

Lessons learned from a critical appraisal of a fall break policy in higher education: A case study

Kelly A Pilato

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in

Applied Health Sciences

(Behavioural and Population Health)

Faculty of Applied Health Sciences

Brock University

St. Catharines, ON

© Kelly Pilato December, 2019

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my four children, Samuel, Vincent, Gabriella and Frank. You were my inspiration and motivation for completing this and I hope I showed you how to make lemonade.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my parents, Wendy and Claude Pilato, without whom none of this would have been possible. You were my champions and supporters in more ways than you know, and you encouraged and pushed me to see this through to fruition, all the while helping me to raise my children with unconditional patience and love.

### **Abstract**

The incidence, severity and persistence of mental health issues is increasing across post-secondary campuses (Zivin et al., 2009; Canada Newswire, 2012) with these students now viewed as a high-risk population (Stallman, 2010). Many Canadian universities are implementing a policy for a fall break in hopes of alleviating students' stress and anxiety in order to improve mental health, heighten retention, and increase academic productivity. To date, there is limited empirical evidence to guide the development of policy and the delivery of effective practices to alleviate school-related stress and anxiety.

This thesis is presented as a three paper, manuscript approach. The focus of this project was to appraise the development and implementation of a fall break and then evaluate its effectiveness in an effort to address rising concerns related to mental health for post-secondary students.

Three thousand and seventy-one students in years one to four completed a post-break survey during one week in January of 2013, 2014, 2015. Of those, 1019 were male and 2052 female. Thirty-three students varying in years from one to four participated in focus groups in February of 2013, 2014, 2015. Of those 4 were male and 19 were female. Ten faculty from varying faculties and one informant participated in interviews in spring, 2018.

Analyses from the surveys revealed that overall, students are in favour of having a fall break. Even though a small percentage of participants perceived their workload to go up before and after the break, 90% of students agree that the fall break was useful in reducing school related stress levels. However, the focus group, faculty and informant interviews revealed that the timing of the fall break had an impact on how students and faculty experienced the break and thus influenced perceptions on the impact that the break had on student mental health.

Comprehensive evidence about whether a fall break policy supports or undermines the mental health of students needs to be assessed using a range of indicators before its implementation. This will help post-secondary institutions determine whether a break in the fall semester can be an effective approach to addressing students' stress and anxiety.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the following people for whom this research and the completion of my PhD have made possible to achieve.

First, I am forever grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Madelyn Law, for her leadership, guidance and mentorship that allowed me to learn and grow in so many ways as a researcher, a teacher and a human being. Dr. Law's willingness to take me under her wing afforded me with countless and immeasurable research, teaching, and instructional opportunities that helped me grow, evolve and ultimately emerge as a researcher. I will take this with me in all of my future endeavors. You trusted me and my capabilities and you so freely shared your knowledge and expertise. Dr. Law's visionary approach to research, and her ability to intellectualize research in a way that adds profound knowledge to the scientific community but can also be understood and applied in real world settings, is inspirational and something I aspire to. You gently pushed me when I needed encouragement, you were compassionate, supportive and understanding of the importance of motherhood and family and most importantly, you believed in me when I did not believe in myself.

I am also grateful for my committee member, Dr. John Hay, for having confidence in me from the start, who provided his infinite knowledge and research expertise and helped me understand the importance of this work and how it could be applied in very practical settings. I am so thankful to my committee member, Dr. Miya Narushima, who so freely gave her knowledge and expertise of qualitative methodology to help me make sense of my data and provide me with infinite "qualitative learning experiences". I am also so thankful for my committee member, Dr. Shannon Moore, for her positive support and for giving of her time and expertise to make this work so much better with her in-depth and insightful comments and

questions. I would like to thank my external defence examiner, Dr. Denise Stockley, for the insightful comments and feedback that made the final document better and for travelling to participate in my defence. I would also like to acknowledge my internal defence examiner, Dr. Todd Green, for his review of this work that helped to enhance and shape the final document.

I would like to acknowledge the many people who took the time to support this project. I would also like to thank Brock University for the funding received to conduct this research. A special thank you to my friends and colleagues at Brock for their support and encouragement and to the Brock University Student Union for their collaboration with data collection.

I am humbled by the unconditional support from my family and friends. To my brother Marty Pilato, my sister Sharon Povinelli, my sister-in-law Debbie Ruch, my brother-in-law Kevin Povinelli and my nieces Morgan and Emma and my nephew Joey Povinelli for always being there for me, encouraging me, making me laugh and for always keeping it real. To my amazing friends who gave me the space I needed to complete this PhD but who were so supportive in whatever way I needed, whenever I needed it. You will never know how truly grateful I am.

**Table of Contents**

	<b>Page</b>
Dedication.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Tables.....	xv
List of Figures.....	xvi
List of Appendices.....	xvii
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Policy Analysis.....	6
1.2.1 What is needed for successful health policy?.....	6
1.2.2 Context in health policy.....	9
1.2.3 What constitutes high quality in health research for policy?.....	10
<b>CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Mental Health.....	15
2.1.1 Definition.....	15
2.2 History of Mental Health Policy in Education.....	15
2.2.1 Globally.....	15
2.2.2 Nationally.....	16
2.2.3 Provincially.....	18

2.2.4 Historical turning points.....	20
2.3 Policy Analysis.....	21
2.3.1 Definition.....	21
2.3.2 Models used in policy appraisal.....	22
2.3.3 A formula for appraising policy.....	23
2.3.4 Agenda setting.....	24
2.3.5 Policy Formation.....	25
2.3.6 Decision making.....	26
2.3.7 Implementation.....	29
2.3.8 Evaluation.....	30
2.4 Paradigm and Epistemology.....	32
2.4.1 Role of the researcher.....	35
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.....	40
3.1 Case Study Approach.....	40
3.2 Methods.....	43
3.2.1 Paper One.....	46
3.2.2 Paper Two.....	47
3.2.3 Paper Three.....	48
3.3 Issues of Trustworthiness.....	50
3.3.1 Validity and reliability in case study research.....	51
CHAPTER 4: DESCRIBING THE CASE.....	53
CHAPTER 5: PAPER 1.....	55



5.1 Literature Review.....	55
5.1.1 Agenda setting.....	56
5.1.2 Policy formation.....	56
5.1.3 Decision making.....	58
5.1.4 Purpose.....	59
5.2 Methodology.....	59
5.3 Methods.....	61
5.3.1 BUSU survey data.....	61
5.3.2 Document analysis .....	62
5.3.3 Informant Interview .....	62
5.3.4 Data Analysis.....	63
5.4 Results.....	64
5.4.1 BUSU Survey.....	64
5.4.1.1 Demographics.....	64
5.4.1.2 Survey results.....	64
5.4.2 Documents.....	64
5.4.2.1 Emergent themes.....	65
5.4.2.1.1 Policy decisions.....	66
5.4.2.1.1.1 Policy considerations.....	66
5.4.2.1.1.1.1 Rationale.....	66
5.4.2.1.1.1.2 Implementation decisions.....	68
5.4.2.1.1.1.3 Evaluation decisions.....	69

5.4.2.1.1.1.4 Policy supports.....	70
5.4.2.1.1.1.5 Label.....	70
5.4.2.1.1.1.6 Votes.....	73
5.4.2.1.2 Policy Actors.....	74
5.4.2.1.2.1 Major actors.....	74
5.4.2.1.2.1.1 Registrar's office.....	75
5.4.2.1.2.1.2 Senate.....	75
5.4.2.1.2.1.3 BUSU.....	76
5.4.2.1.2.2 Minor actors.....	76
5.4.2.1.2.2.1 Associate Deans.....	77
5.5 Discussion.....	77
5.5.1 Agenda setting.....	78
5.5.2 Policy formulation.....	80
5.5.3 Decision making.....	81
5.5.3.1 Label.....	82
5.5.3.2 Implementation and evaluation.....	82
5.5.4 Policy Implications.....	83
5.5.5 Limitations and future research suggestions.....	84
5.5.6 Publication.....	85
CHAPTER 6: PAPER 2.....	86
6.1 Literature Review.....	86
6.2 Methodology.....	90

6.3 Methods.....	91
6.3.1 Quantitative data.....	91
6.3.1.1 Fall break survey.....	91
6.3.2 Qualitative data.....	92
6.3.2.1 Fall break focus groups.....	92
6.3.2.2 Faculty interviews.....	93
6.3.2.3 Informant interview.....	95
6.3.2.4 Documents.....	95
6.3.3 Data analysis.....	95
6.4 Results.....	96
6.4.1 Fall break survey.....	96
6.4.2 Focus groups.....	99
6.4.2.1 Students.....	99
6.4.2.1.1 Like timing.....	100
6.4.2.1.2 Time management.....	100
6.4.2.1.3 Dislike timing.....	101
6.4.2.1.4 Dislike placement.....	101
6.4.2.1.5 Workload.....	102
6.4.2.1.6 Momentum.....	102
6.4.2.1.7 Indifference.....	103
6.4.3 Faculty interviews.....	103
6.4.3.1 Faculty.....	103

6.4.3.1.1 Timing.....	104
6.4.3.1.2 Momentum.....	105
6.4.3.1.3 Time management for assignments.....	106
6.4.4 Informant Interview.....	107
6.4.4.1 Informant.....	107
6.4.4.1.1 Registrar’s office.....	107
6.4.4.1.2 Senate.....	108
6.4.5 Documents.....	108
6.4.5.1 USAC and Registrar’s office.....	108
6.4.5.2 Associate Deans.....	109
6.4.5.3 Health advisory committee and department of housing.....	109
6.4.5.4 The calendar year.....	109
6.4.5.5 Evaluation.....	109
6.5 Discussion.....	110
6.5.1 Policy Implications.....	113
6.5.2 Limitations and Future Research Suggestions.....	114
6.5.3 Publication.....	115
CHAPTER 7: PAPER THREE.....	116
7.1 Literature Review.....	116
7.2 Methodology.....	120
7.3 Methods.....	121
7.3.1 Fall break survey.....	121

7.3.2 Focus group data.....	122
7.3.3 Data analysis.....	125
7.3.3.1 Quantitative measures.....	126
7.3.3.2 Qualitative measures.....	127
7.4 Results.....	127
7.4.1 Fall break survey.....	127
7.4.1.1 Participants.....	127
7.4.1.2 Survey.....	127
7.4.2 Fall break focus groups.....	131
7.4.2.1 Stress.....	131
7.4.2.1.1 School related stress.....	132
7.4.2.1.2 Self-related stress.....	134
7.4.2.2 De-stress.....	135
7.4.2.2.1 Coping strategies.....	135
7.4.3 Faculty interviews.....	138
7.4.3.1 Impact.....	139
7.4.3.1.1 Label.....	141
7.4.3.1.2 Structure.....	143
7.5 Discussion.....	146
7.5.1 Policy evaluation.....	147
7.5.2 Limitations and future research.....	147
7.5.3 Policy implications.....	147

7.5.4 Publication.....	149
CHAPTER 8: FINAL DISCUSSION.....	150
8.1 Discussion.....	150
8.1.1 Paper one.....	151
8.1.2 Paper two.....	152
8.1.3 Paper three.....	152
8.2 Policy Implications.....	154
8.2.1 Interrelated.....	155
8.2.2 Label.....	156
8.2.3 Timing and placement.....	157
8.2.4 Continued and updated evaluation.....	158
8.3 Limitations and future research.....	159
8.4 Key insights.....	160
8.5 Overall reflections.....	162
9.0 References.....	163

**List of Tables**

<b>Tables</b>	<b>Page</b>
Table 1 Problem solving and the policy cycle (From Howlett and Ramesh, 1995).....	23
Table 2 Documents included as data.....	60
Table 3 Topics of discussion in the informant interview.....	62
Table 4 Major themes and sub themes.....	65
Table 5 How the break is labelled in documents by date.....	72
Table 6 Fall break policy creation in relation to the first three stages of the policy cycle.....	78
Table 7 Items included from fall break survey.....	92
Table 8 Topics of discussion in the fall break focus groups.....	93
Table 9 Topics of discussion in the faculty interviews.....	94
Table 10 Topics of discussion in the informant interview.....	95
Table 11 Sample, fall break survey.....	96
Table 12 Fall break policy implementation in relation to the implementation stage of the policy cycle.....	110
Table 13 Fall break survey Items.....	122
Table 14 Topics of discussion in fall break focus groups.....	124
Table 15 Break reduces stress.....	130
Table 16 Fall break policy evaluation in relation to the last stage of the policy cycle.....	145
Table 17 Fall break policy appraisal in relation to the policy cycle.....	155

**List of Figures**

<b>Figure</b>		<b>Page</b>
Figure 1. Stages of data collection.....		49
Figure 2. Increase in workload before and after the break.....		99



**List of Appendices**

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Page</b>
Appendix A Fall Break Across Ontario Universities.....	185
Appendix B Policy Appraisal Cycles.....	186
Appendix C Types of research in policy process.....	187
Appendix D REB Clearance Form, Fall Break Survey and Focus Groups.....	188
Appendix E Fall Break Survey Year One.....	190
Appendix F Fall Break Survey Years Two and Three.....	192
Appendix G Focus Group Interview Guide.....	194
Appendix H Debriefing Letter Fall Break Survey .....	195
Appendix I Letter of Invitation Fall Break Focus Groups .....	196
Appendix J Consent Form, Fall Break Focus Groups .....	198
Appendix K Informed Consent, Fall Break Survey .....	200
Appendix L Debrief Letter, Fall Break Focus Groups .....	202
Appendix M Faculty Interview Guide .....	203
Appendix N Informant Interview Guide .....	205
Appendix O Invitation Email Faculty Interviews .....	206
Appendix P Follow-up Email correspondence with the Faculty .....	207
Appendix Q Invitation Email Informants .....	208
Appendix R Follow-up Email correspondence with the Informant .....	209
Appendix S Email Response for Recruiting Participants .....	210
Appendix T Informed Consent, Faculty Interviews .....	211
Appendix U Informed Consent, Informant Interviews .....	214

Appendix V Alphanumeric Pseudonym Example .....217

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Background

The mental health status of university and college students is receiving attention as media reports, clinical observations, and empirical evidence point to higher levels of stress and anxiety across Canada. High occurrences of mental health issues (anxiety, stress, depression) in undergraduate students at post-secondary institutions are evident at a national, global and provincial level (Adalf, Glikksman, Demers, & Newton-Taylor, 2001; Stallman, 2010). Students consistently report higher levels of stress and anxiety than that of the general population (Adalf et al., 2010; Stallman, 2010) and cases of suicide are often well publicized (Blackwell, 2015; Goffin, 2017; Lunau, 2012; Pfeffer, 2016; Venema, 2017). Mental illness commonly develops between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four (Eisenberg, Golberstein, Gollust, & Hefner, 2007) placing post-secondary students at particular risk. With 1.2 million part-and full-time post-secondary students in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013), the mental health of this population is a significant concern.

Stress and anxiety are significant factors in students' mental health (Mostafaei, 2012). Post-secondary students may experience higher levels of stress than the general population (Adalf et al., 2001). A common theme in the literature is that university and college students have unique mental health issues, reporting a high incidence of mental health problems and/or illnesses (Hussain, Guppy, Robertson, & Temple, 2013; Wagner & Yeong, 2013). In particular there is evidence to suggest that undergraduate students experience the highest prevalence of depression (Eisenberg et al., 2007). This is, in part, due to the significant academic demands and pressure in university and college (Hartley, 2011). In fact, the higher stress levels associated with being a first-year university student contribute to dropout rates, more than anxiety or

depression (Tamin, 2013). Beyond the immediate burden of illness, there is a significant societal cost in terms of productivity, both present and future.

There is a well-established relationship between academic performance and health (El, 2010); the better your health, the better your academic performance. It is reasonable to argue then that reducing stress should lead to improved mental health, and therefore better post-secondary academic outcomes. Research suggests (Keyes et al., 2012; Tremblay et al., 2008) that mental health disorders and poor perceived levels of mental health are related to both suicidal behaviour and poor academic performance. It appears that, the prevalence, severity and persistence of mental health issues is increasing across Ontario post-secondary campuses (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009; Canada Newswire, 2012) with university and college students now viewed as a high-risk population (Stallman, 2010).

Research indicates that most students are aware that they have a need for treatment, but the majority do not seek it out due to a disparity between their perceived need and actual need, as well as a perceived lack of appropriate mental health treatments on campus (Zivin et al., 2009). However, effective policies aimed at treatment of mental health problems among college students are currently not available (Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serras, 2009). Research in Europe suggests that numerous anti-stigma mental health policies based on assumptions are questionable at best (Angermeyer, Holzinger, & Matschinger, 2009). In the United States, some evidence-based prevention strategies have proven useful in improving the quality of life for post-secondary students, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, interpersonal-process therapy and exercise and stress training (Buchanan, 2012). Hence, effective policies should support interventions based on empirical evidence.

Given the severity of mental health problems and disorders among university and college students, it is evident that the need for action is pressing. It is important for Ontario universities and their communities to realize the seriousness of the mental health issues faced by their students (Canada Newswire, 2012). It is equally important for post-secondary institutions to understand their capacity to influence students' mental health. The College Student Alliance (2012) reports that the Ontario government recognizes both the unique mental health challenges and the high prevalence of mental illness among post-secondary students. They recommend that a specialized post-secondary education (PSE) framework be used by the province to create policy initiatives to help students achieve optimal mental health (Canadian Health Promoting Campuses, 2016; Okanagan Charter, 2015; College Student Alliance, 2012). With Statistics Canada (2013) reporting 783,198 registered undergraduate students in Ontario, the need to develop policies that support the mental health of university students is paramount. Many universities across the province have implemented a policy creating a fall break in hopes of alleviating students' stress and anxiety (see Appendix A). While there is limited research on university-initiated interventions that alleviate school related stress, there is essentially no empirical evidence to support that supposition.

Policy implementation evaluation is crucial for determining its effectiveness (Nilsen, Roback, & Cairney, 2013) and this may be particularly true in higher education (Reale & Seeber, 2013). Evaluation studies are necessary for policy creation as well as establishing effective implementation and determining successful outcomes (Stufflebeam, 2003). Similar to healthcare, where health policy is often enacted on the prescription pads of physicians (Rachlis, 2005), university policy often only becomes evident through institutional decisions and this is not always an effective approach (Angermeyer & Matschinger, 2009). The fall break is a good

example of this approach. In an attempt to reduce stress, many universities and colleges implemented a policy for a break in the fall semester. While the break varies by length and placement within the semester, what is consistent is that the policy was implemented in the absence of evidence to indicate if this fall break is either necessary or effective.

While there is limited research on university-initiated interventions to alleviate school related stress, even “less is known about the adequacy of mental health services available to Canadian post-secondary students on campuses” (Heck et al., 2014, p. 250). Much of the evidence that is available is quantitative, coming from a post-positivist paradigm and does not examine the essence of being a student or the experience of a fall break on students' mental health. Even still, there is no baseline evidence regarding the stress levels or mental illness prevalence of incoming students to post-secondary institutions, or to the same for students through the course of their studies. This lack of baseline evidence creates a serious challenge for attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of the fall break policy. The single greatest challenge in evaluating the effect of a fall break policy on the mental health of undergraduate students is the lack of baseline data from previous cohorts without a mid-term break. In the absence of such data, it is difficult to establish causality between any changes – if any and in what direction- to students' mental health status resulting from the implementation of the fall break policy.

In order to establish whether a fall break would be a reasonable and effective policy to reduce student stress and anxiety, evidence about the causes of that stress, in relation to the structure of a semester, is required. Once the ebb and flow of stress/anxiety levels relative to the varying demands of the term are understood, an effective response could be designed, and implemented with its effect scrutinized. The present response of inserting a break in classes at mid-term, with no constraints on the scheduling of known acute stressors such as exam and

assignments, is arbitrary and almost impossible to determine if effective. In effect, it is akin to using a very blunt object to solve a multi-faceted problem. Comprehensive evidence about any policy to support the mental health of students requires a range of indicators to be determined prior to implementation. In the absence of data collected ad hoc, an analysis of data from historical sources is required – hospital admissions, reported mental-illness, drop-out rates, course withdrawal rates, along with post-hoc reports from students who experienced a fall term with no break.

Possible interventions to support the mental health of university students is of considerable interest (Pilato, 2013). It is important to effectively formulate, implement, and evaluate mental health policies within post-secondary institutions. This perspective, in regard to the implementation of a fall break policy in the absence of evidence to inform the policy, was the motivation for the current project. The two overarching research questions were then: 1) How was the policy developed and implemented? and 2) What impact, if any, does the fall break have on mental health for university students? The associated research objectives are: 1) To provide a post policy implementation analysis through a critical analysis lens to compare, contrast and evaluate both policy development and implementation in relation to what is known about best practices for each (Paper #1 and #2) and 2) To determine whether a policy for “fall break week” impacts mental health outcomes among Brock University students (Paper #3). This research will help post-secondary institutions determine whether a fall break week can be effective in addressing students’ stress and anxiety and benefit their mental health. As well, this research will provide a critical perspective on the development of policy in post-secondary institutions.

The purpose of this thesis is to critically evaluate the formation of the fall break strategy as a policy and evaluate the effectiveness of that approach on the mental health status of

undergraduate students. Simply put, the research question is whether the fall break policy was well formulated, properly implemented, and effective?

### **Policy Analysis**

Policy appraisal includes examining the process in and around the policy formation (Bardach, 2012; Hanney, Gonzalez-Block, Buxton, & Kogan, 2003; Howlett, 2009; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009; Walt et al., 2008; Weimer & Vining, 2011). In order to appraise how policy is formed, as well as its effectiveness, each stage needs to be examined. Many researchers (Bardach, 2012; Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011) suggest various stages to policy appraisal. While these stages vary somewhat between researchers, they all follow a continuum that includes the idea for the policy, the decisions behind the policy, the formulation of the policy, its implementation and ensuing evaluation (See Appendix B). There are also various models used to understand the process of policy making (Bardach, 2012; Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011) that should be included in policy appraisal. The relationship between policy making, evidence utilization and their connections also bears examination (Hanney et al., 2003). This is particularly important with health policy. There are various approaches to health policy analysis and any appraisal should include an examination of the frameworks and/or theories used in the creation of the policy (Walt et al., 2008). For instance, was there a framework used and if so, does it align with policy objectives? Another important component in any health policy appraisal is to look at the context of the people and/or institutions involved in making the policy-what are their agendas and where do those agendas come from (Hanney et al., 2003).

