own gaps in coping with stress. For those participants who needed more social interaction, they spoke more with facilitators and met up with friends at the program. For those who needed a comforting presence, their focus was solely on the interactions with the therapy dogs. Stories shared by participants highlighted their own unique challenges and struggles with academic life. Despite their differences, each student was able to create meaning from their interactions that helped them cope. Through these interviews, it became clear that the connection between human and animal, as facilitated through this program, has had a positive impact on the lives of students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will include a discussion in regards to each of the themes identified in the thematic analysis of the research. The chapter will begin with a summary of findings, followed by a discussion of the current relevant research that relates to each finding. Findings are discussed in relation to current literature on student stress and animal assisted activity programming. A discussion on limitations and recommendations for future implementation of similar programming are also discussed, followed by the researcher's reflection.

Summary of Findings

As discussed previously, AAA programs provide stress relief to a variety of populations. For students in particular, AAA has only recently emerged as a source of programming that is regularly offered on Canadian university campuses. The current study found that four participants of the *PAWS Your Stress* program had positive experiences that impacted their lives in two ways – through providing an outlet for stress relief and in providing meaningful experiences for students. All participants described themselves as “frequent attendees”, and have each attended more than 6 sessions of the program.

The participants differed in terms of their own experience of stress. All participants experienced school related stress in some form. They found that school related stress took different forms in each of their lives. Some took a more proactive approach to coping with stressors, while others used somewhat avoidant strategies. Despite variations in coping styles, all participants felt that the program was effective in providing relief for their stress. All participants found their interactions with animals to be meaningful, especially when connecting one-on-one with the therapy dogs.

Through participant responses, three themes addressed how stress relief was achieved by

students through their experiences - being in the moment, social benefits, and variations in coping. Being in the moment, the first theme was identified by all participants as part of their experience. This approach, which resembles mindfulness techniques, was effective in providing momentary relief for the students in terms of stress relief. Second, although it is not the primary goal of the program, *PAWS Your Stress* served as a social outlet for some participants, who discussed connecting with therapy dogs, handlers, and other participants. This serves as a more expansive form of stress relief, in terms of improving social connections for students. Lastly, variations were identified in regards to the participants' ability to seek out coping strategies. For some, this included strengthening an already established array of strategies. For others, this included changing or implementing a new strategy altogether.

Two themes were identified to explain how meaning was made through students' participation – personalized interactions and reciprocal interactions. These two types of interaction were identified as most important to participants in their connections to the therapy dogs. First, participants suggested that the most meaningful interactions occurred when they interpreted a special connection to exist between themselves and the dogs. One-on-one interactions were helpful in facilitating these meaningful interactions. Second, reciprocal interactions between human and animal served to provide the participants with meaningful experiences.

Lastly, the program goals of love and support were found in two areas. The first area is in participants' description of the stress relief associated with their involvement, which students identified as support. Second, the program also facilitated the opportunity for a sharing of empathy and affection between the students and animals, which students defined as love. This finding is consistent with similar literature that measures the St. John Ambulance program goals

of love and support (Dell et al., 2015).

Integration of Findings with Current Literature

The Experience of Stress

Dogs have the ability to use their sense of smell to identify illness in humans (Wells, 2007). Wells (2007) explained that dogs are able to detect serious physical illnesses, such as cancer or the onset of an epileptic seizure. Recent research suggested dogs are also able to smell hormones in humans (Tuxworth, 2012), and therefore may be drawn to participants whose cortisol levels are elevated. Animals have been integrated into many aspects of human life, yet have only recently begun to be viewed as therapeutic tools (Amiot & Bastian, 2014). Mindfulness training has been used as an effective method of stress relief for students. Greeson, Toobey, and Pearce (2015) suggested that even a program as short as four weeks can reduce stress for students, expand mindfulness in daily life, and improve student self-care. Mindfulness training has been used in collaboration with animal assisted therapy. In studying the combination of the use of trained therapy dogs with a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, Henry and Crowley (2015) found that the use of therapy dogs provided no impact on the course of therapy. In a study of self-compassion and empathy within a mindfulness training program, individuals reduced levels of stress in their life (Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010). As a result of participation in this mindfulness-based program, significant reductions were seen in symptoms of stress and mood disturbances. Participation was also associated with improved self directed empathy and compassion. While AAT did not improve the effect of MBSR programming, there was also no detriment to participants. More investigation into this phenomenon could be helpful in assessing the link between mindfulness based practice and AAA.

Dell et al. (2015) examined three AAA programs on Canadian campuses, and found that

being in the moment was part of the students' experiences of the programming. When presented with the statement, "I felt in control of my emotions (that is, balanced and in the moment) after spending time with the therapy dogs", 84% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed. With the knowledge that students in the current study also experienced some aspects of mindfulness in their own participation, further integration of mindful techniques into stress relief programming could be helpful in providing students with different tools to combat stress.

Neurobiological evidence supports some of the findings of my research. Mira, who discussed a hyper-focus on academic content, felt that the program provided her with a break from that state of mind. The human animal bond has been found to help in individuals who are locked into a hypervigilant, hyperfocused state common among those with posttraumatic stress symptoms (White, 2011; Esnayra & Love, 2008). The presence of animals helps to regulate the autonomic nervous system and bring down an individual from this stress-induced state. Cortisol, a hormone that is secreted in times of stress, has been associated with periods of sustained attention. When individuals are stressed and cortisol is secreted, memory and attention function begin to deteriorate (Vedhara, Hyde, Gilchrist, Tytherleigh, & Plummer, 2000). This may explain why individuals experiencing academic stress find that the program provides a sense of calm. If only for a moment, students are able to allow their mind to rest. Attendance of the program may help stressed individuals regulate the autonomic nervous system, coming back to a place of calm and focus.

Social connections are necessary in adjusting to the changes that accompany university life. As a student engages in social interaction, they are able to build a network of support. Pierceall & Keim (2007) discussed the wide variety of sources that student stress can come from including creating new friendships and establishing social connections. Establishing social bonds

through AAA programming could be helpful, especially for students new to university.

In the study of three Canadian AAA programs for college students, Dell et al. (2015) suggested that the influence of handlers could positively impact students' experiences of being supported. In response to the statement, "I felt supported by the dog handler", 94% of attendees either agreed or strongly agreed. This finding is consistent with the current study. It is clear that the handlers play an important role in AAA programming.

In a study of student stress and coping strategies, perceived levels of stress among students was associated with decreased use of practical coping strategies for students (Kausar, 2010). It is possible that by providing students with a number of practical coping strategies, students are supported in coping with stress. This may assist in lowering the perceived levels of student stress experienced by students. In the study of three AAA programs on Canadian campuses, Dell et al (2015) found that 92% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The therapy dogs helped me to de-stress". This finding is consistent with the current study.

Making Meaning through Love and Support

Love and support are important parts of the relationship built between people and therapy dogs. Chandler (2005) described the innate ability of therapy dogs to provide comfort and nurturance. The use of a therapy dog encourages physical touch that may otherwise cross boundaries between client and mental health practitioner. Chandler (2005) suggested that this appropriate, genuine, and caring touch can be extremely meaningful for recipients.

The opportunity for student to express love to the dogs through reciprocal interactions emphasizes a bidirectional relationship between human and animal. These findings are consistent with the current study. Participants in the current study also described feeling love during their

participation. Participants felt that love existed in the affection given to them by the dogs, as well as within the affection they were able to extend to the animals through kind words or physical touch. The ability to express affection for the dogs was a fundamental part of their experience. Without the space to express this affection for the animal, the interactions may not have been as meaningful for participants.

In her dissertation examining human-horse interactions, Chalmers (2014) found that through interpreting observations of their horses, participants came to better understand the nature of their communications. Similar to the findings in my research, participants made interpretations to construct a dialogue on behalf of the animal. The participants made meaning through what they believed to be a legitimate exchange of communication between human and animal. “These interpretations essentially permitted understanding through a dialogue that was constructed as if their horses were voicing their thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Chalmers, 2014, p. 215). It is through this communication and language exchange that a relationship is built between human and animal.