**What is needed for successful health policy?** Policy requires scrutiny, scrutiny requires evidence, and evidence requires both data collection and qualitative and quantitative research.



Successful health policy is dependent on policy-oriented health research (Hanney et al., 2003).

“The utilization of health research in policy-making should contribute to policies that may eventually lead to desired outcomes, including health gains” (Hanney et al., 2003, abstract).

Health policy and systems research is vital for successful implementation and sustainability of health policies (Tancred, Schleiff, & Peters, 2016). However, policy-oriented research is unique in that: it is interdisciplinary, has wide reference groups, and a broader conception of knowledge production (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009). Policy oriented health research includes various components. These are contextual, technical, basic and applied, and interdisciplinary (Hanney et al., 2003), all of which should be examined in policy appraisal.

Many researchers (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011) suggest that research plays an important role in policy formation. This is particularly true for sound health policy formation. “Different types of research will be more relevant for various levels and situations of policy-making and for different aspects of those policies” (Hanney et al., 2003, p. 7). The type of research used in health policy is partly dependent on how and for what the research will be used. There are various models of research utilization that can be used to inform health policy (Hanney et al., 2003), including those in an academic setting. Hanney et al. (2003) refers to these as: classic/purist/knowledge-driven, problem solving, interactive/social interaction, enlightenment, political and tactical. Any of which may be used in research to inform health policy. Hence, the type of research used in health policy formation is contingent on its utilization. In fact, it is “the combination of diverse forms of scientific inputs and decision outputs that shapes the processes of utilization and creates specific expectations and opportunities” (Hanney et al., 2003, p. 9). Some of these different types of research utilization may include (Appendix C): conceptual modelling, data-based policy, constrained modelling,

strategic research symbolic payback, symbolic argumentation or paradigms (Hanney et al, 2003). For instance, strategic research might be used to accelerate, and influence a given health agenda and push it through while other policies might be based on data from empirical findings (Hanney et al, 2003). On the other hand, paradigms can influence what valuable health policy is, depending on the accepted way of interpreting reality and facing problems which is dependent on the times, policy makers and political leaders (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009). Thus, while the types of research and models of utilization may vary, it is clear that health policy in an academic setting should stem from established evidence. “Using evidence can be important in creating and implementing health policies because when research is seen to be of high quality, policy makers will be more likely to use it” (Hanney et al., 2003, Categories of health research and possible levels of utilization section, para. 5). This raises the question: What is high quality evidence in health policy? This is important to understand in the context of the current study in order to inform the critical appraisal of the fall break policy.

The majority of policy makers typically look at the statistics (Howlett et al., 2009). This is true in health policy formation as well. More recently, research suggests that the hierarchy of research evidence in health interventions (i.e., randomized clinical trials) might not be the gold standard for health policy formation (Dobrow et al., 2004; Dobrow et al., 2006; Hanney et al., 2003; Marston & Watts, 2003; Teghtsoonian, 2009; Walt et al., 2008).

“Critics argue that this conceptualization of evidence creates a bias toward research that focuses on individual-level variables and treatments and, in so doing, fails to give adequate consideration to qualitative research findings that identify a range of social, economic and political influences on health and signal features of people’s lives” (Teghtsoonian, 2009, p. 33).

Rather, evidence in health policy should be thoughtful about the assumptions of how policy makers view(s) the nature of the social world and the paradigm with which they live by, inclusive of various forms evidence such as texts of a poem, files from a newspaper, clinical trials or large databases (Marston & Watts, 2003).

**Context in health policy.** Context is also important in population health policy. Considering the variety of research and its utilization in the policy process, it is necessary to understand the context of differing philosophies of knowledge in relation to the heuristic facets of the policy. Context can help to understand the decisions around a policy, the choices made, and the people involved in its conception, from its introduction to agenda setting, formation and implementation (Dobrow et al., 2004; Hanney et al., 2003). Moreover, context can influence evidence, utilization and the nature of decisions in the formulation of population-based policy (Dobrow et al., 2004). This context can be viewed both internally and externally. For instance, context can internally influence evidence depending on the purpose of the problem, the population base and its feasibility and implementation. It can also externally influence evidence depending on how the policy will be used. The differences between service capacity in an urban or rural area, and the participants involved in those areas, will influence the purpose of the policy and the evidence used in its formation and implementation (Dobrow et al., 2004). Context includes having an understanding of the positionality of both the researcher(s) and policy maker(s), as both have an influence over the policy (Walt et al., 2008). Understanding positionality helps guide the health issues seen of importance, questions to be asked, positions of power, resources to be used, institutional power and who the insiders and outsiders of the policy are (Howlett et al., 2009; Walt et al., 2008). Determining context plays an important role in policy appraisal and helps understand varying policy objectives, varying skills and abilities of

policy makers and researchers, resource constraints and political interests, differing ways of collecting and types of evidence, and how the evidence is used (Dobrow et al., 2006) to formulate health policy.

**What constitutes high quality in health research for policy?** The relationship between evidence and context is also important in population health policy. In order to appraise policy, one needs to look at the relationship between policy making and utilization connections, as this is not always an ends-means rational model (Hanney et al., 2003). Context influences evidence utilization in the development of population health-based policy, both internally and externally throughout its introduction, interpretation and application (Dobrow et al. 2006). Moreover, contextual factors can be a deciding factor in whether or not a policy has practice impacts (Newson et al., 2015). Context can determine a policy's feasibility and any implementation issues (Dobrow et al., 2004). In short, "in policy research, almost all likely sources of information, data, and ideas fall into two general types: document and people" (Bardach, 2012, p. 83). Thus, while evidence is needed, it is not the quantity of data collected but the quality that will dictate the impact a policy may have (DeLeon & Williams, 1997; Dobrow et al., 2004; Dobrow et al., 2006; Howlett, 2009; Marston & Watts, 2003; Newson et al., 2015; Walt et al., 2008).

Commonly, both quantitative and qualitative research are employed in policy formation. Quantitative research is based on deductive logic that uses variables to test causal relationships and hypotheses and stems from a positivist paradigm. While there are well established paradigms for understanding the quality of quantitative research, both in design and statistical analysis, qualitative evidence is equally important, although the integration of qualitative evidence in health policy and practice is burgeoning and given this, not as readily adopted in health contexts.

Qualitative research is based on assumptions about the nature of the social world, inclusive of the paradigm, that the researcher and those involved in the research come from. Hence, evidence can come not only in the form of clinical trials and massive databases, but also from more qualitative research sources (Marston & Watts, 2003). In this way, positionality becomes an important variable in health policy research. Walt et al. (2008) suggest that both the researcher and policy maker position can influence policy in terms of what health issues to focus on, the questions to be asked and the resources used. Therefore, it is vital that researchers practice greater reflexivity “that involves an analysis of their own institutional power, resources and positions and their role in defining research agendas and generating knowledge” (Walt et al., 2008, p. 315). For instance, who is the policy research team composed of and what are their roles? Are they insiders or outsiders? What is their policy analytic capacity, as there is space for different policy research agendas from differing positionalities and all of this has an impact on research and evidence and its utilization in health policy development (Walt et al., 2008)? If the level of policy analytic capacity is low, this can lead to a failure of evidence-based policy making and a failure in policy's effectiveness (Howlett, 2009).

Qualitative research can provide beneficial evidence to inform health policy (Dobrow et al., 2004; Dobrow et al., 2006; Howlett, 2009; Marston & Watts, 2003; Newson et al., 2015; Walt et al., 2008) Typically, this is post-hoc policy implementation (Walt et al., 2008) and may include various data collection methods, depending on the paradigm the researcher is coming from. Some researchers suggest that document analysis is useful in health policy research (Hanney et al., 2003; Liamputtong, 2013). For instance, document analysis of the health policy can help explain the policy process and in doing so, add to the policy appraisal. Hanney et al. (2003) suggest that in depth interviews gathering detailed investigation provides rich, thick data

with diverse layers and provides the best evidence. Others (Walt et al., 2008; Bardach, 2012; Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011) suggest that case studies, using careful case selection and classification, enable policy prescriptions on health issues, especially if a comparative approach is taken. Taking all this into consideration, this research takes a case study approach, using multiple forms of data collection, including document analysis, surveys and focus groups, to provide evidence on the policy for a fall break at Brock.

Given the context provided here in relation to the need to address the mental health concerns of university students, and the interest in critical appraisal of the development and implementation of effective policies in this regard, the following PhD dissertation addressed these two areas in three distinct yet connected research papers presented as a manuscript approach.

***Paper #1:*** Paper One analyzed the formulation of the fall break policy at Brock. This research analyzed data collected from a Brock University Student Union (BUSU) survey (Appendix D) conducted in the spring of 2013, as well as qualitative data from document analysis and an informant interview in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) formation stage of the policy cycle.

***Paper #2:*** Paper Two analyzed the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. This research used both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence. As such, this Paper Two analyzed descriptive statistics collected from documents, the fall break survey (Appendix E and F) and qualitative data from the fall break focus groups, faculty and informant interviews in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) implementation stage of the policy cycle.

*Paper #3:* Paper Three evaluated the fall break policy at Brock. This research used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect self-report data on mental health outcomes associated with the fall break. As such, paper three is an analysis of data from the fall break survey, used to provide quantitative evidence for the impact of the fall break policy. Focus group data from the fall break assessment provided qualitative evidence aimed at uncovering students' lived experience of the fall break, in the context of how the fall break influenced mental health. Faculty interview data also provided qualitative evidence regarding faculty perceptions of the impact of the fall break policy. These were analyzed in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) evaluation stage of the policy cycle.

These papers are triangulated to explain the fall break policy in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) policy cycle. These papers are meant to provide comprehensive analysis about the policy process at one post-secondary institution and ultimately, whether a fall break policy supports or undermines the mental health of students, using a range of data sets. This research will help post-secondary institutions determine whether a break in the fall semester can be an effective approach to addressing students' stress and anxiety. Following an extensive review of literature each of the three papers is presented separately and then analyzed together in a discussion and overarching implications sections.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides a working definition of mental health to add context here in relation to the fall break policy. The history mental health policy in education from global, national, and provincial perspectives will also be presented to provide a landscape of education policy in Canada and how it has evolved. A working definition of policy analysis that describes models used for appraising policy will also be presented. Moreover, an introduction of the policy cycle used in this policy analysis is also detailed in this chapter (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995; Howlett, Ramesh & Perl, 2009). Finally, chapter two introduces the reader to this researcher's paradigmatic and epistemological stance.

### Mental Health

**Definition.** Mental health can be defined in a variety of ways. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines mental health as “the condition of being sound mentally and emotionally that is characterized by the absence of mental illness and by adequate adjustment especially as reflected in feeling comfortable about oneself, positive feelings about others, and the ability to meet the demands of daily life” (Merriam Webster Online, n.d.). In some definitions the term mental health is used to:

describe the ‘thinking’ or ‘rational’ part of psychosocial health that describes our ability to perceive things happening around you in realistic ways, to use reasoning in problem solving, to interpret what is happening, and to evaluate your situation effectively and react appropriately (Donatelle & Thompson, 2011, p. 30)

Sometimes mental health is simply defined as an absence of mental disease (Westerhof, & Keyes, 2010). Moreover, globally, there is a lack of consensus on a definition of mental health (Manwell et al., 2018). This lack of consensus has policy implications. Hence, “understanding



the history and evolution of the concept of mental health is essential to understanding the problems it was intended to solve, and what it may be used for in the future” (Manwell et al., 2018, conclusions).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO, 2014, Mental health: a state of well-being, para. 1). This definition encompasses a positive aspect of mental health that aligns with WHO’s definition of health: “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2014, Mental health: a state of well-being, para. 1). WHO’s definition of mental health includes emotional, psychological and social well-being and is used to inform many other definitions of mental health (Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), 2017; mentalhealth.gov, 2017; CMHA Ontario, 2018). Subsequently, “mental health is more than the absence of a mental health condition or illness: it is a positive sense of well-being, or the capacity to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face” (CMHA Ontario, 2018, Positive mental health and well-being, para. 1). This definition of mental health is predominantly used to inform policy nationally and will be the definition that will be used to inform this research.

### **History of Mental Health Policy in Education**

**Globally.** There are many distinctions and interconnections among international, Canadian, and Ontario policies related to mental health in educational settings. In January of 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) put out a resolution to address the burden of mental health disorders globally, as well as strategies for a “comprehensive, coordinated response from the health and social sectors at the country level” (WHO, 2012, p. 1). This

resolution highlighted some of the already existing mental health resolutions supported by WHO, like the extreme importance that mental health problems have in all societies, and the burden that these problems can have in terms of quality of life, economic costs and social costs (WHO, 2012). Furthermore, it encouraged countries to give appropriate attention to mental health and to implement strategies, policies and programs to address these mental health problems. It also highlights the reciprocities a mental disorder can lead to, including (but not limited to), disabilities, disease, substance use and other disorders. This resolution stressed that mental health and mental health disorders are a worldwide issue that certainly plays a huge role in the global burden of disease (WHO, 2012). The WHO (2012) urges member states to develop comprehensive policies and strategies for health promotion and prevention that promote human rights and are in alignment with national priorities. Member states were also encouraged to observe risk factors and social determinants of health relating to mental disorders, as well as to give priority to mental health promotion and prevention, to improve population health of each member state and to add to the global development of a comprehensive mental health plan (WHO, 2012). It is important to note here that much of our understanding, including the WHO's understanding of mental health disorders, stemmed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) that was first established in 1952 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Subsequently, and in partnership with the WHO, a revised DSM-5 was created and included a section for children and notably, an outline for cultural formulation.

**Nationally.** In Canada, the historic context of education, mental, and social services was shaped by colonial ideologies (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) and any mental health policies in education were informed as such. Said policies were not based on contextual factors and were often detrimental to those they served, as was the case in residential

schools. In 2009, the Mental Health Commission of Canada put forward the first part of a national mental health strategy that “painted a vivid picture of the kind of mental health system we need” (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). Essentially, this framework called for the recognition of mental health as an essential component to quality of life for Canadians; offered hope for recovery and mental health supports and promotion; stressed equitable access to services and treatments; and allowed for Canadians with mental health problems to be “fully engaged citizens and active participants in all aspects of social and economic life” (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 7). Following suit, in 2012, the Mental Health Commission of Canada put forward our first national mental health strategy. This strategy is meant to be a “blueprint for change” (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 7) and was participatory in its development of many different people, either living with or touched by those with mental illness. Its focus is on mental health, mental illness, recovery and well-being and is meant to be comprehensive of many of WHO’s (2012) directives for promotion and prevention, recovery and rights, access to services, and disparities and diversity, all of which are in alignment with WHO (2012) directives. Moreover, this strategy also encompasses raising awareness of children and youth, workplaces, seniors; development of policies and practices that include human rights; inclusive of social determinants, cultural differences, language differences, geographical differences and gender and sexuality differences. It is also in alignment with WHO’s directives, in that leadership and collaboration are through knowledge, coordinated efforts and human resources are a priority (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). However, some of the strategic directives in Canada’s first mental health strategy are specific to the Canadian landscape. Strategic direction 5 calls for priorities of “First Nations Stream, Inuit

Stream, Metis Stream and Urban, rural and social issues” (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 5).

The mental health of youth has been made a global priority (WHO, 2012). Informed by WHO (2012), Canada’s first mental health strategy includes the social determinants of health and well-being among young people. This comprehensive report offers insight into the health and well-being of young people, and to understand their social determinants of health to inform policy, a practice that will improve the lives of young people (WHO, 2012). In order to ensure that children’s mental health was comprehensive in Canada’s mental health strategies, a child and youth mental health framework was mandated by the Mental Health Commission of Canada through the Child and Youth Advisory Committee (CYAC) entitled “Evergreen: A child and youth mental health framework for Canada” (Kutcher & McLuckie, 2010, p. 7). Evergreen was created to offer information to the MHCC that supports its mental health strategies and to “provide a framework of values and strategic directions to assist governments and other authorities responsible for child and youth mental health in Canada in their address of child and youth mental health” (Kutcher & McLuckie, 2010, p. 7). In other words, Evergreen can be used as a “transdisciplinary tool for implementation and evaluation of mental health policy in Canada” (Moore, 2015). As such, Evergreen’s values and strategic directions mirror those of the WHO’s (2012).

**Provincially.** Over the last thirty years, “Mental health policy in Ontario has moved from an emphasis on institutionalization of people with mental illnesses and addictions to a system that depends on effective and accessible services delivered in the community” (Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Ontario, 2018, History of mental health reform). Ontario (as in many other provinces) has a comprehensive mental health strategy that aligns closely with the

WHO's (2012) recommendations and follows Canada's national mental health strategy. This is a comprehensive strategy that is meant to "improve mental health and well-being for all Ontarian's, create healthy, resilient, inclusive communities, identify mental health and addictions problems early and intervene and provide timely, high quality, integrated, person-directed health and other human services" (Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, 2011, p. 2). The first three years of strategy implementation focused on youth and young people in Ontario and provided them with high quality services, early detection and closing service gaps. As such, Ontario's Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) developed a "policy framework for child and youth mental health to provide strategic direction for ongoing improvements over the next decade" (MCYS, 2006, i). This framework was intended to be reflective of Ontario's mental health strategy, as well as to improve for all children and youth: timeliness in provision of services, increased health promotion and prevention, increased cross-collaboration, highlight best practices, heighten social inclusion and enhance accountability (MCYS, 2006).

The Ministry of Education in Ontario also has guidelines and strategies to improve the mental wellbeing of children and youth in Ontario. The Ontario Ministry of Education offers guidelines for educators, parents and children on a variety of health issues pertinent to Ontario's youth, including those on mental health. For instance, they offer guidelines for safe and accepting schools, substance use, addictions and related behaviours and mental health. These guidelines compliment Ontario's MCYS strategies (i.e. Open Minds, Healthy Minds). Over the last few years we have seen some education policies and/or practices designed to promote mental wellness in children and youth. The Leading Safe and Accepting Schools project (2014) is one of them. This project was meant to act as a toolkit for schools to implement safe and accepting practices (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2015). In 2014, a survey of this toolkit

provided a snapshot of “Ontario school and system leaders’ perceptions of progress, best practices and challenges to implementing safe and accepting schools’ initiatives in their districts” (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2014, p. 5). This report revealed that in order to create safe and accepting schools in Ontario, a whole school approach needs to be taken (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2014). This idea of population health for citizens is not new, as we saw in the WHO (2012) mental health strategies. However, traditionally this approach has not been taken with youth and children in Canada. Mitchell (2003) suggests using a rights-based approach for health promotion and policy implementation in youth. “Young people are fully competent to manage important aspects of their own health and have led authorities to support health-enhancing behaviours for themselves and their peers” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 510).

**Historical turning points.** Globally, nationally and provincially strategies are in place to foster mental health policies in education, to improve the mental health and wellbeing of youth. Historical turning points can have an impact on health policy and the policy cycle, and therefore, are important as documentary evidence in policy analysis. Slaby, Barham, Eron and Wilcox (1994) suggest that:

Health policy analysis needs to be informed by a deeper understanding and questioning of the historical trajectory and political stance that sets the stage for the acting out of health policy formation, in order that health systems function optimally along their own historical pathways (p. 447).

Health policy analysis should be examined in relation to human rights and inclusion of vulnerable groups (Mannan et al., 2013). “If human rights and equity underpin policy formation, it is more likely that they will be inculcated in health service delivery” (Mannan et al., 2013, p. 1). However, in practice this is not always the case. For instance, a fall break policy at Brock

University was implemented in the absence of supporting empirical evidence. Brock's Senate approved a three-year trial of a fall break policy to improve student's mental health. Since the policy was implemented in the absence of baseline evidence, it is now difficult to go back and determine if this policy is effective and equitable in reducing student stress. Ultimately, mental health policy in education should be developed concert with national and provincial mental health strategies. Ideally, any mental health policy in education at any level, would follow the MCYS policy framework for child and youth mental health and would be equitable and based on restorative practices.

### **Policy Analysis**

**Definition.** The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines policy as “a way of acting or proceeding or the ability to make intelligent decisions especially in everyday matters” (Merriam Webster Online, n.d.). The same online dictionary defines analysis as “the separation and identification of the parts of a whole or a series of explanations or observations on something (as an event)” (Merriam Webster Online, n.d.). Hence, policy analysis may be described as the explanation of a way of taking action. Bardach (2012) refers to policy analysis as a “social and political activity” (p. xv) that by nature includes a topic that impacts the welfare of many guided by the policy analysts whom may include professionals, politicians or other interested parties. Today, policy analysis is “often done in teams or office wide settings; the immediate consumer is a ‘client’ of some sort, such as a hierarchical superior; and the ultimate audience will include diverse subgroups of politically attuned supporters and opponents of the analysts’ work” (Bardach, 2012, p. xv), all of which have an impact on the quality of the analysis. Policy analysis can also be described as the systematic appraisal of a given policy, that explains the effects of said policy, including any policy outcomes (Howlett et al., 2009). Appraisal can be

defined as “an opinion on the nature, character, or quality of something or the act of placing a value on the nature, character or quality of something” (Merriam Webster Online, n.d.). In this paper the term policy analysis will be used interchangeably with the term policy appraisal and is defined as the “systematic comparison and evaluation of alternatives available to public actors for solving social problems” (Weimer & Vining, 2011, p. 26).