Reciprocal interactions, like those facilitated through this AAA program, provide the opportunity for participants to express empathy towards the animal. It is possible that through these empathetic interactions, students are able to see themselves through the animal’s lens. Perhaps through these interactions, self empathy is made possible. Self directed empathy and compassion have been shown to be beneficial (Birnie, et al. 2010). A nonjudgmental approach, in combination with building companionship and establishing a bond, can create a trusted connection between human and animal (Arkow, 2015). It is within this trusted space that students can truly experience interactions that are perceived to be meaningful in their lives. These findings are consistent with the findings that both personally significant experiences as

well as the reciprocal nature of interactions were where participants felt most loved.

International Students and Gender Differences

Two of the students who participated in the research were born outside North America. Both now live in Saskatoon as Canadian citizens, but each described a perceived difference between “home” and Canada. Though neither classified themselves as international students at the time of our interview, each were new to Canada at one point in their lives. International students have unique needs that differ from the average university population (Mori, 2000). North American universities can sometimes overlook the needs of these students, who are often far away from familiar environments and unsure of how to access services. Mori (2000) discussed that these students are at greater risk for psychological distress than their integrated peers. Research has suggested that services have been underutilized among international students, and these individuals are more likely to drop out after attending one counselling session (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Based on my observations of the sessions, the drop-in nature of this program seems to be attractive to individuals new to Canada. Perhaps due to the casual drop-in nature of *PAWS Your Stress*, international students are provided with a method of accessing mental health support that is accessible, socially interactive, and less stigmatized.

Within international students, gender differences exist. In a study of a midwestern university in the United States, Bang, Muriuki, and Hodges (2008) found that female international students experience more stress than international male students. As a student in a new academic environment, exposure to new culture, language, and social customs can be overwhelming. This transition occurs at time where students need support as they adjust to life in a new country. Many Canadian students identify with diverse cultural and societal backgrounds. This has implications for international students, as well as Canadian students newer to Canada,

whose unique needs for support have not yet been fully addressed by North American universities (Mori, 2000).

All participants of the present study were females. Gender differences exist among males and females in the perception and expression of stress. Love towards companion animals has been illustrated, in particular among women (Fook, 2014; Flynn, 2000). Women are also more likely to report instances of rising stress levels (American Psychological Association, 2010). Women are more likely to report physical symptoms associated with stress, such as headaches or indigestions than men. Both genders report higher stress levels on average than is considered to be healthy, but women report the most stress overall. While women exhibit a variety of healthy coping mechanisms, they are also more likely to underestimate their ability to combat stress. (American Psychological Association, 2012). This could explain the higher number of women seeking out help in combatting stress through attending the program. It could also provide insight into why women at the *PAWS Your Stress* appeared to be more open to discussing their experiences with a researcher than the minority of male participants. Lastly, women are also more likely to turn to sedentary activities to cope with stress (American Psychological Association, 2012), fitting with the mode of interaction that is used in the *PAWS* program. If facilitators were able to integrate more active methods of interaction such as walking or running into the sessions, males may feel less pressure to engage in the social, sedentary form of stress relief that is commonly utilized by females. Additionally, it may be beneficial for facilitators to target the population of female university students who report high levels of mental health concerns.

Limitations of the Program

In providing AAA to university students, there are some drawbacks to the method in

which programming is offered. At times, participants discussed the large amount of students who attend. Participants expressed that the large number of people overwhelmed them. They expressed a hesitance to join unless they were able to ensure a seat within a circle. Some participants discussed the desire for more one-on-one time with the dogs. The small number of available volunteer therapy dog teams, as well as the limited number of sessions available to attend, decreased the amount of individualized interactions for participants.

Strengths of the Research

This research builds upon a current body of research that stands to benefit from a detailed analysis of the participant experience of AAA programming in the post-secondary setting. Using a qualitative approach is beneficial because of the experiential findings that are shared as a result of participant interviews. Qualitative analysis slows the process of data gathering, and creates space for participants to think through responses to pre-set questions within the context of a conversation. Due to the high quality of participant responses, a detailed portrait of the student experience at the *PAWS Your Stress* program was gained. This detailed discussion of the participant experience has confirmed existing findings, as well as led to improved understanding about how students make meaning from their attendance of this program.