**Models used in policy appraisal.** There are well established means both for writing policy and its appraisal. These include various models that can be used in policy appraisal and there is much debate among researchers as to which method is best. However, most of these models are comprised of similar components. For instance, Bardach (2012) suggests that there is an eightfold path to policy analysis. The eightfold path includes: “define the problem, assemble some evidence, construct the alternatives, select the criteria, project the outcomes, confront the trade-offs, decide and tell your story” (Bardach, 2012, p. xvi). On the other hand, Weimar and Vining (2011) purport that policy analysis includes: problem analysis (understand the problem, choose and explain relevant goals, select a solution method); solution analysis (impact of categories, policy alternatives, predictions, assessment) with information gathering reciprocally happening at both of these stages; and communication (p. 344). Furthermore, Howlett (2009) suggests that there are five stages of the policy cycle and the role of policy appraisal is to investigate those stages. These include: agenda setting (goals); policy formulation (better data and research on an issue); decision making (risk analysis and assessment); policy implementation (administrative resources that match policy goals); and policy evaluation (performance measurement and effectiveness) (Howlett et al., 2009). Even a quick Google search turns up a myriad of diagrams depicting the policy process and stages in the policy cycle, all with similar details. The policy process is “the process by which an issue moves from its initial inception



through to implementation” (The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada, n.d., *Primer on population health*, Chapter 14) and ensuing evaluation. Hence, a key component of policy appraisal is to look at the stages of the policy and the process used for its formation. In fact, “many policy analysts use the policy cycle as a framework to understand the process of how policies come about” (The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada. n.d., *Primer on population health*, Chapter 14). Policy appraisal should include examining the process in and around the policy formation (Bardach, 2012; Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Hence, any good policy appraisal will include an examination of the people involved in making the policy, the conceptual framework used to create and evaluate the policies, public engagement with research and the interfaces between the researcher and the wider political environments (Hanney et al., 2003).

**A formula for appraising policy.** Howlett (2009) suggests that part of appraising policy is to examine the policy process used for its formation. According to Howlett (2009), there are five such stages: agenda setting, formulation, decision making, implementation and evaluation. Howlett and Ramesh (1995) suggest that these stages relate to phases of applied problem solving. Hence, these stages will be used throughout this paper to appraise the fall break policy at Brock. The first three pertaining to policy formation: agenda setting, policy formulation and policy decision-making (Howlett, 2009). Table 1 depicts the “five stages of the policy cycle and their relationship to applied problem solving” (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995).

Table 1: Problem solving and the policy cycle. (From Howlett and Ramesh, 1995)

Five stages of the policy cycle and their relationship to applied problem solving		
Stages in policy cycle	Phases of applied problem solving	Description and comments

Agenda setting	Problem recognition	How an issue comes to the attention of policy makers. The process is not always rational, and it can often be difficult to see why some issues rise to the top of political agendas while other, seemingly more important issues, remain unaddressed
Policy formulation	Proposal of solution	Decision-makers (governments, health regions, hospitals, care teams etc.) formulate policy options. Government policy-making usually occurs behind the scenes and is carried out by professional policy analysts
Decision-making	Choice of solution	How decision-makers decide what to do or not do about an issue
Policy implementation	Putting solution into Effect	Putting the decisions into effect. Not as simple as it sounds, as it usually entails changing habits and ingrained ways of doing things
Policy evaluation	Monitoring results	(all too often neglected) Examining implementation and outcomes to check if the policy has been properly implemented and if the desired outcomes were achieved

**Agenda setting.** Agenda setting deals with how a problem arises and why a policy is needed in the first place. Bardach (2012) refers to this as defining the problem. In the past, agenda setting was more objective with unilateral decision making (Howlett et al., 2009). Agenda setting research has shown this stage of the policy cycle to be influenced by a variety of different key players and stakeholders, their ideas, beliefs and value systems, and the institutions they are a part of (Howlett et al, 2009). Therefore, agenda setting involves “the complex interrelationships of ideas, actors and structures” (Howlett et al., p. 108), whereby the content of the issues determined at this stage of the policy process are dependent on the policy creators, including its subsystem, the ideas and beliefs of those actors. Even at this early stage of the policy cycle, health research utilization is important (Hanney et al., 2003). Hence, policy appraisal should include the examination of the agenda setting process, including the key actors

involved at this stage. In doing so, one piece of the policy puzzle may be understood which will have an impact on determining its effectiveness. In addition, understanding the key stakeholders involved and the policy subsystem at the agenda setting stage, may help to explain the policy ideas and framework that guided its formulation.

**Policy formation.** Policy formulation can be guided by varying policy instruments that may have an impact on its design. Howlett et al. (2009) suggest that some policy tools may be information based, authority based, treasure based or organization based. For instance, information-based policy tools may include public information campaigns or benchmark and performance indicators, while organization-based policy instruments can include public enterprises or family and community organizations (Howlett et al., 2009). The reality is that “the variety of instruments available to policy-makers is limited only by their imaginations” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 114). Hence, policy makers have to choose which instrument will best serve policy formulation, that will best tackle the policy issues, as well as its implementation. “This can be undertaken in a highly systematic, analytical fashion or as a much more trial-and-error exercise based simply on the experiences and preferences of policy formulators” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 117). It may be difficult to know which policy tool to use at various points in the policy process and these tools can fluctuate throughout the policy process (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Regardless of the policy instruments chosen, these tools should align with the policy problems and help to guide policy formulation. This choice is usually at the discretion of the policy makers. Included in this decision are the policy alternatives that may be used to compare goals and impacts the policy it is being designed for (Weimer & Vining, 2011). “Policy formulation is about choosing from among these types of policy instruments those that can be used to address particular policy problems and then

analyzing these choices in terms of both their technical and political feasibility, with an eye to reducing their number to a small set of alternative courses of action that can be laid out for decision-makers at the next stage of the policy process” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 135). Bardach (2012) suggests that constructing policy alternatives is in and of itself an entire separate step in policy formulation and ensuing evaluation whereby different policy options are laid out and alternative strategies and outcomes are evaluated and then narrowed down accordingly. In the end, there may be some alternatives that get discarded, leaving policy with a final list of alternatives that have been conceptualized and then simplified (Bardach, 2012). Nonetheless, evidence based on research leads to more choice of well-informed policy alternatives (Hanney et al., 2003).

There are also a variety of models, frameworks and theories that may be used for policy making (Hanney et al., 2003). Some of these may include rational models, whereby policy makers identify problems and provide alternatives (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009); incrementalist models that use scientific knowledge and other factors like interests, values, established positions and personal ambitions (Hanney et al., 2003); networks approach in which a policy network of communities, government officials, interest groups work together to formulate a policy (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009); the garbage can model that involves an untidy process with no phases in which many different problems and alternatives are offered by participants (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009) just to name a few.

**Decision Making.** The next stage in policy appraisal is examining the decision-making around the formation (Howlett et al., 2009). "The decision-making stage of the policy process is where one or more, or none, of the many options that have been debated and examined during the previous two stages of the policy cycle is approved as an official course of action" (Howlett

et al., 2009, p. 139). It is here that decisions are made based on the evidence found in the policy formation stage for effective implementation (the next stage). Health research can be utilized to help in the decision-making process. However, "even with standard operating procedures in place, exactly what process is followed, and which decision is considered 'best' will vary according to the structural and institutional context of a decision-making situation" (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 141). Again, understanding this context will help to tell the story of what influenced the types of decisions made in the policy process. Researchers (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011) agree that there are various models that can be used as a lens to gain insight into the decision made in the formation of a policy. These can include rational, incremental, mixed-scanning, networks, garbage can and decision accretion models of policy decision making (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Moreover, Bardach (2012) suggests that models should align with the system in which the policy is being created and may include evolutionary models, market models or production models. In the decision-making stage, context also needs to be considered. The nature of decisions in health policy are influenced by context (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). In particular, varying policy objectives, varying skills and/or abilities of expert group members, resource constraints and/or political interests, differing ways of collecting evidence as well as the different types of evidence, all need to be examined (World Health Organization (WHO, n.d., website). "Given the diversity of forms of knowledge and policy decision, their interaction has to be understood in the context of both the diverse values shaped by philosophies of knowledge and the practical aspects of policy making" (Hanney et al., 2003, The tactical model section, para. 5). In other words, part of the decision-making stage needs to look at the decisions around the policy and, the choices in a given situation, political character of the actors

participating (Hanney et al., 2003). One way of doing this is to look at the context that the policy decision was made under. It is “the combination of diverse forms of scientific inputs and decision outputs shapes the processes of utilization and creates specific expectations and opportunities” (Hanney et al., 2003, p. 9).

In recent years, behavioural economics have been used globally at a governmental level to inform policy decisions (McAuley, 2013; Leigh, 2015; French & Oreopoulos, 2017). Behavioural economics “incorporates psychological knowledge about human behaviour to enhance and extend economic models of decision making” (Huriya, 2011, p. 446). Leigh (2015) suggests that behavioural economics policy makers should examine policy alternatives and provide a plethora of information and then tests policies before implementing them. Randomised policy trials should be done to test new policy ideas (Leigh, 2015). In Canada, behavioural economics has been applied to health care policy to elicit organ donation consent (French & Oreopoulos, 2017). Furthermore, it has been applied to try and increase flu vaccine rates (Chen & Stevens, 2017). Behavioural economics has also been used to inform policy in education (Huriya, 2011). It can be used in education to help understand the intricacy of decision making in post-secondary education, to guide policy formation, and to understand which interventions will be most effective (Koch, Nafziger & Nielsen, 2015). However, French and Oreopoulos (2017) caution that behavioural economics works best as a compliment to more traditional models. “This is because policy interventions incorporating behavioural economics are very context specific; these interventions often occur within an existing policy framework, and it is not always obvious what the best way to alter the status quo is (French & Oreopoulos, 2017, p. 630-631). In today’s society, universities are under an immense amount of pressure to respond to students’ mental health. This combined with the excessive demand for increased admissions can

leave post-secondary institutions competing to attract and retain students (Peston, 2013).

“Producer power, however, is not unlimited and , therefore, to some extent what is offered must correspond to consumer (student) demand, and effort must be made to make consumers (students) want what is offered” (Peston, 2013, p. 27). Nonetheless, policy decisions should be based on research that examines alternatives in order to offer the most effective response.

**Implementation.** Policy implementation is another step in the cycle. Once a problem has been identified, the agenda set, the policy has been formulated and policy decisions have been made (Howlett et al., 2009). However, implementation needs to be considered and built into each step of the cycle process (Bardach, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2011; Howlett et al., 2009). In fact, the success or failure of policy implementation may be traced back to its design (Howlett, 2009). “Consequently, prudent policy design anticipates implementation problems by including policy features to generate information, resources, and fixers to solve them” (Weimer and Vining, 2011, p. 306). Hence, implementation problems need to be thought about ahead of time and built into the design of the policy (Weimer & Vining, 2011). At the very least, policy alternatives need to be adequate so that even if implementation is unsuccessful, positive policy outcomes may still ensue (Bardach, 2012). That being said, there are many variables that will impact the success or failure of policy implementation. Weimer and Vining (2011) suggest that there are four factors that impact implementation success. These include: incentives for implementation, assembly, compliance and “the motivations and resources of those who will be managing the implementation” (p. 292). Howlett et al. (2009) agree that the actors and activities involved in policy implementation can either help or hinder its implementation and thus, are important to examine in the policy cycle. There may be many different actors involved in the

policy implementation who were not necessarily part of process of policy formation (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009).

Implementation science can be used to help design successful policies throughout the policy cycle. Nilsen (2015) writes that "implementation science is defined as the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other EBPs into routine practice to improve the quality and effectiveness of health services and care" (p. 2). In other words, it is the practical application and delivery or use of scientific evidence. Implementation science is sometimes described as knowledge translation, knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer, knowledge integration or research utilization (Nilsen, 2015). Implementation science literature points to the use of theories, models and frameworks to guide successful implementation (Nilsen, 2015). Some of these theories, models and frameworks are taken from psychology or sociology (Nilsen, 2015). For instance, some researchers (Park, Lencucha, Mattingly, Zafran, & Kirmayer, 2015) used narrative and phenomenological theoretical frameworks. Other researchers (Burke et al., 2015; Field, Booth, Ilott, & Gerrish, 2014; Renger, Bartel, & Foltysova, 2013) have used theories, models and frameworks that have emerged within implementation science (Nilsen, 2015). This research views health policy implementation of the fall break based on theories stemming from implementation science.

**Evaluation.** Policy evaluation is the last cycle in the policy process. After the agenda has been set, decisions have been made, a policy has been formulated and implemented, its evaluation can be done. Policy evaluation has to do with how the policy is working, or its effectiveness (Howlett et al., 2009). A policy can change based on the outcomes of the evaluation. "After a policy has been evaluated, the problem and solutions it involves may be completely reconceptualized, in which case the cycle may swing back to agenda-setting or some



other stage of the cycle, or the status quo may be maintained” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 178).

Howlett et al. (2009) refer to this as policy learning. Policy evaluation is beneficial because it helps to learn about what does and does not work in the policy and where in the cycle needs to be addressed to fix the policy. In other words, policy evaluation provides learning regarding the policy and policy issues (Howlett et al., 2009). Once again, this learning is largely dependent on the actors involved at this stage of the policy cycle. For instance, who the actors are and how they are situated in the world and their worldview and position will have an influence over the how the policy is evaluated and what comes of those evaluations. “Policy evaluation processes, recognizing these built-in biases, often simply aim to provide enough information to make reasonably intelligent and defensible claims about policy outcomes, rather than offering definitive explanations that build airtight cases concerning their absolute level of success or failure” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 183). That being said, there are different types of lessons that can be learned from policy evaluations. These can be both practical and fundamental (Howlett et al., 2009).

Practical lessons can include “practical suggestions about specific aspects of the policy cycle, based on the actual experience with the policy on the part of policy implementers and target groups” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 181). These lessons can include perceptions about what has worked and not worked throughout the policy cycle process. “Other lessons probe broader policy goals and their underlying ideas or paradigms, or the ‘frames’ in which lesson-drawing takes place” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 181). This fundamental lesson from policy evaluation can lead to a policy being terminated or severely altered (Howlett et al., 2009). Even at this stage in the policy cycle, the policy can fail. Ineffective policy evaluation can lead to policy failure. The actors involved are crucial to effective policy evaluation; “the activity of several distinct types of

evaluators result in several distinct types of policy analysis and evaluation” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 185). While the policy actors have an impact on the policy evaluation, the policy evaluation itself can lead to various outcomes for the policy. Howlett et al. (2009) suggest that ultimately, there are three possible outcomes that can be deduced from the evaluation stage in the policy cycle: successful, wanting and failure. “In the first two outcomes, the policy evaluation stage serves to feed the policy back to some other stage of the policy process” (Howlett et al., 2009, p.191). If the policy is deemed successful, it will likely carry on as such. However, if it is deemed wanting, it means revisions are needed and thus, must be fed back through the policy cycle. Finally, if the outcome is deemed failure, it means the policy should be terminated. Hence, the evaluation stage in the policy cycle can lead to lessons learned that will ultimately impact the success or failure of the policy.

### **Paradigm and Epistemology**

There is much debate among researchers (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Sparkes, 1992; Tower & Rowe, 2012) about the varying paradigms and ensuing epistemologies and ontologies between quantitative and qualitative research and the tensions these debates provoke. "There is extensive discussion within the research methods literature as to the epistemological and ontological distinctions of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies” (as cited in Pascal, Johnson, Dore, & Trainor, 2010, pp. 173-174). What is clear in the literature is that the first step in qualitative research is for the paradigm and epistemology to be articulated by the researcher. "It is impossible to engage in any form of research without first committing (often implicitly) to ontological and epistemological positions" (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). These positions guide the research so that paradigm informs theoretical framework, which informs methodology that in turn, informs methods (Carter & Little, 2007; Crotty, 2003a; Daley, 2007a; Fossey,

Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Scotland, 2012; Tracy, 2013). Moreover, "choosing an epistemological position is the starting point because epistemology is foundational and will directly influence methods and methodology" (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1325). However, there are confluences even within those epistemological foundations (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Tracy (2013) suggests that for interpretivists "the nature of knowledge is produced, dependent and value laden, subjective and co-created" (p. 48). This resonates with me because I believe that there are no universal truths and that research can never be value free. "Values are an integral part of social life; no group's values are presumed superior to others" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 710). Each person has their own experiences and worldview and they bring that with them wherever they go. I do not believe you can take who a person is out of research, not even who the researcher is. I am very much interested in uncovering the meaning of human experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). As such, "Interpretivists emphasize meaning people make rather than facts (Pascale)" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 17). Along with this is the notion that human beings are social and create meaning from their experiences in the world (Fossey et al., 2002). Since no two people are the same, then no two people can experience the same phenomena in the same manner from their experiences. Hence, "interpretive researchers attempt to understand and explain phenomena by accessing the meanings people assign to them" (Blumer, 1978 as noted in Tower, Rowe, & Wallis, 2012, p. 41). Furthermore, Sparkes (1992) suggests that for interpretivists, there are multiple realities and so many constructions of reality are possible. He states:

In view of this, interpretivists focus on the interests and purposes of people (including the researcher), on their intentional and

meaningful behaviour, then by attempting to construe the world from the participants' point of view they try to explain and understand how they construct and continue to reconstruct social reality, given their interests and purposes.

(Sparkes, 1992, p. 27)

It is this notion of how social reality is constructed that was initially confusing for me, but that so deeply resonates with me now.

Guba (1990) suggests that for constructivists there can be multiple explanations and the idea of induction also really resonates with me. "The constructivist proceeds in ways that aim to identify the variety of constructions that exist and bring them into as much consensus as possible" (Guba, 1990, p. 26). In my mind now, the idea that there could be one truth applicable to all people seems ludicrous. I like the idea that there can be many constructions, with no one that is more correct than the other (Guba, 1990). In other words, "no group's values are presumed superior to others" (Fossey et al., 2002; p. 719). Along with this is the notion that construction of knowledge is co-created and that it is okay for the researcher to be made explicit in the research (Crotty, 2003b; Daley, 2007a; Fossey et al., 2002; Guba, 1990). Daley (2007a) states:

From this perspective, the creation of an explanation is co-constructed insofar as there is no pretense about the researcher's not having a profound influence on how the data are created, managed, interpreted, and brought forward in the process of analysis (pp. 48-49).

To this end, Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggest that social change is an important outcome from the results of the co-constructed knowledge for interpretivists. While I do not believe that

emancipation resonates with me for my research, I would like to think at least one person could benefit from my research.

Another aspect of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, more specific to qualitative research that really hits home with me, is the idea of relational ethics (Tracy, 2013). Never before had I thought of ethics outside of informed consent and anonymity. Trussell (2010) suggests that there may be many "ethically heightened moments" (p. 377) in the research process. I really thought about what those moments could be in my own research. Some questions I asked myself were: How will I emotionally protect participants? Will I need to protect myself either physically or emotionally? What will I do with emotionally sensitive data? Will I know what to do if someone discloses information to me that will either harm themselves or others? I found that in my research there were times when participants were sharing their experiences of mental illness that I really felt ethically heightened in knowing how to proceed, both with the interview and with doing what is right for the participant.

Jones et al. (2014) suggest that constructionism, constructivism, and interpretivism are often used interchangeably. The literature suggests this to be true: many researchers (Crotty, 2003b; Daley, 2007a; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Sparkes, 1992) not only use the terms interchangeably but their meanings between epistemology and theoretical stance. For this researcher, there is a blurring of the two; they are one in the same and can be adopted as both the paradigm and theoretical stance all at once. There are many aspects within this worldview that resonate with this researcher.

**Role of the researcher.** It is important for the researcher to be reflexive and understand the role of the researcher in the case study research process. Dupuis (1999) discusses the importance of including the human self in the research process from conducting, writing and

reporting qualitative research. "I argue that those things that are thought to be problematic in science need not be, and I propose that we adopt an alternative approach to qualitative research in leisure studies-a reflexive methodology-that is more in keeping with the theoretical orientations with which we profess to be working" (Dupuis, 1999, p. 44). I believe that the researcher is embedded in the research (Daley, 2007b). "Researchers are engaged at all stages of inquiry, in a process of interpretation and meaning making that necessarily includes their own biography and social position" (Daley, 2007b, p. 196). Coming from an interpretivist paradigm, I see the role of the researcher as an insider (Lacity & Janson, 1994, Daley, 2007b). However, I recognize that this stance may evolve throughout the research process (Daley, 2007b). In other words, my role as a researcher is "in flux and emerges as the conditions of the research situation unfold" (Daley, 2007b, p. 190). At times I may be an insider in the researcher and at other times I may have to take more of an outsider stance (Deutsh, 2004). Hence, I believe it is vital to be reflexive throughout the research process (Clancy, 2013; Daley, 2007a; Deutsh, 2004; Dupuis, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Shaw, 2010).

In being reflexive, the importance of positionality of the researcher in the research process becomes clear. Daley (2007a) suggests that reflexivity helps to bridle personal bias, to reveal our values and interests and to limit misinterpretations. Shaw (2010) states: "By engaging in reflexivity, we can enter into a dialogue with participants and use each participant's presentation of self to help revise our fore-understanding and come to make sense of the phenomenon anew" (p. 235). As a novice researcher at the start of my journey, I am only just beginning to think about who I am as a researcher and what my role as a researcher is in my research. I do believe that where I come from, my values and beliefs, have an impact on my research in ways that are not entirely clear to me now. For instance, it is through introspection

that I have come to understand my interest in examining mental health policy for young people, and that these reasons are important to understand and do not minimize the importance of the research (Finlay, 2002).

I recognize the importance of positional reflexivity (Bowtell, Sawyer, Aroni, Green, & Duncan, 2013). My "social identity, researcher positionality, power relationships and pre-understanding" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 38) all have an impact and help to guide my research. I have some insight into why I am engaging in research on mental health policy in young people, and how my experiences have led me to this project, although I gain new insights into this almost daily. I have now begun to think about who I am as a white, heterosexual, middle class, female, single mother, Italian-Canadian PhD student will impact my research. Being a PhD student in a researcher role is a position of privilege and may even be viewed as having a position of power by participants in my research. It is important to recognize these positions going into my research and eventually, as they relate to my data. Moreover, I have thought about how being a heterosexual woman might impact the research. For instance, will someone who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered be able to open up to me and will I be able to be empathetic to their mental health issues, whatever they may be? Will I be able to represent their voices authentically? Or, perhaps it will not be an issue at all. How will I bridge the power gap between the participants and myself? Will I be more or less empathetic because I myself am a student? How will being a mom impact my research, if at all? I feel like it is important to acknowledge my positionality and to examine how that influences my research (Jones et al., 2014).

Researcher positionality has an impact on research and being a novice researcher will impact the research. However, being reflexive about positionality can only help this research

pursuit. This is true for health policy analysis. In health policy analysis, “the role of the policy researcher and the importance of reflexivity and researcher positionality in the research process” (Walt et al., 2008, p. 308) should be of utmost consideration. It is in being reflexive that biases I bring with me become evident (Bowtell et al., 2013; Clancy, 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Shaw, 2010). At this point, I am not sure what my preconceived notions on school related mental health issues for undergraduate students are, or if a policy for a break will have either a positive or a negative impact on school related stress in undergraduate students. Hence, I cannot help but wonder if my "greenness" (Deutsh, 2004, p. 886) influences my research?

For this case study research, transparency is important (Tracy, 2013). The researcher cannot separate who they are from the research; my social identity and my experiences are a part of me and will therefore have an impact on my research. I do not think that I can put that aside, nor do I think I would be able to, even if I tried. Moreover, I recognize that my physical being may also have an impact on my research. "Being reflexive means realizing the importance of our full body presence as a way of understanding our roles and relationships" (Daley, 2007b, p. 190). I am not sure I had even thought about how I look or what I wear or how my body language could influence my research. In any research I have been a part of thus far, it has not really been a concern. However, I am now thinking about how my appearance, my age, body language and gestures will influence the relationship I have with participants in my research. That said, it is my hope that participants and I were engaged in a relationship where we co-constructed knowledge together. Jones et al. (2014) suggest that:

The literature refers to this connection as the relationship between the knower (researcher) and known (participant) as an evolution of going from a separateness orientation (objectivity) to an orientation where inquiry is a form of interaction, that



influences both the knower and the known (co-construction of knowledge) (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011 as noted by Jones et al., 2014, p. 43).

I recognize that I am coming from a place of privilege as a white, middle class PhD student and power as a researcher. I hope my role as a student helped to bridge the said power imbalance. Again, in being transparent and revealing the decisions I make and the influences on my research, this helps to establish trust with participants (Tracy, 2013). Ideally, the power structure of researcher-participant would be minimized, so that our voices become mixed "with participants' voices sometimes dominant" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 199). It would be naive to suggest that I could represent the voice of participants, without including their voices in the construction of knowledge. Finlay (2002) suggests, "Intersubjective reflection can help reveal the mutual meanings emerging within the research relationship (p. 215). Hence, at this point in my research journey, the idea of participants as co-researchers in the research does not resonate with me, but I do believe in the co-construction of knowledge with participants.

Dupuis (1999) suggests a collaborative role between the researcher and the participants "in the meaning-making process" (p. 60). This is how I envisioned my research to be carried out. Moreover, I recognize that participants and myself as researcher might switch in and out of subject-object positions throughout the research process (Deutsh, 2004). Dupuis (1999) talks about the role of emotions in qualitative research and how they should be included in the process. "Consequences to us as researchers, especially to qualitative researchers, and emotional responses are an integral part of scientific inquiry" (Dupuis, 1999, p. 51). As such, "the research conversation can have a transforming effect on both the researched and the researcher" (Daley, 2007b, p. 191). It is through reflexivity that this dual role can become clear so that the co-construction of knowledge can be represented.

### **Chapter Three: Methodological Approach**

#### **Case Study Approach**

This case study investigation into mental health policy in post-secondary education utilizes a case study methodology and a conceptual framework informed by constructive theoretical assumptions (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Case study research can acculturate this perspective of “acknowledging multiple realities having multiple meanings, with findings that are observer dependent” (Yin, 2014, p. 17). Liamputtong (2013) states, “the theoretical framework that a researcher adopts for their case study is really a reflection of his or her conception of a case” (p. 201). This research will use the case study method to understand the shared meanings of the fall break at Brock University through an appraisal of the policy, representing the perspectives of varying participants and describing how and why their varying perspectives enlighten the analysis of a policy for a fall break to impact students’ mental health (Yin, 2014). “Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). In 2013, Brock University implemented a fall break policy in hopes that it would have an impact on students’ mental health. Stress and anxiety are significant factors impacting students’ mental health (Mostafaei, 2012). Reduced stress leads to improved mental health, which results in better post-secondary academic outcomes and retention which in turn, leads to a better equipped and more productive workforce. Many post-secondary institutions recognize the need to help improve the mental health of their undergraduate students and have implemented a fall break policy in hopes of achieving this. Possible policies for interventions to

support the mental health of university students is of paramount importance across Ontario universities.

Case study approaches are widely used in policy research (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Bardach, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2011; Howlett et al., 2009). There is also a plethora of research on the use of the case study approach in health policy formation, implementation and evaluation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Campbell et al., 2000; Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2009; Sanderson, 2002; Walt et al., 2008; ) Moreover, “case study methodology is frequently used in higher education and student affairs research because many of our work environments and the situations we encounter represent ‘cases’” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 93). There are various types of qualitative case studies that can be used depending on the intent of the research (Yin, 2014). The approach for this research will be an embedded single intrinsic evaluative case study. In an intrinsic case study, the “focus is on the case itself” (Creswell, 2013, p. 100). In this research, an appraisal (evaluation) of the education policy for a fall break will be examined. Said policy will be appraised using a single case, namely the fall break policy at Brock University. In a single instrumental case study, “the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). An evaluation of the post-secondary institutional policy of having a break in the fall to reduce stress among its undergraduate students is needed. The challenge lies in evaluating the policy implementation prior to collecting baseline data and with no empirical evidence to support the policy. Therefore, this research will evaluate the fall break policy at Brock by examining the units of the policy cycle (policy formation, policy implementation and policy evaluation) that will include different levels of data collection and analyses at each level of policy appraisal (Yin, 2014). Hence, this may be considered a case study evaluation.

Yin (2014) suggests that case study evaluations provide comprehensive insight of a case in its “real-world context” (p. 220) in order to “capture the complexity of a case, including relevant changes over time, and attend fully to contextual conditions, including those that potentially interact with the case” (p. 220). This research concentrates on the initiative of the fall break policy. In evaluative case study research, it is imperative to have multiple forms of evidence as well as that evidence be intentionally triangulated from multiple sources, including both quantitative and qualitative (Yin, 2014). This research used both qualitative and quantitative forms of data collection, using a variety of methods that will be triangulated to offer possible explanations and implications of the fall break policy at Brock. In keeping with an evaluative case study approach, “the quantitative part of a case study evaluation might assume a realist orientation, whereas the qualitative part might assume a contrasting, relativist (or interpretivist orientation)” (Yin, 2014, p. 220). Case study research is an effective approach for evaluative research. “Because of the strength of case study research in capturing the complexity of a case as well as changes in the case over time, case study research is the conventional way for doing process or implementation evaluations” (Yin, 2014, p. 222). When used as the primary evaluation method, case study research can be used to focus on initiatives, outcomes and/or both (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2013). This research will be an appraisal of the fall break policy against Howlett’s (2009) stages in the policy cycle, including the fall break policy’s formulation, implementation and evaluation. In this way, an analysis of the policy process will be examined, and possible policy alternatives offered (Yin 2014; Howlett et al., 2009). The overarching research objectives are: 1) To provide a post policy implementation analysis from a critical analysis lens to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy development and implementation in relation to what is known about best practices for policy development and implementation (Paper

#1 and #2) and 2); To appraise whether a policy for “fall break week”, in fact, does reduce students’ stress and anxiety for university students (Paper #3) .

### **Methods**

Congruent with case study research as an evaluative method, multiple sources of evidence will be collected. Yin (2014) advises that “a case study evaluation should rely on multiple sources of evidence, which may include interviews, documents, field observations, archival records, physical artifacts and participant-observation” (p. 220). Zida et al. (2017) used the case study approach to analyze the policy making processes of two health policies meant to “improve performance on health indicators and strengthen responsiveness to health-related challenges” (p. 1). They used document analysis of published literature, policy and government documents as well as informant interviews to gather rich, thick data to explain the policy processes. Documents are useful in qualitative research (Tracy, 2013). In fact, documents can help to verify information and play “an explicit role in any data collection using case study research” (Yin, 2014, p. 107). Documents can include archival records (Yin, 2014; Tracy, 2013). These documents can be used to confirm other sources of evidence. However, it is important that the case study researcher not be over reliant on the documents in the study (Yin, 2014). Tracy (2013) suggests that focus group interviews are a good way to capture lived experiences. Focus group interviews will be guided by the overarching research topic: the lived experience of how fall break influences students’ mental health (van Manen, 1990). Moreover, the interviews will be semi-structured, in order to best capture participants' lived experiences of school related stress and the impact of a fall break on their mental health, using rough interview guide to start the conversation.

Interviews are also important in qualitative case study research (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Tracy, 2013; Yin, 2014). Interviews will be set up as more of a conversation, in order to engage in more of a reciprocal dialogue (Tracy, 2013). In focus group interviewing for case study research, the focus is on assembling small groups of participants in a number of different focus groups to obtain rich, thick description (van Manen, 1990; Tracy, 2013) that captures the views of the population under focus (Yin, 2014). Jones et al. (2014) suggest that establishing trust and building rapport with participants is crucial, especially if the topic is emotionally sensitive. Being reflective, as to the role of the researcher and positionality, are starting points from which to build upon, when building rapport and establishing trust. The key will be to continually reflect on the process and the dialogue in order to build trust and rapport (Jones et al., 2014). Moreover, in case study research using focus group interviewing, reflexivity is also important to avert a “methodological threat created by the conversational nature of the interview” (Yin, 2014, p. 112) whereby “the conversation can lead to a mutual and subtle influence between the researcher and the participant” (Yin, 2014, p. 112). Being sensitive to this threat through reflexivity during the focus groups is one way to conduct better interviews (Yin, 2014).

Other researchers (Yin, 2014; Hanney et al., 2003; Newson et al., 2015) suggest that both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence can be used in health policy research. In fact, Walt et al. (2008) propose that it is imperative to corroborate qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence in policy appraisal. Furthermore, in case study evaluations, a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that includes both realist and interpretive perspectives can be used (Yin, 2014). “For example, the quantitative part of a case study evaluation might assume a realist orientation (e.g. presenting the researcher’s questions and interpretations about the case being studied, whereas the qualitative part might assume a contrasting, interpretivist orientation (e.g., presenting the case form participants multiple perspectives and meanings-including the

possibility of challenging the researcher's original assumptions" (Yin, 2014, p. 220). Moreover, Creswell and Poth (2018) purport that various forms of data collection, including interviews, document analysis, and surveys may be effective for data triangulation in case study research when coming from an interpretivist paradigm; whatever answers the research questions best are the methods that should be employed.

Analyzing case study data is not always easy to do as the techniques are not clearly defined and may include the researcher's own strategies (Yin, 2014). As such, Yin (2014) recommends that having a general analytic strategy is best, even if it is designed by the researcher. Policy appraisal requires possible policy alternatives to be recommended (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Yin (2014) offers "examining plausible rival explanations" (p. 140) as a general analytic strategy that can be used in evaluative case study research. This strategy ensures that there are different kinds of rival explanations for any given hypothesis (Yin, 2014). Explanation building is an analytic technique that may be used with rival explanations strategy (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) agrees that explanation building can be useful for providing insights into causal links in the public policy process. "The public policy propositions, if correct, could lead to recommendations for future policy actions" (Yin, 2014, pp. 147-148). This research used explanation building to analyze data on rival explanations that can be used as part of a policy appraisal, offering policy alternatives on the fall break policy at Brock. Since the policy cycle is iterative (Howlett, 2009) and explanation building is also iterative (Yin, 2014), it will fit well as an analytic strategy to offer policy alternatives. With explanation building:

Eventual explanation is likely to be a result of a series of iterations, including making an initial theoretical statement or an initial explanatory proposition; revising the

statement or proposition; comparing the findings of an initial case against such a statement or proposition; comparing other details of the case against the proposition; comparing the revision to the findings; and repeating this process as many times as needed (Yin, 2014, p. 149).

This research is presented as three papers with multiple sources of evidence collected and analyzed and triangulated as follows:

1. **Paper One.** Paper one appraised the formulation of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose was to provide a post policy implementation analysis from a critical analysis lens to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy development in relation to what is known about best practices for policy development and implementation. This paper analyzed data collected from a Brock University Student Union (BUSU) survey conducted in the spring of 2013, as well as qualitative data from document analysis and informant interview data in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) formation stage of the policy cycle. Therein, paper one used sequential data collection that started with the BUSU survey, then documents, and finally the informant interview. Documents used during the formation of the fall break policy at Brock as well as Brock Senate Minutes from meetings during the formation of the fall break policy, were analyzed. It was of utmost importance to ascertain the accuracy of these archival records (Yin, 2014). Sequentially, an informant interview was conducted to corroborate the emergent themes from the documents in order to more fully gather rich, thick data on the fall break policy formation at Brock. Sampling was purposive in order to “purposefully choose data that fit the parameters of the projects’ research questions, goals and purposes” (Tracy, 2013, p. 134). As such, Brock Student Senate committee members, Administrators, appropriate faculty



and others that emerged as informants in the policy formation process were invited to participate in the informant interviews. This allowed for rich, thick data to be obtained. Descriptive statistics using Stata 13 were used to analyze pertinent BUSU survey data. Data from documents was analyzed first and then informant interview data was transcribed verbatim and then themed, using an intercoder agreement among the researchers and the research assistants.

2. **Paper two.** Paper Two analyzed the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose was to provide a post policy implementation analysis using a critical analysis lens perspective to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy implementation. This paper used both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence. In case study evaluations, a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that includes both realist and interpretive perspectives, can be used (Yin, 2014). “For example, the quantitative part of a case study evaluation might assume a realist orientation (e.g. presenting the researcher’s questions and interpretations about the case being studied, whereas the qualitative part might assume a contrasting, interpretivist orientation (e.g., presenting the case from participants multiple perspectives and meanings-including the possibility of challenging the researcher’s original assumptions” (Yin, 2014, p. 220). As such, this Paper Two analyzed descriptive statistics collected from the fall break survey, and qualitative data from documents, the fall break focus groups, faculty and informant interviews in relation to Howlett et al.’s (2009) implementation stage of the policy cycle. Sampling for the survey was randomly selected. Descriptive statistics using Stata 13 were used to analyze pertinent survey data. Focus group data was used to capture the student response to the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. Focus groups

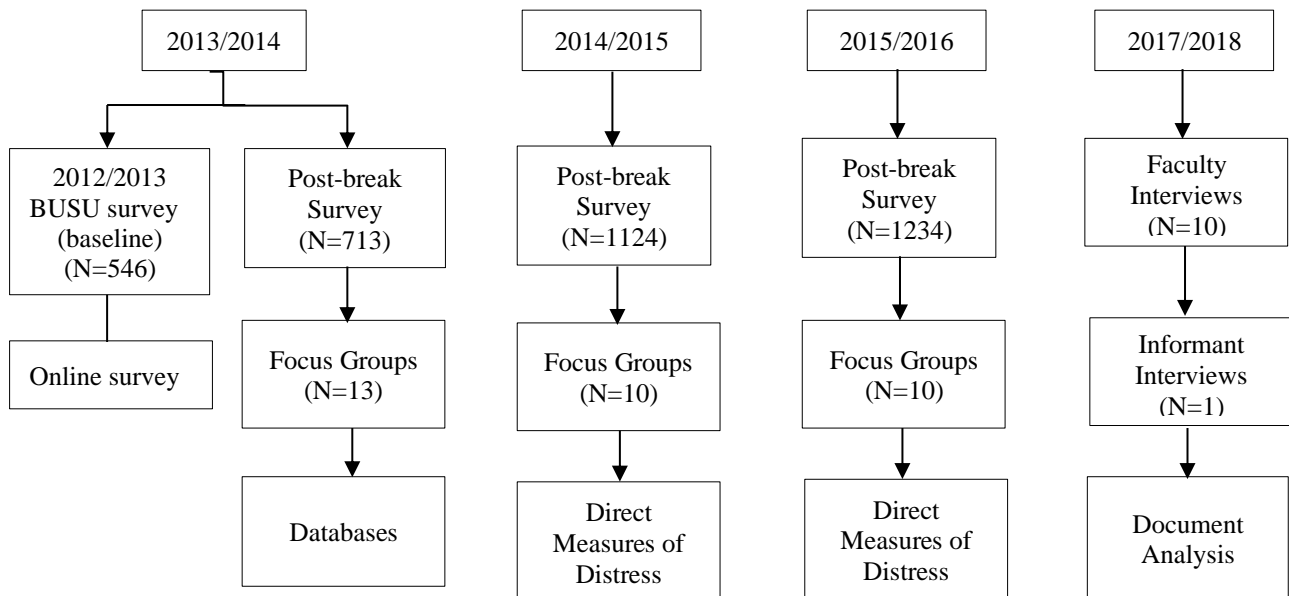
are useful for exploring emotional experiences (Tracy, 2013). Pertinent data from focus groups, conducted during the fall break assessment were analyzed. Sampling for the focus groups was purposeful, and included participants registered in undergraduate courses. (Tracy, 2013). As such, focus group participants from random locations across the Brock campus were asked to participate in the interview sessions. Focus group interviews can be effective for case study research evaluations (Yin, 2014). All focus groups were transcribed verbatim, and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers and the research assistants. Faculty interview data was used to capture the faculty response to the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. Sampling was purposive and included two professors from five faculties at Brock. Informant interview was used to capture considerations for the implementation of the fall break. All interview data was transcribed verbatim and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers.

3. **Paper three.** Paper Three analyzed the evaluation of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose was to appraise whether a policy for “fall break week”, in fact, does reduce students’ stress and anxiety for university students in the absence of baseline data. This paper used both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence to collect self-report data on mental health outcomes associated with the fall break. In case study evaluations, a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that includes both realist and interpretive perspectives, can be used (Yin, 2014). Data from the fall break surveys (Appendix E and F) was used to provide quantitative evidence on the impact of the fall break policy. Descriptive statistics as well as Chi-Square, Kruskal-Wallis and two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study and faculty were examined using Stata 13 to see if

there were any associations between gender and faculty, gender and year of study and year of study and faculty. Sampling for the survey was randomly selected. Focus group data from the fall break assessment was used to provide qualitative evidence aimed at uncovering students’ lived experience of the fall break, in the context of how the fall break influenced mental health as a means of evaluating the fall break policy at Brock. Sampling for the focus groups was purposeful and included participants who were registered in undergraduate courses in one academic institution that implemented a fall break, of which those students experienced (Tracy, 2013). As such, focus group participants from random locations across the Brock campus were asked to participate in the interview sessions. All focus groups were transcribed verbatim, and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers and the research assistants. Faculty interviews also provided qualitative evidence on faculty perceptions of the fall break policy at Brock. Sampling was purposive and included two professors from five faculties at Brock. All interview data was transcribed verbatim and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers.

Figure 1 outlines the combined data collection stages for all three papers

Figure 1  
Stages of data collection.



### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

There are validity and reliability issues that can have an impact on the quality of interpretive research. Creswell (2013) advises that issues of validation have an impact on qualitative research coming from an interpretivist paradigm. In interpretive research, “ethical validation means that all research agendas must question their underlying moral assumptions, their political and ethical implications, and the equitable treatment of diverse voices” (Creswell, 2013, p. 248). In being reflexive as both a producer and a product of the researcher text (Creswell, 2013), validation is attainable. As such, presenting the researcher positionality and bias will also help to validate the research (Creswell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Moreover, using multiple sources of evidence will allow for data triangulation and is one way of ensuring validation (Creswell, 2013). “The most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry” (Yin, 2014, p. 120). This research used documents, surveys and interviews as multiple sources of evidence that may be triangulated to support the findings. “By developing convergent evidence, data triangulation helps to strengthen the construct validity of your case” (Yin, 2014, p. 121). In keeping with an interpretivist paradigm, triangulation is important to accurately capture the participant’s viewpoint, namely undergraduate students at Brock University. This research used focus groups as a means of corroborating quantitative evidence from survey results. Since "the aim is to develop an empathic understanding that is cognizant of the multiple nature of truth and that context determines the meaning of the experience, a far better strategy is to seek clarification during the co-construction of the data, including in-interview clarification" (McConnell et al., 2011, p. 37). This research used in-interview clarification during the focus groups and the faculty and informant interviews.

Another way this research addressed trustworthiness was by “writing with detailed and thick description” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252) so that “detail can emerge through physical description, movement description and activity description” (p. 252). It is through rich, thick description that transferability of data becomes apparent to readers (Creswell, 2013).

Reliability issues can also have an impact on interpretive qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). With regard to reliability, this research used interceder agreement by using multiple coders on focus group data.

**Validity and reliability in case study research.** While issues of validity and reliability have an impact on interpretive research, Yin (2014) suggests that there are five particularly important components of case study research that affect its design quality. These are: “case study questions; its propositions, if any; its units of analysis; the logic linking the data to the propositions; and the criteria for interpreting the findings” (Yin, 2014, p. 29). In concurrence, Creswell (2013) recommends that “good” case study research should include: a clear identification of the case; a clear rationale for using the case; a clear description of the case; themes identified for the case; generalizations made from case analysis and researcher reflexivity and positionally evident (p. 265). Accordingly, this research addressed these issues throughout its design. However, with case study research the experience of the researcher herself plays an import in the quality of the study. The continuous interaction between the issues being studied and evidence collected requires the researcher to make judgement calls and hence, requires a specific skill set from the researcher (Yin, 2014). “No such gatekeepers exist for assessing the skills and values needed to do good case studies” (Yin, 2014, p. 73). The ability to do good case study research requires that researcher have the capability to: ask good questions, be a good listener, stay adaptive, have a firm grasp of the issues being studied and avoid biases (Yin, 2014).

While the novice researcher may not already have these attributes, they can be learned over time.

“But everyone must be honest in assessing her or his capabilities in the first place” (Yin, 2014, p.

73). Therefore, reflexivity will be an important aspect of this research.