Additionally, this research includes a diverse range of participants. Two participants were born outside of North America, and one participant self-identified as “queer”, identified as an individual existing within the larger LGBTQ community. This diversity touches upon some marginalized populations who may not be typically represented in qualitative research. By providing in depth answers to questions, these participants were able to provide answers to give context to their unique experiences. This information can serve to improve understanding of how different populations experience an AAA program.

As a past participant of this program, my own experiences have served to provide me with a better personal understanding of the types of interactions that are described by participants in the current study. My own experience with my family pet has also contributed to my ability to see interactions with animals as a healthy method of de-stressing. In my work at my practicum site, Family Service Saskatoon, I've observed Leanne and Jack, a therapy dog team in training. Even though they are beginning their journey as a therapeutic team, I have seen their impact on a multitude of individuals and groups. Jack's presence in the Intimate Partner Violence groups has provided comfort for women coping with the effects of domestic violence. Individual clients look forward to seeing this therapy dog team. Community outreach programs benefit from a hands-on approach to learning about counselling. Informal support is provided to the staff during the times when Jack and Leanne are between clients. The essence of non-judgment and kindness has provided love and support for clients in the community. These diverse experiences serve to strengthen my understanding of the bond between human and animal, which is beneficial to the current study.

Limitations of the Research

It is likely that the students who not only attended frequently, but also agreed to be interviewed for this study, have exceedingly positive experiences of the program. Individuals whose experiences were comparatively less positive are not included in the analysis of data, thus reducing the likelihood that negative experiences of the program would be shared with the researcher.

In recruiting for participants, it was a challenge to find a male participant who wished to share their story about attending the program. Information was given to male participants, however, no male participants showed interest in the study past the initial handbill. Lack of

diversity among participants leaves out a valuable male perspective.

In interviewing student participants, other valuable information may have been missed in the present study. A detailed examination of the program would have ideally included the thoughts and observations of the therapy dog handlers as well as the facilitators involved in the program. Observers could provide details about their experiences from a different perspective that would be similarly rich in detail. Each therapy dog team had a unique approach to interactions with the participants. It is difficult to fully understand the extent to which the handler's interaction with students may have impacted the experiences of the participant.

A major limitation of this study is the lack of detailed information from a member of the therapy dog team - arguably the most involved member within the interaction - the dog. Some obvious barriers exist in terms of communication with animals in the sense that language is not shared between species. However, other explanations exist to explain why dogs are not typically considered to be sources of information within the research community. Barrett and Wuetheric (2012) discussed the lack of understanding of Indigenous 'ways of knowing' among Western researchers. This impacts how we bring legitimacy to our understandings in research. A Western hierarchical model that places animals below humans contributes the mindset that therapy dogs cannot be valuable sources of information. Multiple ways of knowing are part of the intuitive process of developing knowledge. Barrett (2011) recommended working with animal co-participants in research, rather than as subjects. Barrett discussed the importance of integrating animals as part of an interactive team when conducting research that involves animals. Observation of animal body language in response to students' behaviour could be used as a valuable source of information. Additionally, information from the handler could be valuable in terms of their own observations of their dogs during the sessions. The St. John Ambulance

volunteers use their own pets in interactions, and as such could be valuable sources of information about the therapy dog's experience.

Implications for Future Programming

First, recommendations can be made for facilitators of animal assisted activity programs. A common recommendation made by participants was to have the program more frequently, as well as for a longer amount of time. This would need to be balanced with time constraints of volunteers, as well as the number of participants in attendance. Some students discussed the importance of being able to have one-on-one time with the dogs, which could be improved by having more therapy dog teams. This was especially important for students during the more popular sessions. It is important to have a sufficient number of dogs to facilitate one-on-one interaction. This recommendation should be taken with the consideration for the wellbeing of the animals and their handlers. Effort should be made to respect the time and service of the volunteer therapy dog teams.