### **Chapter Four: Describing the Case**

Setting the context is particularly important in case study research as the context becomes part of the case (Jones et al., 2014). Brock University was founded in 1964 and is located in the city of St. Catharines, in the Niagara region along the Niagara escarpment. Moreover, since cases are within a bounded system, it is important to understand the case in relation to the bounded system (Jones et al., 2014). “This process begins by situating the specific phenomenon of interest (the case) in a larger context by describing what that context looks like” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 95). Brock offers undergraduate degree programs in a number of various departments, from seven diverse Faculties with “co-op and service-learning options that provide maximum exposure to a student’s chosen field of study” (Brock website, about page, n.d.), including experiential learning. Brock also offers 49 graduate programs from the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

There are more than 19,000 students enrolled in either full or part time studies at Brock (Brock website, About page, n.d.). Of those, there are approximately 15,000 full-time and 2,300 part-time undergraduate students, with the majority being female (Brock website, Fact Sheet page, 2017.). Brock also boasts approximately 1,300 full-time and 450 part-time graduate students, with the majority being female (Brock website, Fact Sheet page, 2017). Brock offers flexible learning, including an array of online and condensed courses, including experiential learning, the fifth largest Co-op program in Canada. Brock employs more than 1,500 academic and support staff, including 594 Faculty. Twelve of these are Canada Research Chairs. Throughout its history, Brock has graduated more than 85,000 students and boasts a mid-90 per cent employment rate for its graduates two years after graduation. Brock also has approximately 480 administrative/professional staff and 12 professional librarians. Moreover, Brock’s Senate,

“who is responsible for the educational policy of the university, has 67 members including 36 elected full time teaching staff and professional librarians, two members of the Board of Trustees, six undergraduate and two graduate students, one Alumni Association representative and 20 ex officio members of Senate” (Brock website, Senate page, n.d.). Brock Senate meets monthly and has eight standing committees that make recommendations to the Senate. These include governance, graduate studies, information and technology and infrastructure, planning, priorities and budget advisory committee, research and scholarship policy, teaching and learning policy, undergraduate program, undergraduate student affairs, student appeals board and academic review. Brock is also governed by a Board of Trustees comprised of 26 members.

According to Maclean’s University Rankings (2020) Brock has been ranked number one for having mental health supports that help students cope with stress and is in the top four for overall student satisfaction (Macleans website, University Rankings page). On Brock’s online homepage a link titled “Mental Health” can be found. This page offers mental health resources across campus for students, faculty and staff, and friends and family. It includes links pertaining to wellness, mental health issues and learning modules/media resources, all of which are informative of mental health issues and supports available to students and staff at Brock University. To date, there is limited empirical evidence to guide the development of policy and the delivery of effective practices to alleviate school-related stress and anxiety. Yet, many institutions across Ontario have implemented a fall break as policy/practice. In 2013, Brock University implemented a policy for a fall break, similar to that of the longstanding winter break, in the hopes of alleviating student stress and anxiety.



## **Chapter Five: Paper One**

### **The Creation of a Mental Health Policy in Higher Education**

#### **Literature Review**

Across North America, in the Canada and the United States, the mental wellness of university students is being recognized as a significant issue that is critical for success in higher education. Universities across Canada and in the US have implemented various policies and practices in an effort to minimize academic and personal stress for students (Martin, 2010; Mowbray et al., 2006; Tanenbaum, 2005). The implementation of a fall break is one of these such policies and activities, but which has limited evidence to support the intended outcomes. For this reason it is essential to examine how these policies were created and implemented to learn from best practices and areas where improvements can be made in order to create effective policies moving forward.

A key component of policy appraisal is to look at how the policy was created. Policy appraisal should include examining the process by which the policy was formed (Bardach, 2012; Hanney, 2003; Howlett, 2009; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Evidence should play an important role in the formation of health policies (Hanney et al., 2003; Dobrow et al., 2004; Tanenbaum, 2005). A lack of high-quality evidence can lead to disconnects between policy formation and implementation and ultimately, the failure of the policy (Kelly, Garvey, & Palcic, 2016). As such, it has been outlined by many that a methodological approach is useful in the policy formation cycle (Vertakova & Vlasova, 2015; Mannan et al., 2013). There are well established means for writing policy. Howlett (2009) suggests that policy appraisal should examine the five stages of the policy cycle which include agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation.

Three of these pertain to policy formation: agenda setting, policy formulation and policy decision making (Howlett, 2009). In fact, agenda setting and policy formulation, which are core to the agenda setting stage, are key factors that have an enormous impact on the policy making process (Zida et al., 2017).

**Agenda setting.** Agenda setting deals with how a problem arises and why a policy is needed in the first place. Bardach (2012) refers to this as defining the problem. In the past, agenda setting was more objective with unilateral decision making (Howlett et al., 2009). Agenda setting is a complex collaboration between policy actors whereby the content of the issues determined at this stage of the policy process are dependent on the policy creators, including its subsystem, the ideas and beliefs of those actors (Howlett et al., 2009). In order for better mental health policies at post-secondary institutions to be created, these institutions should include assigning a task force responsible for the creation, implementation and evaluation of the policies (Heck et al., 2014). In doing so, one piece of the policy may be understood in determining its effectiveness. In addition, understanding who the key stakeholders involved in the policy subsystem are at the agenda setting stage, may help to explain the policy ideas and framework that guided its formulation.

**Policy Formation.** Policy formulation can be guided by varying policy instruments that may have an impact on its design. Howlett et al. (2009) suggest that some policy tools may be information based, authority based, treasure based or organization based. For instance, information-based policy tools may include public information campaigns or benchmark and performance indicators, while organization-based policy instruments can include public enterprises or family and community organizations (Howlett et al., 2009). Hence, policy makers have to choose which instrument will best serve policy formulation that will best tackle the

particular policy issues of interest as well as its implementation. This can be attempted in a profoundly orderly, expository style or as a considerably more experimentation exercise dependent on the encounters and inclinations of policy formulators (Howlett et al., 2009). It may be difficult to know which policy tool to use at various points in the policy process and these tools can fluctuate throughout the policy process (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Regardless of the policy instruments chosen, these tools should align with the policy problems and help to guide policy formulation. This choice is usually at the discretion of the policy makers. Given the limited research available on effective policies to address mental health on post-secondary campuses, it is especially important that a coordinated response guide policy is created (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2009). Thus, it may be difficult to realize the most appropriate instruments however, the unique environment on post-secondary campuses allows students to be reached in a multitude of outlets any policy should encompass a more holistic approach (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2009). Hence, policy alternatives may be used to compare goals and impacts the policy that is being designed for (Weimer & Vining, 2011).

Policy formulation is about choosing the appropriate policy instruments that will best address the problem by examining these instruments for feasibility and developing competing policy alternatives (Howlett et al., 2009). Bardach (2012) suggests that constructing policy alternatives is in and of itself an entire separate step in policy formulation and ensuing evaluation, whereby different policy options are laid out and alternative strategies and outcomes are evaluated and then narrowed down accordingly. In the end, there may be some alternatives that get discarded, leaving policy with a final list of alternatives that have been conceptualized and then simplified (Bardach, 2012). Nonetheless, evidence based on research leads to more choice of well-informed policy alternatives (Hanney et al., 2003).

**Decision Making.** The next stage in policy appraisal is examining the decision-making around the formation (Howlett et al., 2009). In the decision making stage of the policy cycle, policy options from the previous stages are considered and a plan to address the issue is revealed (Howlett et al., 2009). It is here that decisions are made based on the evidence found in the policy formation stage for effective implementation. However, the structural and institutional context has an impact on which decisions are thought best in the decision making process (Howlett et al., 2009). Again, understanding this context will help to tell the story of what influenced the types of decisions made in the policy process. Researchers (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011) agree that there are various models that can be used as a lense to gain insight into the decision made in the formation of a policy. Moreover, Bardach (2012) suggests that models should align with the system in which the policy is being created and may include evolutionary models, market models or production models. In the decision-making stage, context also needs to be considered.

The nature of decisions in health policy are influenced by context (Dobrow, Goel & Upshur, 2004). Part of the decision-making stage needs to look at if decisions around the policy and, the choices in a given situation, political character of the actors participating (Hanney et al., 2003). One way of doing this is to look at the context in which the policy decision was made. It is “the combination of diverse forms of scientific inputs ad decision outputs shapes the processes of utilization and creates specific expectations and opportunities” (Hanney et al., 2003, p. 9)

Health policies are not always reflective of the people the policies are intended to help (Baum & Friel, 2017). Mental health policies in post-secondary education settings are often ineffective due to an absence well-balanced and supported participation of these policies that are inefficient and/or irrelevant to the users (Bartee, & Kelly, 1980). Both scientific and practical

evidence gathered from collaboration between researchers, practitioners, policy makers and the public (users) is needed to make sound decisions that will improve policy development and implementation (van Bon-Martens et al., 2014). Evidence based policies need to be formulated that align the interests of the individual users and policy makers (Teghtsoonian, 2009) in order to be effective.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to use a policy appraisal lens to *evaluate the formation* of the fall break policy at Southern Ontario mid-size university. The goal of this work is not to criticize the policy formation as many universities have been in a state of urgency to implement strategies to enhance student well-being. It is the purpose of this project to understand factors that influenced the policy formation, how this aligns to what is known theoretically about good policy formation and in turn allow for lessons learned for thinking through the development of future higher education policies in this area.

### **Methodology**

This case study offers a critical appraisal of the formation of the fall break policy at medium sized comprehensive university using both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence. In case study evaluations a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that includes both realist and interpretive perspectives can be used (Yin, 2014). As such, this research is an analysis of data collected from a 1) University Student Union (BUSU) survey conducted in the spring of 2013, 2) qualitative data from document analysis and; 3) an informant interview which are then analyzed and triangulated to understand how they relate to Howlett et al.'s (2009) formation stage of the policy cycle. Documents are unobtrusive and can be used in qualitative research to provide a more accurate reflection of behavior, allow researchers to see a behaviour

for themselves, are safe for researchers and researched and provide easier access since there is no human contact involved (Liamputtong, 2013). Documents used during the formation of the fall break policy including Senate and Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee minutes from meetings during the formation of the fall break policy as well as pages from the institution's website were analyzed. Table two represents the documents that were included as data.

Sequentially, an informant interview was conducted in order to corroborate the emergent themes from the document and archival records in order to more fully gather rich, thick data on the fall break policy formation. Sampling for the emergent informant was purposive in order to purposefully align the data to the research questions and objectives (Tracy, 2013). As such, Student Senate committee members, USAC members Administrators, appropriate faculty and others that emerge as informants in the policy formation process were invited to participate in the informant interviews to allow for rich, thick data to be obtained.

Table 2  
Documents included as data.

Type	Title	Date
USAC	Minutes	September 13, 2012
USAC	Minutes	October 11, 2012
USAC	Minutes	November 8, 2012
USAC	Minutes	November 22, 2012
USAC	Minutes	December 6, 2012
USAC	Minutes	February 1, 2013
USAC	Minutes	March 1, 2013
USAC	Minutes	April 5, 2013
USAC	Minutes	May 3, 2013
USAC	Minutes	September 12, 2013
USAC	Minutes	November 7, 2013
USAC	Minutes	September 11, 2014
USAC	Minutes	October 9, 2014

USAC	Minutes	May 7, 2015
USAC	Minutes	September 11, 2015
USAC	Minutes	February 5, 2015
USAC	Minutes	February 12, 2016
USAC	Minutes	March 11, 2016
USAC	Minutes	May 13, 2016
USAC	Minutes	September 15, 2016
Senate	603 Senate Brief: REPORT OF THE ACTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY SENATE	December 5, 2012
Senate	MINUTES OF MEETING #603 (2012-13)SENATE	December 5, 2012
Senate	graduate studies committee REPORT TO SENATE Meeting #647, February 8, 2017	February 8, 2017
USAC	2011-12 Annual Report to Senate	May 15, 2012
USAC	2012-2013 Annual Report to Senate	May 14, 2013
Faculty Board	MINUTES OF MEETING 2 (2012-2013) FACULTY BOARD	November 16, 2012
USAC	REPORT TO SENATE 609	May 22, 2013
USAC	REPORT TO SENATE 616	January 7, 2014
USAC	REPORT TO SENATE 628, Wednesday, March 18, 2015	February 6, 2015
Graduate Studies Committee	REPORT TO SENATE Meeting #650, May 10, 2017	May 2, 2017
website	Undergraduate Calendar	2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018
website	Campus News	2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017,2018
website	Important Information	2018

## Methods

### BUSU Survey Data

Data was inputted and analyzed from an online Brock University Student Union (BUSU)

survey (Survey 1) conducted at the end of the 2012/2013 academic year, prior to the 2013/2014 fall reading week. The analysis focused on three questions: How high are your stress levels during midterm season; does winter reading week alleviate your stress levels; I would be in favour of a fall break? These surveys were used to triangulate data from documents and the informant interview.

### **Document Analysis**

Documents used during the formation of the fall break policy as well as Senate and USAC minutes from meetings and pages from the institution's website regarding important dates and undergraduate and graduate academic calendars were analyzed and themed using intercoder agreement between researchers. Since it is of utmost importance to ascertain the accuracy of these archival records (Yin, 2014), a thorough review of documents from a variety of documents relating to the fall break policy formation were analyzed. Documents are valuable in qualitative research and were used to corroborate and augment evidence (Yin, 2014) from the BUSU survey data and informant interview data.

### **Informant Interview**

An informant interview was conducted to gather contextual data on the creation of the fall break policy. The informant interview was conducted via telephone and was audio recorded. This interview was 27 minutes in length. The main topics of discussion for the interview were created using the three phases of policy formation as a sensitizing framework. Table three displays the main topics of discussion used in this research.

Table 3  
Semi-structured interview guide for the informant interview.

Discussion Topics:
What was your role in the creation and implementation of the fall break?
Who was involved in the creation and implementation of the fall break?



What were some of the decisions that were made in the formation of the break?
Who was involved in the decision making regarding the formation of the fall break?
Was the decision to implement a fall break unanimous?
Were you in favour of the fall break?
How did this factor into the decisions regarding the creation and implementation of the fall break?
What were some of the decisions regarding the timing of the break to be implemented the fall break the week following Thanksgiving?

### Data Analysis

Yin (2014) agrees that explanation building can be useful for providing insights into causal links in the policy process. Explanation building was used to analyze data on rival explanations that can be used as part of a policy appraisal, offering policy alternatives on the fall break policy. Since the policy cycle is iterative (Howlett, 2009) and explanation building is also iterative (Yin, 2014), this fits well as an analytic strategy to offer policy alternatives. As such, descriptive statistics were examined using SPSS for those variables from the BUSU survey in order to triangulate data from documents and the informant interview. Data from documents was analyzed using a thematic analysis method that included open coding, axial coding and theming using an intercoder agreement between the researchers. The informant interview data was transcribed verbatim and then themed using an intercoder agreement among two researchers. This allowed for rich, thick data to be triangulated between the BUSU surveys, documents and informant interview to explain the process in the formation of the fall break policy. Triangulated data was used to explain the formation cycle in the policy process as part of an iterative process used to provide details of the case. From this analysis, other plausible policy alternatives were uncovered.

## Results

### BUSU Survey (2012/2013)

**Demographics.** Of the 16, 882 registered undergraduate students in the 2012/2013 academic year, participants in the BUSU survey included 546 undergraduate students in years 1-4. Of those, 165 were male and 318 were female, 3 were “other” and 60 participants left this item blank.

**Survey results.** Initial results from the BUSU survey indicated that 92.5% of participants experience increased stress levels during midterms and that 90.1% of students were in favour of the idea of a fall break. Results also indicate that prior to experiencing the break, 91.3% of participants thought the break would lower their stress levels. These results help to understand one piece of the puzzle of how the fall break policy was created.

### Documents

Analysis of documents including minutes from Senate, Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee and Associate Deans meetings revealed that the break was first put on the agenda September 13, 2012. This is when the USAC first started discussing the break and draft information regarding the utility of a fall break was circulated to the committee. Discussions prevailed at USAC meetings and were eventually presented to Senate and a decision was reached by Senate on December 5, 2012. Initially on December 5, 2012 Senate rejected the policy but further discussions ensued and the policy was ultimately voted in by Senate on that day.

On October 11, 2012, as a result of minutes arising from the September 13, 2012 USAC meeting, it was determined that a BUSU representative wanted to attend meetings when fall break was on the agenda.

At the USAC meeting on November 8, 2012, it is here that a presentation was made and the rationale for a draft proposal given for the fall break with the inclusion of the fall academic calendar reflecting the fall break. The registrar’s office reviewed the academic calendar and a presentation was made by USAC. BUSU also provided feedback from students; part of the rationale is that mental health issues were cited by students who would like a break in the first semester and more time for written assignments and presentations. USAC presented how mental health issues for students in the fall are high, especially for first year students. As part of their rationale, the mental health framework was referred to for citing support for health and wellness. It is also at this meeting that Graduate Studies Association provided their support for a break in the fall semester. Discussions about the possibility of a fall break ensued here within USAC. Arising from these discussions it was determined that consultation with other committees would take place, that there needed to be flexibility with related regulations regarding progress exams and there was a request for empirical evidence to support a fall break week. At this meeting, the representative from the registrar’s office agreed to work on a proposal for dates for the three years the break was to be piloted, 2013-2015.

**Emergent themes.** The result of iteratively comparing and contrasting data from the documents and informant interview allowed for two major themes with accompanying sub themes to emerge. Table four summarizes the themes, sub themes and sub sub themes that emerged.

Table 4.  
Major themes and sub themes.

Theme	Sub theme	Sub sub theme
Policy Decisions	Policy considerations	Rationale for break Implementation Decisions Evaluation Decisions Policy Supports

		Label Votes
Policy Actors	Major Actors	Registrar's Office Senate
	Minor Actors	Associate Deans

**Policy Decisions**

Policy decisions is a theme that emerged from document and informant interview analysis. Policy decisions have to do with the decisions that were made in the creation of the fall break policy. Policy decisions includes considerations that were examined as part of the decision-making process in the creation of the fall break policy. Policy decisions also includes decisions around the policy design, implementation and its evaluation including how the break was voted in and also how it was labelled. Another component yet of policy decisions includes additional policy supports that were considered.

**Policy considerations.** Policy considerations includes the rationale for the creation of the fall break policy. This involves the proposed policy ideas, draft information that was considered in policy decisions, policy implementation and evaluation logistics. Initially, one member of USAC provided draft information regarding the fall break that was circulated to the whole USAC for consideration (USAC minutes, September 2012). In November of 2012 a presentation was made by a member of USAC providing a rationale for a draft proposal of the fall break that was also taken under consideration (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012). Before the break could be presented to Senate, policy considerations had to be examined and evidence prepared to support the rationale for the break. Part of these considerations included the rationale supporting the need for the break in the fall semester.

**Rationale.** These policy decisions were informed by considerations that there was an

“increased demand for mental health support on campus and they were looking for ways to be, um, you know, support students who were struggling with mental health issues” (Informant, 2018) and that there were “mental health issues cited by students who would like a break in the first semester and more time for written assignments and presentations” (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012). It was also suggested that there are “unique mental health issues in fall which are especially important for first year students” (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012). The informant suggests that part of the rationale for the break was based on different mental health frameworks that included:

a Canadian Association of College and University Student Services

(CACUSS) mental health framework and the Cornell framework for mental health.

Looking at the various pillars of mental health, where we stood in terms of our current status but then also looking at gaps and looking at recommendations on a go forward, with respect to those various pillars of mental health (2018).

The institution’s own mental health framework was also used to provide rationale for the creation of the break. “It was just one of many, so under the mental health framework we were looking at, um, you know, even first year exams and pressures on, uh, first year students and not making first year exams mandatory. So it was, you know, that was another initiative of trying to alleviate some of the stress and pressure on students” (Informant, 2018). This was also reflected in the USAC minutes from November 8, 2012). Another motivating consideration weighed was that mental health was a priority area at the university. The informant likens this to:

I think that at the time, five years ago we were really, mental health, it continues to be a really key area of importance for the university right, so mental health relates to, you

know, retention at the university, it relates to just trying to ensure that students are able to succeed academically, right (2018).

This combined with a fall break being implemented at other post-secondary institutions was the impetus for policy discussions at. As the informant outlined:

And saw that the fall break was being introduced at more and more institutions. Some had had it around for a while like Trent University, and for others it was just kind of in the exploration stage, um, so we saw this as, you know, an emerging trend in terms of post-secondary education and addressing mental issues. So, it was really kind of there that the discussion started (Informant, 2018).

In the minutes of USAC, mental health policies being implemented in the fall semester at other that post-secondary institutions are also cited as part of the rationale for the fall break policy (USAC minutes, May, 2015). Surprisingly, the informant (2018) suggests that part of the impetus for the fall break was recognizing that “to change any academic calendar dates, it would have to go through the Senate approval process, so that was part of it”.

*Implementation decisions.* Policy decisions also refers to those considerations that were made regarding the implementation of the fall break policy. Some of these considerations included the scheduling of the fall break for a full week attached to Thanksgiving Monday. This was reflected in minutes from Senate and the Graduate Studies Committee report to Senate (Report to Senate, meeting 647, Feb 1, 2017). Policy decisions regarding implementation considered feedback from BUSU, GSA, the registrar’s office and USAC recommendations made to Senate. “**fall break** – The Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee recommended that Senate adopt a fall break week during the week following Thanksgiving, effective for three (3) years, starting in 2013” (USAC minutes, May 14, 2013). Implementation considerations included

amendments to the Faculty Handbook regarding the calendar year, appropriate Schedule of important dates and undergraduate and graduate calendars and timetables (USAC minutes, November 7, 2013). Other considerations included discussions around the impact that a fall break would have on academic field trips and the viability of a break in the fall semester. “There was brief discussion about the impact *fall break* will have on academic field trips” (USAC minutes, February 1, 2013).

***Evaluation decisions.*** Policy decisions regarding evaluation were embedded in the creation of policy. In the minutes from USAC and Senate motions approving the fall break also included approval for data collection on the break. Hence, the fall break was created as a three year pilot with ensuing evaluation to monitor its impact and possible continuation. “Um, it was in part to say okay, we need to be able to assess the impact of the break” (Informant, 2018). USAC wondered what the impact on courses would be at the outset and this was reflected in the decisions during policy creation. USAC wanted to:

make sure there was a methodology in place to be able to try and assess um, the impact, of the fall break but also to look at whether you know based on the feedback any changes would have to be introduced, whether it was to timing or length or um, you know how it was administered and so we had, you know, the research assistant part of it, assigned to that (Informant, 2018).

Hence, funding was approved for evaluation and a call for proposal was put out in the policy creation stage, four months prior to the policy’s first year of implementation. Even in its creation stage, USAC was considering what the best methodology for evaluating the impact of the break would be. The informant suggests that:

I think the challenge is, you know, um, in trying to make a convincing case to do it is it's

really hard to quantify, as you know, quantify the results right? How do you, um, quantify whether or not the break has improved on retention rates or academic progress. So, it's really hard thing to, um, quantify from a ... you know, from a research methodology point of view” but, um, but I think the, um, survey assessments, were also considered (Informant, 2018).

***Policy supports.*** Policy decisions also includes additional policy considerations. Part of these considerations included support programming for students who remain on campus during the break, services of psychiatrist, psychologist, nursing and online support for students’ experiencing depression, as well as resources for faculty and teaching assistants to help in identifying students in distress. During the first year of policy implementation, these policy supports were implemented as a way of enhancing the impact of the fall break policy. The informant suggested:

there was also, you know, all of the mental health supports that were being put in place in terms of counseling support and in terms of, you know, peer support and um, all of the programming that was happening through the um, the, the health services and through the student, uh, services for students with disabilities (2018).

***Label.*** Label refers to the considerations for what the policy is called. Call it a break period, called it a fall break week at USAC meetings. During policy creation, sometimes the policy is labelled as a fall break week and other times it is refer to as fall break, other times it is referred to as fall break. Nonetheless, it is referred to as a break throughout policy creation and discussions regarding policy creation. Moreover, discussions during the creation of the policy also indicate that considerations for how the break should be used were explored but not



necessarily what to label the break. In particular, the Faculty board minutes of meeting 2 (2012-2013) state that:

Student Services has seen students having greater stress in the fall and this break would ease this somewhat for them. So, it was suggested that faculty should not assign additional work for the week following as this would negate the intention of the mental health week. It is intended to give students some space to catch up from the intense beginning of terms (USAC minutes, November 16, 2012; website).

However, this was simply stated in the minutes in absence of data to support this claim. Further discussions took place “on the meaning of the term fall break and whether or not field trips or other types of mandatory obligations for students should occur during this time when students are expecting a break from classes” (USAC minutes, April 5, 2013).

During the policy creation stage, we can also see from the minutes of Senate that it was voted in with the label fall break Week (Senate minutes, December 5, 2012). This is also reflected in the 2013 academic calendar where the break is labelled as fall break Week. However, after the first year of the policy this label is not always reflected in the Undergraduate calendar posted on the institution’s website. The first three years of its implementation the policy is labelled as fall break Week in the undergraduate calendar (2013/2014 Undergraduate Calendar, Brock website). By 2016, and each subsequent year the break appeared in the Undergraduate calendar as Reading Week (2017/2018 Undergraduate Calendar, Brock website). In the campus news, which is also posted on the website, the policy is labelled as fall Reading Week articles posted before the first year of implementation as well as each year thereafter. However, also in 2018, the policy is labelled as fall Reading Break under the important information section regarding residences that are open during the fall reading break. Nonetheless,

in neither the minutes nor informant interviews discussions about what to label the break are not found. Table five shows how the break was labelled in each document by date.

Table 5

How the break is labelled in documents by date.

Label	Type	Dates
Fall break week	USAC Minutes	November 8, 2012; November 22, 2012; December 8, 2012; November 7, 2013; January 7, 2014; September 11, 2014; September 11, 2015
	USAC Annual Report to Senate	May 14, 2013
	Senate Minutes	December 5, 2012
	Graduate Studies Report to Senate	February 1, 2017
	Undergraduate Calendar	2013, 2014, 2015
Fall break	USAC Minutes	November 8, 2012; November 22, 2012; April 5, 2013; January 7, 2014; September 11, 2014; September 11, 2014; October 9, 2015; May 7, 2015; February 5, 2015; March 11, 2016; February 1, 2013; March 1, 2013; May 3, 2013 September 12, 2013; November 7, 2013; February 12, 2016; September 15, 2016;
	USAC Annual Report to Senate	May 14, 2013
	USAC Report to Senate 609	May 22, 2013
	USAC Report to Senate 628	February 6, 2015
	Associate Dean's Oral Report to Senate	November 16, 2012
Fall reading week	Campus News	2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017,2018

	Undergraduate Calendar	2017/2018
Fall reading break	Important Information section on website	2018

*Votes.* Votes refers to the votes that took place in the development of the fall break policy. Voting happened within the USAC prior to being brought forward for a vote by Senate. “MOVED to recommend to Senate to adopt a fall break Week as per the attached schedule for 2013. DISCUSSION The MOTION was amended accordingly: That the fall break Week is effective for 3 years and includes a 10 day exam schedule with 4 periods” (USAC minutes in November 22, 2012). Upon this vote, new considerations for an evaluation of the impact of the proposed policy were brought forward. “There was further discussion about the impact of the proposal. MOVED that, during the 3 year period, collect the data regarding the impact of the proposal. Review the data at the end of the 3 year period” (USAC minutes, November 22, 2012). Voting also happened within Senate based on recommendations made by USAC for the implementation of a fall break policy who ultimately approved the fall break policy. “At Senate, that’s where um, approval would have happened, I don’t recall anyone voting against it” (Informant, 2018). Arising from this vote is the vote made by Senate that the impact of the fall break policy be monitored with data collection over the duration of the three year pilot. Senate minutes reflect that:

received a Report from the Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee, and

- approved that University adopt a fall break week effective for three years starting in 2013;
- approved that the Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee monitor the impact of the introduction of a fall break week by overseeing collection of data during the three years (Senate minutes, December 5, 2012).

Policy decisions made from voting also refers to the voting that took place after each year of data collection monitoring the impact of the policy on whether or not to continue with the break and/or if any changes needed to be made. This is reflected in USAC minutes (USAC minutes, October 9, 2014; USAC minutes, May 7, 2015; USAC minutes, February 12, 2016). As well, policy decisions made from voting also refer to when the break would be placed in the fall semester, how long the break would be and how the break would be labelled in the academic calendar

### **Policy Actors**

Policy actors is another theme that emerged from the document and informant interview analysis. Policy actors includes those persons who were involved in the decision making in the creation of the fall break policy. Policy decisions were influenced by considerations arising from discussions with major and minor policy actors. There were major actors involved in the policy creation. These policy actors included BUSU who reported on feedback from students, members of the USAC and their sub-committee that informed the larger committee regarding the policy, GSA, Senate and the Registrar. There were also minor actors involved in the policy creation. These policy actors were involved in various ways and at different points in time throughout the duration of the policy creation and added advice regarding policy decisions.

**Major Actors.** USAC was involved in the fall break policy from its inception through to its implementation and ensuing evaluation. USAC was a major actor in the policy creation including the policy decisions presented to Senate and “was pretty instrumental in kind of moving it forward to Senate for approval” (Informant, 2018). In May of 2012, members of USAC proposed a fall break for the first time as an item for future discussion and resolution (USAC minutes, May 15, 2012). One member of USAC who worked in Student Affairs took the

lead in the proposed fall break policy was responsible for consulting with various policy actors and for providing a rationale regarding the policy:

So I think, uh, my role at the time in student affairs was to help provide, um, the rationale for, um, the break, the fall break, and to bring it forward as a best practice, kind of emerging practice to faculty and, um, staff and to the senior administration to consider it. So my role was really as a, I would say, um, a facilitator to have the conversations with the student union, with um, the senate committee on student affairs, um, so that it could be thoroughly, um, considered and any questions and concerns addressed and in order to bring it forward for, um, senate approval (Informant, 2018).

USAC also consulted with the registrar's office regarding a revised a revised 2013 academic calendar to allow for the fall break week.

**Registrar's office.** USAC worked with the registrar's office to GSA in support; discussion about possibility here within USAC. The registrar's office was also a major actor in the policy creation. They reviewed the academic calendar, provided feedback and also attended and made presentations at USAC meetings regarding the timing of the fall break within the academic calendar in the fall semester. The registrar "reviewed a proposed fall Academic Calendar reflecting a fall break Week" (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012). The lead USAC member met with BUSU and GSA who provided feedback on the student response to the fall break policy (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012). In fact, BUSU asked to have a representative attend USAC meetings when fall break was on the agenda to provide feedback from students (USAC minutes, October 11, 2012). Both BUSU and GSA were consulted and were in full support of the policy (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012).

**Senate.** While it was USAC that were major actors in proposing, researching and drafting

the policy, they ultimately reported to Senate who voted on whether or not to implement the fall break policy. Senate reviewed and discussed the merits of the Report of the Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee regarding the fall break and then decided to adopt the fall break week as a three year pilot and also approved that USAC monitor the impact of said break by overseeing data collection during these three years (Senate, 603 Senate Brief, December 5, 2012). Hence, Senate was a major actor in the decision making and creation of the fall break policy.

**BUSU.** The Student's Union represented the student's voice regarding the implementation of the fall break policy. Ultimately, BUSU provided feedback from students regarding their perceptions of stress during exam times and favourability of implementing a fall break to help relieve this stress. This was reflected in the USAC minutes that stated "BUSU is in full support of a *Fall Break Week*. Feedback from students indicated that 60% would like more time for written assignments and presentations. Mental health issues were cited. Mental health issues arise in the fall semester especially for first year students transitioning to university life" (USAC minutes, November 8, 2012).

**Minor Actors.** The lead USAC member also met with Associate Deans, the Health Advisory Committee and the Department of Housing regarding the utility and logistics of a break in the fall semester (USAC minutes, November 22, 2012). The informant (2018) suggests that similar interests of Student Services and USAC weighed into policy decisions. "I think that um, you know, my support behind and in working with the students, we were on the same page. That really helped to move it forward" (Informant, 2018). While these actors were consulted in the process, they were not part of the formal decision-making process and they can be considered minor actors in the fall break policy creation. "Certainly there was a lot of consultation with,

um, with SAC, the Senior Administrative Council, so I know it was discussed there. Um, it would have been certainly discussed with like the Associate Dean” (Informant, 2018). Student affairs departments and the Mental Health Management Advisory (MHMAC) were also consulted. “The student affairs departments would have included, um, so for example the, um, what was the services for students with disabilities, so that office was, you know, definitely involved in the mental health initiative and we had a mental health advisory committee that um, that was involved with developing the framework and also weighing in on things like the fall break” (Informant, 2018).

*Associate Deans.* The Associate Deans can also be considered minor policy actors. Reflected in the Faculty Board minutes of meeting 2 (2012-2013) was the Associate Dean’s oral report where the possibility of a break in the fall semester was reported on by the Associate Dean, inviting feedback from faculty members. “The consensus is that this is entirely possible although details will have to be worked out for graduate students” (Associate Dean’s Report-Oral Report, November 16, 2012). Ultimately, their consensus helped to support the policy, but they were not a formal part of the decision-making process. “And I think that, um, you know, working closely in particular like with the Associate Deans, they saw the value” (Informant, 2018).

### **Discussion**

This research sought to understand the formation of the fall break policy at one post-secondary institution using a case study approach with mixed methods. The purpose was to provide a post policy implementation analysis from a critical analysis lense to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy development in relation to what is known about best practices for policy development. Overall, data triangulation revealed that while there were a number of creation

factors that were considered regarding agenda setting, policy formulation and policy decisions, there is some discrepancy between the surveys and the qualitative interviews regarding the appropriateness of the policy, what and how the break is labelled and who was involved in the policy decisions. Moreover, triangulation of the data also revealed that how the break is labelled can potentially cause confusion as to how the time during the break in the fall semester should be spent, and this ultimately affected how it is experienced by its users. Table six represents the fall break policy creation in relation to the first three stages of Howlett and Ramesh's (1995) policy cycle.

Table 6

Fall break policy creation in relation to the first three stages of the policy cycle.

Stages in Policy	Phases of applied problem solving	What worked	What didn't work
Agenda setting	Problem recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need policies aimed at student mental health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this the best policy?</li> <li>• Does this policy relieve student stress and anxiety?</li> </ul>
Policy formulation	Proposal of solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fall break policy</li> <li>• Right policy instruments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy alternatives not considered</li> <li>• No policy model/framework</li> </ul>
Decision-making	Choice of solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various policy actors involved in decision making</li> <li>• Many considerations were weighed</li> <li>• Practical evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not based on scientific evidence</li> <li>• Label</li> <li>• Didn't include policy users</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Five stages of the policy cycle and their relationship to applied problem solving. Howlett and Ramesh, 1995)

### **Agenda setting**

Problem recognition is the first step in any policy creation (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995).



How an issue comes to the attention of policy makers in health policy is often not logical and can lead to arduous decisions about why certain policy issues make it to the top of the list while others do not (Howlett et al., 2009). Post-secondary institutions have successfully recognized the need for policies aimed at student mental health. This was confirmed by BUSU's last three survey questions that revealed student's overwhelmingly feel stressed during mid-terms, were in favour of the idea of creating a fall break and that the winter break helped to alleviate their school related stress and anxiety. However, our analysis of the BUSU surveys, documents and informant interview reveal an aperture in the fall break policy that opens up more questions: Is this the best policy? Does this policy effectively relieve student stress and anxiety? While the institution recognized the need to support students relieve their stress and anxiety in the fall semester, the solution appeared to be reactive as opposed to proactive and lacked clarity regarding what the break was meant for and how the time should be spent. Sometimes issues arise to the top of the agenda because they are deemed to be of high public importance (Howlett & Giest, 2015). The rationale for the fall break policy rising to the top of the agenda was varied: other universities were implementing a fall break, students were overwhelmingly in support of having it, there was an increased demand for mental health support on campus, recognition of unique mental health issues for first year students and it aligned with the institution's Mental Health Framework. However, our analyses revealed that part of the reason USAC strongly supported a fall break policy was not only because students were strongly in favour of having or that other universities were also implementing similar policies, but also because it was believed to be a policy that Senate would be likely to approve. This is thus not aligned to the most valid way in which to create policy.

## **Policy Formulation**

Once an issue has risen to the top of the agenda, proposed solutions can be made (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995). The fall break policy was one such proposed solution. There are a variety of instruments that can be used to formulate policy (Howlett et al., 2009). Policy makers have to choose which instrument will best serve policy formulation and will best tackle the policy issues and act as a guide to policy formulation (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). The current analyses revealed that policy instruments used in the formulation of the fall break policy were appropriate. As outlined by Timmerman and Metcalfe (2009) policy processes at post-secondary institutions differ from governmental policy processes, it is practical to consider students, teachers and staff as students, faculty and staff are akin to citizens of the university responsible for its affairs (Timmerman & Metcalfe, 2009). From the various committees involved in policy formulation including USAC, BUSU, registrar, Senate and MHMAC, to the tools used in the policy formulation that included the Mental Health Framework and BUSU survey, these policy instruments did have an impact on the policy design (Howlett et al., 2009; Reale & Seeber, 2012). However, no policy alternatives were considered. Policy alternatives should be considered as a means of offering alternative strategies resulting in a final list of alternatives that have been conceptualized and then simplified (Bardach, 2012). Nonetheless, evidence based on research leads to more choice of well-informed policy alternatives (Hanney et al., 2003).

Our findings indicate that no policy alternatives were considered in the creation of the fall break policy, as evidenced in the BUSU survey only asking students if they would be in favour of a fall break instead of what would help to relieve their stress and anxiety. Rather, the fall break policy was created as one part of a campus wide mental health strategy based on practical

evidence and feasibility instead of being guided by a policy model and based on comprehensive scientific evidence. However, both scientific and practical evidence gathered from collaboration between researchers, practitioners, policy makers and the public (users) is needed to make sound decisions that will improve policy development and implementation (van Bon-Martens et al., 2014).

### **Decision Making**

Policy decisions were based on considerations and support for the rationale for the break and the many different considerations that brought the fall break policy to the top of the agenda. Policy decisions are influenced by the context of the policy makers (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Many different policy actors were involved in the fall break policy decisions including BUSU, USAC, Deans, Registrar's office, student services and Senate. In policy formulation the relevant policy actors are often those who have strong opinions on the issue with minimal knowledge on the topic that yet believe they can offer policy as a solution (Howlett & Giest, 2015). Our analyses reveal that while these involved policy actors were relevant, the policy users were not necessarily engaged in policy creation and this could be viewed as a design flaw. Mental health policies in post-secondary education settings are often less effective, inefficient and/or irrelevant to the actual users of those policies (Bartee, & Kelly, 1978). Including the voices of those impacted by the break in the creation stage, namely students and faculty, might have mitigated some design flaws. While students were asked if they were in support of having the break, the policy users were not really included in the creation process aside from providing rationale for the break. This perhaps had an impact on policy creation. As such, mental health policies are not always reflective of the people the policies are intended to help (Bartee & Kelly, 1978). In part, this was a reality of the fall break policy.

Evidence based policies regarding student mental health need to be formulated so that they align the interests and include the voices of the individual users and policy makers (Teghtsoonian, 2009) in order to be effective.

**Label.** This was also evident in the way that the policy was labelled. There was confusion among students and faculty with how the students should spend the break. This is a policy implication. How the policy is labelled changes from the first year of its creation to each year of implementation. It is initially called fall break week but then changes to fall reading week and is listed on calendar as such. This has different connotations and we can see this reflected in students from first year not knowing what to do with break, to faculty thinking it is intended for students to catch up on work. The label of the break could potentially affect what the break means to people and the connotations that go along with how the policy is labelled. Depending on what break is called, this adds to confusion about how break should be used among faculty and students. If it is a break, this has different connotations than reading week and if it is a policy meant to relieve students stress and anxiety, then how can we tell students how to use the break? This would be different for each student. Hence, direction is needed on what the policy was intended for that is universal across the university. This is a design issue that also effects implementation and evaluation. Loose and ambiguous policy language can have an impact on the success or failure of the policy (Timmerman & Metcalfe, 2009). As such, underdeveloped policies can act as a barrier for buy-in or supporting student mental health and well-being (DiPlacito-DeRango, 2016). Thus, it is a delicate process as we cannot dictate what professors do and how they run their courses.

**Implementation and evaluation.** Implementation and evaluation considerations were part of the policy decisions for the fall break policy creation. These are important considerations

in the creation stage of the policy cycle (Howlett et al., 2009). Our analyses reveal that policy creators wanted to put the break where it would be least disruptive to students. As such, USAC and registrar's office discussed the best time for and placement of the break in the fall semester. This was brought forward to Senate. All agreed that the best time for the fall break was attached to Thanksgiving. However, this decision was again based on practical evidence with little regard to the effectiveness of its users and did not consider where Thanksgiving week would fall in the semester beyond the first year of its implementation (Pilato et al., 2019). Moreover, policy evaluation was also part of the decision-making process during the creation of the fall break policy and was the first to embed evaluation into their policy creation and to recognize the importance of evaluation. This is an important step to consider at the creation stage as the decisions made regarding evaluation can have an impact on the usefulness of said evaluation. Our analyses indicate that during its creation, Senate approved the decision to evaluate the policy for the first three years of its implementation. Ultimately, the decisions made during the creation of the fall break policy regarding implementation and evaluation had an impact on its perceived effectiveness (Pilato et al., 2019).

### **Policy Implications**

This research provides context here in relation to the need to address the mental health concerns of university students and the interest in critical appraisal of the creation of effective policies in this regard. From this critical appraisal, policy learning ensued. Considerations for how a policy rises to the top of the agenda can influence not only the impact that the policy has in terms of effectiveness but can also highlight implementation and evaluation issues that may arise. Therefore, it is important to fully understand the role of policy instruments and their influence on the main actors for success in the policy creation process (Azline et al., 2018).

Moreover, it is important to ensure you have the appropriate policy actors involved in formulation of said policy (Howlett & Geist, 2015). If the voices of faculty and students were included in the decision-making process during the fall break policy creation stage, design flaws that impacted implementation and evaluation may have been mitigated (DiPlacito-DeRango, 2016). As we saw from our analyses, how the policy was labelled also has policy implications. The lack of uniformity on how the fall break is labelled can cause confusion on how the time should be spent and the impact that it has on student's mental health. This can also be seen as a barrier since faculty have academic freedom. However, research (DiPlacito-DeRango, 2016) has shown that pedagogy can be influenced to promote mental health initiatives if curriculum, methods of teaching and newly developed courses and programs are the focus. Moreover, we also saw that it is also important to consider implementation and evaluation issues during the creation stage of the policy cycle. Even the most visionary policies have room for improvement (Timmerman & Metcalfe, 2009). If faculty and student voices were included in these decisions, perhaps the timing of the break and its three-year evaluation would not have been design flaws. Thus, decisions made during policy creation can have a direct impact on the other stages in the policy cycle (Howlett et al., 2009).

### **Limitations and Future Research Suggestions**

While this research provides insight into the formulation of the fall break policy, it is not without limitations. The fall break policy lacked any baseline data to suggest the utility of its creation aside from practical evidence from students and those policy actors involved in its formulation. Moreover, this research is at risk for recall bias based on self-reported perceptions since data was collected months and even years post policy implementation. Future research of the creation of mental health policies in higher education should include baseline data as this

research can have an important role in policy formation (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Moreover, only one informant participant agreed to participate in this research. Perhaps if more informants agreed to participate, their collective voices could help to more fully capture how the fall break policy was created. Finally, this research does not explain the impact that the label has on how students perceive the impact of the break. Future research should explore the impact of how the label of the policy has on how students and faculty understand and ultimately experience the break.

**Publication**

This manuscript will be submitted to the following academic journal: Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (<https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epa>)

## **Chapter Six: Paper Two**

### **Implementation evaluation of a mental health policy in higher education: shared meanings of the fall break policy**

#### **Literature Review**

The mental wellness of students in higher education has become a priority in post-secondary institutions due to the increasing prevalence of mental health issues reported by students across campuses (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009; Canada Newswire, 2012). As a result, many post-secondary institutions have progressively implemented a variety of policies and initiatives in an effort to reduce academic and personal stress for their students (Martin, 2010; Mowbray et al., 2006; Tanenbaum, 2005). This indicates that post-secondary institutions recognize the seriousness of mental health issues encountered by their students (Canada Newswire, 2012). For many of these post-secondary institutions, the implementation of a fall break policy is an attempt to address the mental health issues faced by their students without evidence to support its effectiveness. Thus, implementation evaluation is important to ensure the usefulness of said policy.