Second, based on the importance of personalized interactions as discussed by all participants, some recommendations can be made to facilitate these types of interactions. The St. John Ambulance program provides returning therapy dog teams, which encourages the development of longstanding relationships between the animals, their handlers and students. These personalized connections can be made possible through encouraging volunteers to commit to volunteering at a particular location for visitation.

Lastly, recommendations can be made to increase recruitment of male participants. All participants in the current study are female. A majority of participants at the program are also female. Women experience stress differently than men (Pierceall & Keim 2007, Hall and Lennie, 2012). Females are encouraged to share their experiences of stress. Many sources of stress relief

identified by my participants, including cardiovascular exercise, dancing, singing, and cooking, are socially linked to women. It is possible that providing affection to animals is seen as a more socially accepted feminine behaviour. In the Dell et al. (2015) pilot study of AAA programming, differences were identified in terms of how each gender described their reasons for attending the therapy dog programming. While females were more likely identify their attendance as “de-stressing”, males were more likely to simply state a general desire to be with the dogs. In terms of recommendations for recruiting more male participants, perhaps a more socially accepted masculine form of interaction could be made possible. For example, if facilitators were to allow individuals to run the dogs, or play catch with a baseball with the dogs, would the program attract more males to participate? With this in mind, continuous work to encourage male participants to attend could also be helpful in fighting against these expectations of genders in the broader social realm.

Researcher Reflection

In going through this research process, one concept I found myself reflecting upon was the future of animal assisted programming. In discussing my thesis with other professionals and academics, I was frequently told that my face “lit up”. This area is incredibly important to me, not only as a researcher, but also as a professional in the helping profession. As my understanding of animals has grown, my perspective on every animal I encounter has changed. I see every opportunity to engage in interaction with my family pet as an opportunity to connect with a non-judgmental presence in a therapeutic manner. Though pet ownership is different from therapeutic intervention, I have come to understand the benefits that clients may experience as a result of their own relationships with their pets. I also came to understand that finding your own approach to mental health needs to be fun and tailored to the individual. My understanding of

finding stress relief, love and support in relationships with animals is not only supported in this research, but comes from a connection that I have understood since I was a child. We make meaning through connections and relationships with those most important to us, including animals.

My participants trusted me and were willing to share their experiences. I found that I was able to identify with each participant on some level. Mira's discussion of finding certain spots on the dog to pet reminded me of my own experiences with my family dog. Dominique's use of exercise and dog therapy in combination closely resembled my own approach to stress relief. Jenaya's decision to consciously fit in small amounts of time reminded me of my own struggle to integrate coping strategies with a busy schedule. I also connected with the social aspect that was so important for Jenaya. I began to socially connect with the facilitators, especially with the program coordinator, Alicia, who attended every session. Similar to Jenaya's experience, I found that I had been making friends through my participation in my own way. Crystal's description of how she felt when she missed the presence of an animal reminded me of the first few months after moving away from home as an adult. Similar to Crystal, I also missed my dog greatly, and sought out other animals to fill that void.

Though my data collection involved mainly semi-structured interviews, I gained my understanding of the program through many avenues. My conversations with program facilitators highlighted some of the challenges facing the retention of programs like this in universities. Restrictions have been made on places animals are allowed to be, even with animals providing therapeutic intervention. In my own experience, service dogs assisting individuals with physical disabilities (ie. Service dogs for persons with epilepsy, seeing-eye dogs) are welcomed in more public spaces than services dogs providing psychological services (ie. Companion animals,

therapy dogs). While the body of research is still emerging, there is an abundance of evidence to illustrate the benefits of animal assisted programming. Despite this, pushback from administrative professionals threatens to eradicate, minimize, or at the very least slow the proliferation of beneficial programs like *PAWS Your Stress*. Engaging in a dialogue that considers both real concerns about animal allergens and dog behaviour, balanced with the benefits that students could gain from participation in programs like *PAWS Your Stress*, is essential. My concern for the livelihood of this program is stronger than ever after spending time listening to my participants' experiences. Part of the desire that drives my research is the intent to provide an in depth understanding of just how meaningful this program can be for participants. It is my hope that with this knowledge, more support will be gained from the individuals in positions of power who make decisions about student mental health programming on Canadian campuses.