Policy implementation is an important step in the policy cycle that typically occurs once a problem has been identified, the agenda set, the policy has been formulated and policy decisions have been made (Howlett et al., 2009). However, implementation needs to be considered and built into each step of the cycle process (Bardach, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2011; Howlett et al., 2009). In fact, the success or failure of policy implementation may be traced back to its design (Howlett, 2009). Policy design configuration should anticipate implementation issues and offer alternatives to fix (Weimer and Vining, 2011). Hence, implementation problems need to be thought of in advance and built into the design of the policy (Weimer & Vining, 2011). At the



very least, policy alternatives need to be adequate so that even if implementation is unsuccessful, positive policy outcomes may still ensue (Bardach, 2012). That being said, there are many variables that will impact the success or failure of policy implementation. Weimer and Vining (2011) suggest that there are four factors that impact implementation success. These include incentives for implementation, assembly, compliance and incentives of the policy actors involved in overseeing its implementation. Howlett et al. (2009) agree that the actors and activities involved in policy implementation can either help or hinder its implementation and thus, are important to examine in the policy cycle. There may be many different actors involved in the policy implementation who were not necessarily part of process of policy formation (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009). Implementation science can help with the policy process.

Implementation science can be used to help design successful policies throughout the policy cycle. Implementation science can be defined as the practical application and delivery or use of scientific evidence (Nilsen, 2015). It is sometimes described as knowledge translation, knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer, knowledge integration or research utilization (Nilsen, 2015). The way implementation science is conceptualized for this paper is the study of results from scientific research (evidence) being put into practice through practical application; the study of how using what is found in research is implemented.

Implementation science literature points to the use of theories, models and frameworks to guide successful implementation (Nilsen, 2015). Some of these theories, models and frameworks are taken from psychology or sociology (Nilsen, 2015). For instance, some researchers (Park, Lencucha, Mattingly, Zafran, & Kirmayer, 2015) used narrative and phenomenological theoretical frameworks. Other researchers (Burke, Lich, Neal, Meissner, Yonas, & Mabry, 2015; Field, Booth, Ilott, & Gerrish, 2014; Renger, Bartel, & Foltysova, 2013) have used theories,

models and frameworks that have emerged within implementation science (Nilsen, 2015). This research views health policy implementation of the fall break in relation to theories stemming from implementation science.

There has been a shift in implementation science that has moved away from empirical to theoretical assumptions (Nilsen, 2015). For instance, some researchers (Park et al., 2015) have even used narrative and phenomenological theoretical frameworks to examine recovery principles in psychiatry. They chose this framework as it was in alignment with their transformative approaches to implementation and research. Park et al. (2015) also used a narrative phenomenological theoretical and analytic framework to explore the ethical tensions that emerge in the implementation of new recovery-oriented standards. In both of these studies a narrative phenomenological theoretical framework was used as it allowed for participatory collection and analysis while at the same time included person-centered, event-focused and discursive practices as analytic tools. Other researchers (Burke, et al., 2015; Field et al., 2014; Renger et al., 2013) have used theories, models and frameworks that have emerged within implementation science (Nilsen, 2015). For instance, Burke et al., 2015) used system science methods in their dissemination and implementation (D&I) research to understand factors that influence D&I. Other researchers (Renger et al., 2013) used Theory Driven Evaluation (TDE), to show how program theory is beneficial.

Nilsen (2015) proposes that using theories, models and frameworks in implementation science are important for evaluating implementation. Moreover, while theories, models and frameworks each have their own definition, in implementation science they are often used interchangeably (Nilsen, 2015). According to Nilsen (2015) the more important distinction is to understand which of the categories that each theoretical approach falls under. These categories

include process models, determinant frameworks, classic theories, implementation theories and evaluation theories. Moreover, models can clarify steps and stages of implementation. The Knowledge to Action Framework (KTA) is one such example. The KTA has two related components: Knowledge Creation and Action Cycle that has phases that are iterative and have an impact on each other (Nilsen, 2015). Field et al. (2014) report that The KTA framework is often used in implementation science both nationally and globally covering a wide range of topics and target audiences. However, they found that how it is applied widely varies and in no studies they examined were every phase of the KTA Framework applied. Either way, evaluation frameworks help to identify implementation issues that should be evaluated in order to influence implementation success (Nilsen, 2015). Renger et al. (2013) suggest that implementation theory and program theory are reciprocal and can be used to improve implementation and intended impacts of an initiative. However, Nilsen (2015) notes that many implementation science studies are evaluative and often times the categories blur between evaluation frameworks and determinant frameworks.

According to Nilsen (2015) determinant frameworks specify barriers and facilitators to implementation outcomes. It is here that we can better understand facilitators and barriers to implementation. Studies that use determinant frameworks investigate determinants that have an influence on implementation outcomes (Nilsen, 2015). Ethical tensions in policy development with policy makers can create a gap between the policy development and implementation (Park et al., 2015). In turn, these might be different or similar to the apparent ethical tensions in implementing a new health policy. Therefore, ethical tensions and aspects need to be taken into account in the development of new policy and in the implementation process (Park et al., 2015).

As such, ethical tensions can act as a barrier in implementation science and are included in this implementation evaluation of the fall break policy.

### **Methodology**

This case study uses both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence to collect self-report data on the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. This paper offers a critical appraisal of the implementation stage of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose is to provide a post policy implementation analysis using a critical analysis lens perspective to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy implementation. In case study evaluations a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that includes both realist and interpretive perspectives can be used (Yin, 2014). “For example, the quantitative part of a case study evaluation might assume a realist orientation (e.g. presenting the researcher’s questions and interpretations about the case being studied, whereas the qualitative part might assume a contrasting, interpretivist orientation (e.g., presenting the case form participants multiple perspectives and meanings-including the possibility of challenging the researcher’s original assumptions” (Yin, 2014, p. 220). As such, this paper is an analysis of documents from the Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee (USAC) and the Mental Health Management Advisory Committee (MHMAC) and Senate.

This paper also analyzes descriptive statistics collected from the fall break survey and qualitative data from the fall break focus groups and informant interviews in relation to Howlett et al.’s (2009) implementation stage of the policy cycle (Pilato et al., 2018). Sampling for the survey was randomly selected. Data from the fall break focus groups was also used to capture the student response to the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. Focus groups are useful for exploring emotional experiences (Tracy, 2013) and as such can help to capture

students' lived experiences of the fall break. Sampling for the focus groups was purposeful and included participants who were registered in undergraduate courses in one academic institution that has implemented a fall break, of which those students experienced (Tracy, 2013). As such, focus group participants from random locations across the Brock campus were asked to participate in the interview sessions. Focus group interviews can be effective for case study research evaluations (Yin, 2014). Sampling for the informant interviews was also purposeful and included an upper administrative staff representative of the USAC membership at the time of the policy creation.

## **Methods**

### **Quantitative Data**

**Fall break survey.** In January of 2014 (Year 1) ethics was approved, and then renewed in January of 2015 (Year 2) and January of 2016 (Year 3), through the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB), of which the thesis supervisor, Madelyn Law submitted, to distribute our "fall break survey". The surveys were distributed over the course of three days, from 11-2 each day, during the last week of January in partnership with BUSU, who suggested the best time to run the surveys based on prior experience. Students were asked to read the consent form then fill out the survey either on the spot with pen and paper or to take a slip with information on how to fill the survey out online.

In year one (2013/2014), once the students completed the survey, they were given a debriefing letter and were invited to sign up to participate in focus group sessions the following week. Students were also given an opportunity to leave their contact information to receive a final copy of this research report upon completion of the study. In year one (2013/2014) the fall break survey included eight items to which numbers 2 to 7 were scored using a scale from 1-5

where 1 equals strongly agree, 2 equals agree, 3 equals neutral, 4 equals disagree and 5 equals strongly disagree. In years two (2014/2015), and three (2015/2016) the fall break survey also included an additional six items with varying response options, five of which only applied to students in their third or fourth year of study. Table seven displays the items from the fall break survey used included in this research.

Table 7  
Items included from fall break survey.

Item Number	Question
4	The fall break led to an increase in workload before the break
6	The fall break led to an increase in workload after the break
8	The best time for a break in the first semester is (options provided)
9	The fall break means that there may be less time for final exams or require an earlier start to the fall term. Would you prefer (three options given)
12	Was the starting date of the fall term problematic for you in any way relative to years before the fall break (options provided)

### Qualitative Data

**Fall break focus groups.** In the fall break assessment, the week following the administration of the fall break survey, group sessions were conducted over the course of the same three days of the week that the surveys were run. Students were given lunch at each of these focus group sessions for participating in year 1 (2013/2014). In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) students were given a ten dollar Brock gift card at each of these sessions. In year one of data collection (2013/2014) three focus group sessions were conducted. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) of data collection only two focus group sessions were conducted over the course of two of the same days of the week that the surveys were run as no new themes were emerging and the research theme saturation had been reached. Year one (2013/2014) focus group participants were asked if they would like to sign up upon completion of the survey. Years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) focus group participants were

randomly asked to participate by the interviewer just before each session. In years one (2013/2014) and two (2014/2015) focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour in length. Once initially greeted, focus group participants were asked to take a few minutes to read and sign the consent form while having a pizza lunch before starting each of the three sessions. The interviewer was careful to build rapport by making small talk initially and then through active listening and encouraging responses during the interview. In this way, trust was established. The interviewer was reflexive about appearance, body language and creating a safe interview space so participants felt comfortable to share.

The same semi-structured interview guide was used for the focus groups in year one (2013/2014) and years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) of the fall break assessment as a basis for open dialogue between the participants and the interviewer. These questions focused on uncovering students' lived experience of the fall break in the context of how the fall break influenced mental health. Table eight displays the topics of discussion.

Table 8

Semi-structured interview guide for the fall break focus groups.

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

**Faculty Interviews.** In the spring and summer of 2018, faculty interviews were conducted to collect data on faculty perceptions of the fall break policy. Ten Faculty interviews were conducted over the course of two months (May-June) and included two professors from each faculty who were randomly selected from a list on Brock's website. Faculty were invited to

participate through email and were sent a reminder email one week later. If a reply was not given, an additional professor from the corresponding Faculty was randomly selected and emailed an invitation to participate. This process was continued until two professors from each Faculty consented to participate. For those faculty who agreed to participate, a consent form as well as a Doodle poll to arrange a mutually agreeable date and time for the interview to occur was sent via email. Participants voluntarily consented to participate and were not given any compensation for participating. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from twenty to forty-five minutes in length. Nine of the interviews occurred in corresponding faculty offices. One interview was done via Skype as the faculty participant was working remotely for the semester. Signed consent forms were collected at the time of the face to face interviews and through email for the remote interview.

The same semi-structured interview guide was used for each of the ten faculty interviews to encourage open dialogue between the faculty participants and the interviewer. These questions focused on uncovering faculty's perceptions of the fall break in the context of how the fall break influenced student's mental health and the structure of their courses. Table nine displays the topics of discussion in the faculty interviews.

Table 9  
Semi-structured interview guide for the faculty interviews.

Discussion Topics:
Undergraduate courses taught in the fall term, including level and if required or elective
Thoughts on benefits or the drawbacks to having a fall break
Did the fall break change the way you structure your courses
When the majority of assignments/tests in your courses are assigned
Thoughts on if faculty have seen a difference in their students' performance as a result of the fall break
In their experience, what effect did the fall break have on student stress in relation to years prior to the fall break
Overall perception of the fall break on students' mental health



**Informant interview.** In the summer of 2018, an informant interview was conducted to gather contextual data on the creation and implementation of the fall break policy. It was hoped that at least three informants would agree to participate and were contacted via email in request of this. However, in the end only one informant agreed to participate. The informant interview was conducted via telephone and was audio recorded. This interview was 27 minutes in length. Table ten displays the topics of discussion in the informant interview.

Table 10  
Semi-structured interview guide for the informant interview.

Discussion Topics:
Role in the creation and implementation of the fall break
Who was involved in the creation and implementation of the fall break
Some of the decisions that were made in the formation of the break
Who was involved in the decision making regarding the formation of the fall break
Was the decision to implement a fall break unanimous
Were you in favour of the fall break
How did this factor into the decisions regarding the creation and implementation of the fall break
Decisions to implement the fall break the week following Thanksgiving

**Documents.** Documents from USAC and Senate that include recommendations from the Health Advisory Committee and Department of Housing, Associate Deans and the Registrar's office were used to triangulate data from surveys and qualitative interviews.

### Data Analysis

Data from the fall break survey as well as focus group data from the fall break assessment were analyzed and compared against Howlett et al.'s (2009) second stage in the policy cycle: implementation. Explanation building was used to iteratively analyze data on rival explanations of the implementation of the fall break policy in order to offer policy alternatives (Yin, 2014; Howlett, 2009). Descriptive statistics as well as Chi-Square, Kruskal-Wallis and two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study and faculty were examined using Stata 13 on each of the

above pertinent variables from the fall break survey. Focus groups and informant interviews were themed using an intercoder agreement. Documents were analyzed using a thematic analysis method that included open coding, axial coding and theming using an intercoder agreement between the researchers. This analysis offers an iterative explanatory analysis process and will provides explanation for the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. From this analysis, other plausible explanations were uncovered.

## **Results**

### **Fall break survey**

In the first year (2013/2014) of the fall break assessment, participants included 713 students in years 1-4. Of those, 267 were male and 446 were female. In the second year (2014/2015) of the fall break assessment, participants included 1124 students in years 1-4. Of those, 354 were male and 398 were female. In year three (2015/2016) of the fall break assessment, participants included 1234 students in years 1-4. Of those, 398 were male and 836 were female. Table eleven represents the distribution of the sample for each of these years for Survey 1, 2 and 3.

Table 11  
Sample, fall break survey.

	Year 1 (2013/2014)	Year 2 (2014/2015)	Year 3 (2015/2016)
Participants	713	1124	1234
Male	267	354	398
Female	446	770	836

Analyses revealed that overall, only 36.9% of students perceived an increase in workload before the break. Alternatively, overall, only 29.6% of students perceived an increase in workload after the break. As such, even though a small percentage of participants perceived their workload to go up before and after the break, the majority of participants from BUSU

survey (before experiencing the break, 2012/2013) and The fall break surveys years one, two and three (after experiencing the break, 2013/2014, 2014/2015, and 2015/2016) were in favour of the fall break. Analysis also revealed that overall and in each of the three years of the fall break assessment, students spent their fall break either mostly doing school work or mostly relaxing/vacationing. Moreover, survey results indicate that the majority of students across all three years of the fall break assessment (2013/2014, 2014/2015, 2015/2016) agree that the best time for a break in the fall semester is Thanksgiving week. When looking at the data, it appears that a slight difference lies with the 2014/2015 cohort being the most strongly in agreement of Thanksgiving week, with the other two years (2013/2014, 2015/2016) falling a bit more towards the week following Thanksgiving week. Nonetheless, overall, in each year of data collection students preferred Thanksgiving week to the alternatives (56%, 73% and 66% respectively). The data also revealed that most students do not spend any days on campus during the fall break. It should be noted that this item was only assessed in years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) of the fall break assessment.

When examining the implementation of a fall break in relation to the start of the fall semester, the data revealed that the majority of students like the timetable the way it is. It should be noted that this question only exists for the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 cohorts, so analysis reflects that. Chi-square analysis indicated a slight difference in preference between the two years. In 2015/2016, more students responded closer to agree that they would want an earlier start to the school year to allow for more time for exams as opposed to those students in 2014/2015. However, it should be noted that overall, in each year of data collection the vast majority of students preferred keeping the status quo (86% in 2014/2015 and 78% in 2015/2016). This was true even for those students in third year and higher in (2014/2015) fourth year and

higher in (2015/2016). When asked if the starting date of the fall term was problematic in any way relative to years before the fall break, those students overwhelmingly responded that there was no problem at all (70.9% in 2014/2015 and 66.8% in 2015/2016). Analyses also revealed that for these same students, the start of the fall term was not problematic relative to years before the fall break. Seventy percent of participants perceived no problem to the start of the fall term at all while 16% perceived minor problems. Moreover, when students in either third or fourth year were given three choices of:

1. an earlier start to the semester, more time for exams and keeping the fall break or
2. keeping the current schedule (start of term, fall break and final exams) as it was in the current school year or
3. removing the fall break, normal start, more time for exams

Students overwhelming (84%) chose to keep the current schedule (start of term, fall break and final exams) as it was in the current school year.

Regarding students' perceptions of their workload increasing before the break, analyses revealed that over the three years, there is a trend towards neutral or indifference with no significant interactions by gender in any year of study. However, there were significant interactions when looking at year of study and faculty in year one (2013/2014). First year students (year one, 2013/2014) were significantly less likely to report workload increasing before the break. However, in years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) there were no significant interactions between gender and year of study. Moreover in year two (2014/2015) first and fourth year students were more likely to either strongly agree or agree that workload increased before the break. Math and science students in study years one ( $N = 24$ ) and four ( $N = 13$ ) were more likely to disagree that workload increased before the break ( $X = 3.4$ , years 1 and 4) in year

one of the fall break survey (2013/2014) with no significant interactions by year of study in year any other year of the fall break survey. However, in year two (2014/2015) those students in Business and Humanities were more likely to respond either strongly agree or agree that workload increased before the break. Participants also remained neutral regarding an increase in workload after the break ( $X = 2.98$ ) and there were no interactions or differences by gender, faculty or year of study in any year of the fall break survey. However, students in first and second year were more likely to respond either disagree or strongly disagree that either workload increased after the break (year two, 2014/2015). Figure two represents increase in workload before and after the break.

Figure 2

Increase in workload before and after the break.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean Year 1 (2013/2014)</b>	<b>Mean Year 2 (2014/2015)</b>	<b>Mean Year 3 (2015/2016)</b>
Increase in workload before	X=2.68	X=2.88	X=2.98
* First year students	X=3.0	X=1.4	X=1.37
* Math and Science	X=3.4	X=1.33	X=1.27
		Nil	Nil
Increase in workload after	X=2.92	X=3.17	X=3.15
Scored from 1-5 with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree.			

### Focus Groups

**Students.** Time and timing was an important theme that emerged regarding implementation in the focus groups with students. This includes proper time management to get personal and school related tasks done, not liking the timing of the break or liking the timing of

the break, not having enough time in a semester, not having enough time off for a break, and spending time with friends and family.

***Like timing.*** Some students really like the timing of when the break was implemented for a variety of reasons. In the focus groups, students conveyed that the break “was nice to take a break from school for a bit, especially around, around the time of midterms” (Focus Group 1, 2015). Some students like the extra time at Thanksgiving as they can go home: “I think it’s good with the Thanksgiving weekend because students go home” (Focus Group 3, 2013). Another student states that: “I personally like where it is because I can go home and celebrate Thanksgiving with my family, and then spend time with my family” (Focus Group 1, 2014). Other students revealed that “it breaks the semester up nice and cleanly too. It makes the whole 8 months into, kind of, nice bite size sections. Okay, I have these 6 weeks, and then it's reading week and now okay, I've got this, and then Christmas” (Focus Group 2, 2013). Moreover, “It divides the time really nicely with the extra break” (Focus Group 1, 2015). This is true “Even regarding midterms, I think it's perfect timing. If you have your midterms before the break and then you have the break, you still have a month before your next midterms start” (Focus Group 2, 2016).

***Time management.*** Students suggested that “time management is a huge thing” (Focus Group 1, 2015). In the focus groups it was revealed that students think time management has a major impact on their school related stress. “I have no time to focus on myself, and no time to sleep either because it’s just one thing after another” (Focus Group 2, 2014). Another student suggested that: “It’s not even your smartness or your ability to learn, it’s your time management” (Focus Group 2, 2013). “Like this past December, all my exams were back to back, so you have to know how to manage your time to study up to those” (Focus Group 3, 2013). Students

recognize that the implementation of the fall break has an impact on their time management. Some students learned how to manage their time better during the break. One student learned that slacking off during the break was not necessarily effective use of their time. “Slacked off just a little, but if we prioritize our time properly, now we know for next year” (Focus Group 3, 2013). Another student suggests that the break “it’s kind of a time to also reflect on what you can do to improve or how you can prioritize your time differently to do better” (Focus Group 1, 2013).

***Dislike timing.*** Contrary to what the fall break survey data suggests, there were some students who did not like the timing of the break in the focus groups. This was related to both the length of the break and the placement of the break within the fall semester. For instance, some students felt like “it was too early to have it” (Focus Group 2, 2014). Another student suggests “it was about two weeks too early” (Focus Group 2, 2015). This was in part due to when assignments were due within the semester. “My biggest workload was actually all of November, that’s why I think that having it later, either at the end of October or very beginning of November, a time when I think students do need a break” (Focus Group 1, 2014). Another student agreed that “I think if we push it a couple weeks back, then the people who do utilize it for a studying week, you have enough stuff to actually prepare for your exams” (Focus Group 2, 2014). Hence, while the majority of students in the fall break survey liked the timing of the break this was not always the case during the fall break Focus Groups.

***Dislike placement.*** The fall break focus groups also revealed that there were some students who did not like the placement of the break attached to Thanksgiving. “I kind of wish it wasn't attached onto Thanksgiving so we'd get a real full week because I felt like because we already have the long weekend that we're not getting what we deserve” (Focus Group 1, 2013).

Another student agreed that: “I think it’s funny how they always pair it with the long weekend. So we technically only 4 days off, it’s like you’re gipping us out an extra day” (Focus Group 3, 2015). One student even suggested “I didn’t really like the time because we’re already getting thanksgiving off and they’re like cheating us of one day” (Focus Group 2, 2015).

**Workload.** Regarding workload going up either directly before or after the implementation of the fall break, there was a bit of discrepancy between the surveys and the focus groups. While the majority of students in the fall break survey did not report workload going up either directly before or directly after the break, during the focus groups with students, some students suggested otherwise. One student suggested that: “instead of four weeks because of reading week, in three weeks I have either papers, assignments or midterms, I have twelve of them in three weeks” (Focus Group 1, 2014). This discrepancy seemed to be particularly strong during the first year of data collection regarding December exams. “I didn’t even know what exam to study for first because I had those four in two days and then I had no time to study for that last one” (Focus Group 2, 2013). Moreover, implementation of the break “Pushes the exams back a bit or makes them more condensed, which kind of makes people stress out a bit more during exam time” (Focus Group 3, 2014).