Conclusion

Five themes were identified within the current study – being in the moment, social benefits, variations in coping ability, personalized interactions, and reciprocity. These themes explain in detail three aspects of how students experience stress relief through attendance and two aspects of how students make meaning from their experiences at the *PAWS Your Stress* program. All participants felt that their attendance of the program was beneficial in their own lives as students. The sharing of these experiences highlights the importance of this volunteer run program as a way for students to gain support, love, and stress relief in their academic journey and beyond.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Handbill



Interested in telling us more about your visit today?

- Who: YOU, a participant of the PAWS Your Stress visits
- What: **1 Hour** for a confidential interview and a **\$15 gift card** to thank you for your time!
- Where: University of Saskatchewan
- When: **any convenient time** for you (please contact Rebecca)
- Why: We would like to learn more about your experiences at the PAWS Your Stress program

This study has been given ethics approval by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

To contact:
Rebecca.griffith@usask.ca
Please do not hesitate to ask any questions!

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Department of School and Counselling Psychology
University of Saskatchewan

Participants Needed for Research in Student Wellbeing and Animal Assisted Interventions



We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of student experiences of the “*PAWS Your Stress*” sessions on campus.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to spend approximately one hour of your time discussing your experiences of post secondary schooling, stress, wellbeing, and your participation of any *PAWS Your Stress* sessions in a confidential environment.

Your participation would involve ONE session, lasting approximately 1 HOUR of your time.

In appreciation of your time, you will receive a **\$15 Starbucks Gift Card**

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Rebecca Griffith (Graduate Student Researcher)
Department of School and Counselling Psychology
306-290-2652
Rebecca.griffith@usask.ca

*This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, The Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan

Appendix C: Consent Form

Animal Assisted Interventions and Student Stress: A Qualitative Investigation

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Rooting for the Underdog: An Exploration of Animal Assisted Interventions

Researcher: Rebecca Griffith, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, SK, Canada, 306-290-2652, Rebecca.griffith@usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Tim Claypool, Associate Professor, Department Head, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, SK, Canada, 306-966-6931, tim.claypool@usask.ca

Committee Member: Dr. Colleen Dell, Addiction Research Chair, Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan, SK, Canada, 306-966-5912

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

- The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of Animal Assisted Intervention programming (*PAWS Your Stress*) at post secondary educational institutions in terms of student stress and coping.

Procedures:

- Participants will be contacted via email through the administrator of the program being examined. Participants may also be contacted through the use of distributed handbills. Contact information for the researcher will be given to participants in order to set up an arranged date and time for a 1 hour interview. Seven pre-selected research questions of an open-ended nature will be asked of the participant to gain information about the participant's experiences of the program. Participant interviews will be recorded digitally, and transcribed. All interviews will take place at the University of Saskatchewan campus.

Potential Risks:

- There are no known immediate or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research, however, some questions within this interview ask about coping with school related stress, which could be distressing for some individuals.

Risk(s) will be addressed by:

- Researcher is trained in counselling techniques, and has 4 months of individual counselling experience in the community, and is able to provide support to participants in emotional distress.
- Though it is not expected based on the provided questions, the researcher has ASIST

(Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) to help support the participant in the event that a participant indicates suicidal ideation within the interview when discussing their stress.

- An information card with student counseling phone numbers and other services will be provided to participants.
- Participants will not be terminated unless they wish to have their interview stopped for any reason or at any time during the interview.

Potential Benefits:

- Potential benefits of this research extend from the participant to society. Participants themselves will receive one-on-one interaction that could lead to some insight about coping strategies for school related stress. On the larger scale, this study will help build knowledge around an emerging area of research centred on the therapeutic use of animals.

Compensation:

- Participants will receive a \$15 gift card in compensation for 1 hour of their time.

Confidentiality:

- Given the detailed nature of participant responses, anonymity is impossible. Confidentiality of responses will be ensured for the participants involved in this study.
- Data will be de-identified, and participants will be given pseudonyms. All audio recordings of this interview will be kept on a password secured computer until they are transferred to a secure system, Cabinet, on the U of S server.

Storage of Data:

- Data will be stored securely in the office of the supervisor of this study, Dr. Tim Claypool.
- When the data is no longer required, it will be destroyed.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary and you may answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your participation in future *PAWS Your Stress* sessions, your academic standing, or how you will be treated.
- Should you wish to withdraw, you must indicate this to the researcher in a timely manner. In the event that you wish to withdraw your data, it will be removed from any hard drive and destroyed.
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until results have been transcribed. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your de-identified data.

Follow up:

Appendix D: Interview Questions

The seven interview questions listed below will be asked in the following order. Prompts have been provided in italicized font.

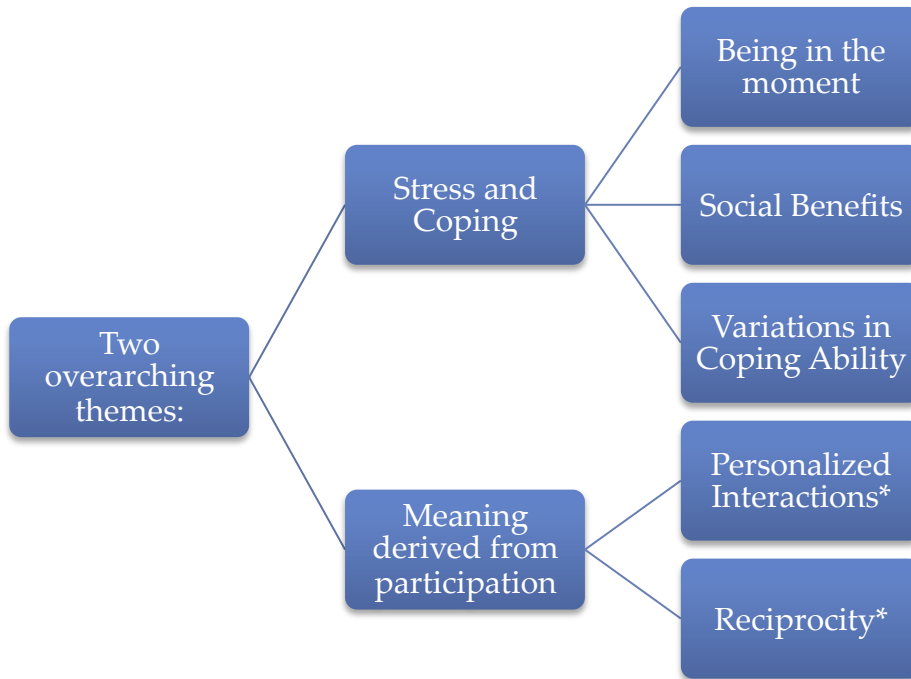
1. How did you hear about the *PAWS Your Stress* program?
- *What initially drew you to attend?*
2. How did you feel before attending?
- *And how did that compare to how you felt afterwards?*
3. How would you describe your interactions?
- *What kind of interactions did you have?*
- *Could you describe them?*
- *Was that helpful for you?*
- *Was there anything that wasn't helpful for you?*
4. Did you have an animal of your own growing up?
- *Do you have one now?*
- *Did you ever feel drawn to a particular animal?*
5. Love and support are two program goals that have been associated with pet therapy. Were there any times you felt loved during your participation? Any times you felt supported?
6. How do you generally cope with stress in your life?
- *How do you cope with school related stress?*
- *What impact has the program had on your ability to cope with stress?*
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the *PAWS Your Stress* program?

Due to the semi-structured nature of the above questions, additional probing questions may be used to clarify participant responses.

Example Probing Questions:

- *"If so, why?"*
- *"If so, how?"*
- *"Could you please tell me a little bit more about that?"*
- *"And what was that like for you?"*

Appendix E: Theme Chart



* = Findings related to St. John Ambulance program goals of “Love and Support”