**Momentum.** Momentum was another important theme related to timing that emerged regarding implementation of the fall break in the focus groups with students. This includes breaking the flow in the semester. Some students felt like: “it was too early to have it. I felt like we had just gotten into school, we had just got into the routine of things and it was like okay see you in a week and it actually kind of got me out of the flow that I was just getting into” (Focus Group 1, 2013). Students reported that the break made it hard to get back into a routine. For instance, one student suggested: “I felt more drained after the break because I was I had just



gotten back into my routine and then I had a week where I could sleep in and do nothing...so then when I started again I felt like I was starting my routine again” (Focus Group 2, 2014). This break in momentum can in part be attributed to the placement of the break within the semester. One student stated: “I felt like I was just getting back into being at school every day and everything and then I had a week off and kinda had to come back again remembering that you kinda have to read when you’re not at school and do assignments when you’re not actually at school so I felt like it threw me off a little bit” (Focus Group 1, 2014). To combat this, in the focus groups some students suggested the break would be better placed later in the semester. “I feel like if it was a week or two later, I know that probably messes with it because then it is a very short time between that and Christmas, but that allows you to have more flow to the curriculum.” (Focus Group 2, 2015).

***Indifference.*** The fall break Focus Groups also revealed that some students were indifferent to the implementation of the fall break. One student suggested that “It probably wouldn't bother me too much if it was taken away to be honest because you get an extra week off potentially in the winter which I think I would enjoy more” (Focus Group 1, 2015).

Another student believed that “I don't think it really impacted me you know, because I was more stressed later in the semester. So having that break in October didn't really impact later on in the semester” (Focus Group 2, 2014).

### **Faculty Interviews**

**Faculty.** Time and timing was an important theme that emerged. This includes how faculty perceive proper time management to get personal and school related tasks done by students. Time also refers to not liking the timing of the break or liking the timing of the break,

not having enough time in a semester, not having enough time off for a break, and how faculty perceive students spend time during their fall break.

**Timing.** Overall, faculty did not like the timing or the placement of the break within the semester. For instance, one participant believes:

It's always a little bit of a pain to figure out how to work around Thanksgiving Monday. Right in the goofy schedule where, after, Thanksgiving anything that was scheduled for the Monday would then be out of sync with everything else. The way that the universities try to find those days, well they found a little bit at the beginning but they've also shortened things at the end. And so, I think there's a bit of a loss that comes with the days in the term (Participant B, 2018).

Some faculty suggested that they do not like the timing of the break because it comes too early in the semester.

So I just think that's too early and I don't if that's the reaction of students as well. But that's a concern to me. I think it'd be better if it happened at the, certainly the half mark or even in maybe the 60% mark so it was kinda on the down swing of the term so that students were already working on their capstone assignments for the courses (Participant H, 2018).

Another faculty participant agrees that the timing of the break should come later in the semester.

You know, I would think, in some way, ideally, it would be a bit later in the term, when maybe there's been more time for work to accumulate more, both for students and for instructors, where maybe the falling behind issue would become more relevant. Like say, if it's closer to the two-thirds point of the term rather than the one-third point, then that's where maybe people would use that extra time more effectively (Participant K, 2018).

Moreover, Participant D believes that:

I think it happens very early and they're just getting into the rhythm of things anyways, they don't really need a break. They just had a break all summer. So I mean from my perspective I wonder, and I know I've heard from talking to other people I've heard other professors say, you know, They don't need a break, we just started. In the winter it's different. It's different than in the winter when we've been at this for six months (2018).

Some faculty even think the timing of the break may actually cause stress for students. “Now the other thing along with it is, and I did make this recommendation at the time and it was defeated. I think it's a week too early. I think the timing actually causes stress” (Participant I, 2018).

Even though some faculty do not necessarily like the timing of the break, they also understand why it is placed where and when it is within the semester. Participant H suggests that: “I understand why it is where it is but I support it. I just question whether it's in their benefit to happen so early in the year I guess. Or the, early in the term” (2018). Another faculty member concurs that:

I also understand the reason why it is early, it's because we already have that one day that's a holiday in October, the Thanksgiving, so we're not only having to lengthen the term four days instead of five with the Thanksgiving. I guess the solution would be the government should make a statutory holiday in November (Participant H, 2018).

**Momentum:** Much like the student participants, some faculty also agree that the placement of the break in the fall semester has an impact on momentum. Some faculty think that the fall break helps to keep a nice flow in their course.

So the one good thing about the fall break is that it helps you keep everything still in sync because you just skip that week and then carry on with the next. So that's one thing that I

think's been beneficial. It just helps your teaching to continue to flow and your courses continue to flow, especially if you have seminars and students are in different classes on different days. It just sort of helps keep the overall flow of a course consistent for every student (Participant B, 2018).

Other faculty believe that flow for students is interrupted as a result of the break. For instance, one faculty states:

The flow is disrupted. You know, you're just getting into something. Especially first year fall. You're a new student, you've never been to a university before. And suddenly, it's really five weeks in, right? Yeah, so you're just getting into a rhythm and suddenly, your back home in your pajamas and eating chips in your parents' couch. You're just like, Ugh, I don't wanna go back. I've lost my interest. So, when students come back, I feel a bit of a drag. I think it still should be the Thanksgiving week. I think we should start the university a week earlier. Because five weeks in, you're just getting up to momentum. And I'm finding although the week between has helped students decompress, they didn't have the momentum in the course and it's almost like starting over (Participant I, 2018).

***Time management for assignments.*** Similar to the students, some faculty thought that the timing of the break has an impact on how students manage their time for assignments and tests. Some faculty believe the break allows students time to catch up on their school work. For instance, Participant B states:

Where then having something due after the week, I think, can really ... the students can benefit from that reading week because they can really spend time studying and working

on reports without having to kind of go to class, and do this and that, and all these other things that sort of chop up somebody's day (2018).

Moreover another faculty believes that:

And a break is a time for them to stop, take a breath, catch up on things that they might have not done, including those things that take longer, reading your textbook or assigned papers or something. And potentially getting caught up on work because of assignments or upcoming midterms (Participant E, 2018).

Other faculty suggest that the timing of the break has had an impact on how they structure their courses and when assignments are due. For instance one faculty states:

So, there used to a major assignment that was due that would prepare them for the midterm. Now what the break did was it ate into the time that I would be easing into all the information that they would need for that assignment. So, I would have to give all that material that they would need for the assignment and make sure it was done before the break, so that they would have the entire break to do the assignment and get ready for the midterm (Participant J, 2018).

Some faculty even believe that the break has had a negative impact on the way students manage their time for assignments. Participant D states:

So I think it actually, scheduling wise, is worse for the students unless they plan to use that full week to study, which they don't. They use it to take a break and travel. A lot of them are traveling and then I think that that is harder on them-I know that they would, as stressful as it is, they prefer to get things done before the break because they're going away, or having a relaxing break, and they don't want to use it to study (2018).

### **Informant Interview**

**Informant.** The informant interview revealed that the timing and placement of the break was considered as an implementation issue during the creation of the policy. Timing relates to length and placement of the break within the semester, important dates in the fall term and impact on the student timetable.

**Registrar's office.** The informant indicated that the timing and placement of the break was heavily influenced by the registrar's office. "I think it was largely looking at even with the registrar's office at the time, where it made most sense to be able to insert a break so it would be the least disruptive right, for students" (Informant, 2018).

It is also clear that policy creators were concerned about how the timing of the break would impact students' timetable and would best be placed to support students.

So we had to factor in things like would it impact on science labs if you introduced it on these dates and how many days would be appropriate, looking at the timing and the length of the break were, I'd say the main considerations right? So where do you introduce it in the academic semester so that makes the most sense to support students at that point in time and looking at things like when midterms are (Informant, 2018).

When considering the length of the break, the timing and the placement of the break within the fall semester the informant revealed that student preference and impact on academic calendar and teaching hours were considered.

And then also considering the timing and length of time. Is it more likely that students would prefer to have this added to a Thanksgiving break when they're more likely to go home and have a more extended break. So looking at that particular question, and then looking at the impact on the academic calendar for the term to say, you know, what does

this mean in terms of teaching days and contact hours right. So trying to minimize the impact on the academic contact and teaching hours. So that was the other consideration, so can we, you know, shorten orientation by a day? Are students prepared to do that, so that we can introduce the break. Can we extend the exam schedule by a day so that we can build in the break. So those were the considerations (Informant, 2018)

*Senate.* Ultimately, the timing of the break was influenced by the recommendations from the registrar's office who reported to USAC, who then relayed this recommendation which helped to inform Senate's decision. "I think through the registrar's office, that was identified as almost the preferable time but when it went to senate, it was identified as those dates as part of the academic calendar dates that are presented to senate" (Informant, 2018).

### **Documents**

The documents reveal that the considerations for the timing of the fall break included recommendations from USAC, Associate Deans and the registrar's office that were used to inform Senate's decisions regarding the timing and placement of the break within the fall semester.

*USAC and Registrar's office.* The minutes from Senate indicate that USAC and the registrar's office worked together in presenting a proposal for a fall break. "USAC presented the rationale for the draft proposal and the registrar's office reviewed a proposed fall Academic Calendar reflecting a fall break Week. B. Davis will work on a new proposal for the dates 2013-2015" (USAC, November 8, 2012). Moreover, upon Senate's decision to pilot the fall break for three years, "In conversation, it was noted that the Registrar should be included in future discussions to bring forward information on the scheduling of exams" (USAC, November 8, 2012).

*Associate Dean's.* In the documents, it is clear that Associate Deans' were also consulted regarding the best time for a break in the fall semester. "K. Meade had discussions with the Associate Deans regarding a time period for a fall break Week and orientation day to reflect the inclusion fall break Week in the Academic Calendar Year (approved at Senate 603 as a three year pilot)" (USAC, November 22, 2012)..

*Health advisory committee and department of housing.* The documents also revealed that the Health Advisory Committee and Department of Housing were also consulted about the timing of the break. "She also met with the Health Advisory Committee and the Department of Housing for discussions about moving dates" (USAC, November 22, 2012).

*The calendar year.* The documents also reflect that consideration of the calendar year in relation to the academic year were also given.

A fall term Break period shall be scheduled for the full week that includes Thanksgiving Monday. Winter Term Reading Week shall commence on the sixth Sunday after the beginning of classes for the Winter Term and shall continue for seven days until the seventh Sunday. To reflect the inclusion fall break Week in the Academic Year (approved at Senate 603 as a three year pilot) (USAC, November 7, 2013).

*Evaluation.* Analysis of documents also revealed that evaluation of the break was embedded in the discussions around policy creation, but not specifically implementation. This was reflected in the minutes from Senate:

On Dec. 5 Senate approved fall reading break as a three-year pilot beginning in October 14-18, 2013; agreed to do assessment of pilot initiative. Classes will begin Wednesday, Sept. 4 instead of Thursday, Sept. 5. Kim will meet with Linda Rose-Krasnor today to discuss fall reading break/MH assessment opportunities for possible graduate student



(Senate, January 24, 2013).

**Discussion**

This research sought to evaluate the implementation of a fall break policy at one post-secondary institution. Using a case study approach with mixed methods, the purpose was to provide a post policy implementation analysis using a critical analysis lens perspective to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy implementation. Overall, data triangulation showed that students and faculty agree with the policy of having the break. While data revealed there were a number of implementation factors that were considered regarding the length and placement of the break, there is a bit of discrepancy between the surveys and the qualitative interviews regarding the timing of the break and its placement within the fall semester. Moreover, triangulation of the data also revealed that both faculty and students perceived the timing of the break to fragment the flow of momentum in the fall semester and may be perceived as somewhat detrimental to student success. Table twelve outlines the implementation of the fall break policy in relation to Howlett and Ramesh’s (1995) implementation stage of the policy cycle.

Table 12  
Fall break policy implementation in relation to the implementation stage of the policy cycle.

Stage in Policy	Phase of applied problem solving	What worked	What didn’t work
Policy implementation	Putting solution into Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation evaluation</li> <li>• Motivated and compliant</li> <li>• Right policy actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing</li> <li>• Placement</li> <li>• No policy alternatives</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Five stages of the policy cycle and their relationship to applied problem solving. Howlett and Ramesh, 1995)

While the fall break surveys overwhelming show students do like timing of break where it is and there were no statistically significant differences regarding alternate timing of the break,

qualitative discussions with students and faculty suggest that the break might come too soon in the semester. Initially the break fell directly in the middle of the semester. But every subsequent year, the break has come five weeks into the fall semester. As discussed in minutes from USAC and MHMAC, discussions regarding the placement of the break in the semester were ultimately decided by the registrar's office and were based on the least amount of disruption to the timetable with a one day earlier start to the semester and a condensed December exam timetable. This is in part due to the unique nature of policy implementation in higher education (Scott, 2018). In particular, there is a lack of specificity that is linked to faculty and departmental jurisdictions in post-secondary institutions and attempting not to overstep these jurisdictions can create implementation issues (Timmerman & Metcalfe, 2009). The ultimate decision for policy implementation was an organizational one, not a student or faculty one, which misses the rationale for the implementation of the policy to be student mental health centered. This is not an uncommon issue. Organizational factors often triumph person centered approaches due to rigid structures that are difficult to change.

Discussions around implementation issues during design of policy are evident in the meeting minutes from USAC and Senate. This is a good thing as the design of a policy can determine implementation success or failure (Howlett, 2009). "Questioning how policies are implemented means focusing on how they are put into action, and the conditions under which success or failure in achieving the expected results ensue" (Reale & Seeber, 2012, p. 136). Hence, implementation problems need to be thought about ahead of time and built into the design of the policy (Weimer & Vining, 2011). At the very least, adequate policy alternatives need derived so that even if implementation is unsuccessful, positive policy outcomes may still ensue (Bardach, 2012). That being said, there are many variables that will impact the success or

failure of policy implementation. Howlett et al. (2009) agree that even the actors and activities involved in policy implementation can either help or hinder its implementation and thus, are important to examine in the policy cycle.

Implementation evaluation was embedded in the creation of the policy as evidenced in meeting minutes from Senate and USAC, this is not necessarily reflected in implementation outcomes. Implementation evaluation occurred in the first three years of the policy being implemented and results were brought back to USAC who reported to Senate their recommendations on the policy. While data on the timing of the break was presented, discussions around the timing of the break did not ensue and no policy changes were made to the placement of the break within the fall semester despite the discrepancy in the data. As reflected in the minutes from USAC and Senate and MHMAC, after each year of data collection USAC re-evaluated whether to recommend to Senate to keep the break each year, but not necessarily the timing of the break. This is in part due to nature of policy implementation in higher education (Timmerman & Metcalfe, 2009).

Evaluation is an instrument of policy intention (Reele & Seeber, 2012). While this research included implementation evaluation, the implementation presented to decision makers and governing institutional bodies, implementation was not revised as a result. In higher education evaluation is often a component to funding early in the policy cycle but said evaluation often ends up being independent from the policy, especially when done as a post research assessment as was the case in this policy (Reele & Seeber, 2012). Initially, it was deemed necessary to evaluate implementation issues in the policy but at the outset, this implementation evaluation was an independent component of an outcome evaluation that did not influence the impact of policy implementation. In part this is due to information asymmetry that occurs in

higher education between policy makers and academics whereby this evaluation can end up taking on a life of its own as a result and any policy modifications are then influenced by the complex layers of policy implementation in higher education (Reele & Seeber, 2012). When this happens, evaluation can be seen as a barrier to implementation.

Underdeveloped policies, however, are also a barrier to implementation that may even create challenges for faculty and staff trying to support students' mental well-being that can lead to negative academic outcomes (DiPlacito-DeRango, 2016). Thus, DiPlacito-DeRango (2016) suggests that one way of overcoming these barriers is to maintain continuity of the actors involved from policy creation, to implementation and evaluation. At our institution, USAC, who was initially involved in providing need, scope and design of the fall break policy, there were ultimately many other actors involved in not only the decision making process but also the evaluation and timing which were outsourced internally at our institution. Ultimately, while the fall break policy was brought forth as a recommendation by USAC, it was Senate's decision whether to maintain the break and how to implement it.

### **Policy Implications**

This research provides context in relation to the need to address the mental health concerns of university students and the interest in critical appraisal of the implementation of effective policies in this regard. From this critical appraisal, policy learning ensued.

Implementation evaluation is an important component not only in policy analysis but said evaluation can also influence the success or failure of implementation (Howlett et al., 2009; Bardach, 2012; Reale & Seeber, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2011). We found this to be true. While this research provides a critical appraisal of the implementation of the fall break policy at one institution, our evaluation is post-hoc. If baseline data regarding the implementation of the

fall break would have been collected prior to its implementation, we could have possibly avoided the implementation issues that arose.

Implementation issues, specifically, timing of the fall break had an impact on how students and faculty experienced the break and thus influenced perceptions on the impact that the break had on student mental health. Moreover, in our post-hoc evaluation we can see how important these implementation issues are to the life of the policy but how implementation decisions did not change as a result. Initially, the break fell directly in the middle of the semester but as the policy naturally occurred attached to Thanksgiving week, the placement changed in the semester also changed so that the break occurred five weeks into the semester instead of directly in the middle. Hence, evidence based decisions are important to implementation success or failure and should be considered as part of the evaluation process (Howlett et al., 2009). Perhaps including student voices on the timing of the break prior to its creation could have mitigated some of these implementation issues (Elwood, 2013; DeWilde & Stepnick, 2015). This is the challenge when collecting evidence ad hoc. It's good to evaluate but before implementation, not just after. Since the policy cycle is iterative, continual evaluation of its implementation should ensue. As the policy naturally evolves so can decision makers change, students change and campus climate can change with a new evolving focus on mental wellness initiatives, student mental health may also evolve and so will mental health policies and implementation issues. Over time, new implementation issues may arise and so implementation will need to evolve with policy changes.

### **Limitations and Future Research Suggestions**

This research sought to critically appraise the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock post policy implementation in the face of the challenge of a lack of baseline evidence.

Future research of policies in higher education should include baseline data as this research can have an important role in policy formation (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Another limitation is that data was only collected the first three years of the policy and as the ebb and flow of the semester changed as a result of the break, so did the timing in relation to calendar year and when Thanksgiving falls. Future research of this mental health policy in higher education should further investigate the best timing of the break in order to provide optimal outcomes for student mental wellness. At the time of this research, there was a challenge in obtaining student mental health records internally, including student health services usage, reported mental-illness, drop-out rates and course withdrawal rates. Future research should investigate these in relation to the fall break policy.

**Publication**

This manuscript will be submitted to the following academic journal: Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research  
(<https://www.springer.com/journal/10488>)

## Chapter Seven: Paper Three

### **Exploring the impact of a mental health policy in higher education: lessons learned from a critical appraisal of the fall break policy**

#### **Literature Review**

The mental health status of university and college students is receiving increasing attention as media reports, clinical observations and empirical evidence point to higher levels of stress and anxiety across Canada. High occurrences of mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression) in undergraduate students at post-secondary institutions appear to be on the rise at a global, national, and provincial level (Adalf, Glikksman, Demers, & Newton-Taylor, 2001; Stallman, 2010). Students consistently report higher levels of stress and anxiety than that of the general population (Adalf, et al., 2001; Stallman, 2010) and cases of suicide are often well publicized. Mental illness commonly develops between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four (Eisenberg, Golberstein, Gollust, & Hefner, 2007) placing post-secondary students at particular risk. With 1.2 million part-and full-time post-secondary students in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013), the mental health of this population is a significant concern.

There is a well-established relationship between academic performance and health (El, 2010); the better your health, the better your academic performance. It is reasonable to argue then that reducing stress should lead to improved mental health and therefore better post-secondary academic outcomes. Research suggests (Keyes et al., 2012; Tremblay et al., 2008) that mental health disorders and poor perceived levels of mental health are related to both suicidal behaviour and poor academic performance. It appears that, the prevalence, severity and persistence of mental health issues is increasing across Ontario post-secondary campuses (Zivin,

Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009; Canada Newswire, 2012) with university and college students now viewed as a high-risk population (Stallman, 2010).

Research indicates that most students are aware that they have a need for treatment but the majority do not seek it out due to a disparity between their perceived need and actual need as well as a perceived lack of appropriate mental health treatments on campus (Zivin et al., 2009). However, research regarding effective policies aimed at treatment of mental health problems among college students is currently not available, or at least not publicly available (Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serras, 2009). Research suggests that numerous anti-stigma mental health policies based on assumptions are questionable at best (Angermeyer, Holzinger, & Matschinger, 2009). Some evidence-based prevention strategies have proven useful in improving the quality of life for post-secondary students, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, interpersonal-process therapy and exercise and stress training (Buchanan, 2012). Hence, effective policies should support interventions based on empirical evidence.

Policy evaluation is the last cycle in the policy process. After the agenda has been set, decisions have been made, a policy has been formulated and implemented, its evaluation can be done. Policy evaluation allows for the identification of how the policy is working, or its effectiveness (Howlett, Ramesh & Perl 2009). A policy can change based on the outcomes of the evaluation. Howlett et al. (2009) refer to this as policy learning. Policy evaluation is beneficial because it helps to learn about what does and does not work in the policy and where in the cycle needs to be addressed to fix the policy. In other words, policy evaluation provides learning regarding the policy and policy issues (Howlett et al., 2009). This learning is largely dependent on the actors involved at this stage of the policy cycle. For instance, who the actors are and how they are situated in the world and their worldview and position will have an influence over the



how the policy is evaluated and what comes of those evaluations. Often times, policy evaluations only provide a rationale for policy outcomes instead of absolute explanations regarding the success or failure of the (Howlett et al., 2009). That being said, there are different types of lessons that can be learned from policy evaluations. These can be both practical and fundamental (Howlett et al., 2009).

Practical lessons can include specific details of the policy cycle based on the experience of those policy actors involved in its implementation (Howlett et al., 2009). These lessons can include perceptions about what has worked and not worked throughout the policy cycle process. This fundamental lesson from policy evaluation can lead to a policy being terminated or severely altered (Howlett et al., 2009). Ineffective policy evaluation can lead to policy failure. The policy actors involved are crucial to effective policy evaluation and offer markedly unique evaluations based on the context of those actors (Howlett et al., 2009, p). Hence, the policy actors have an impact on the policy evaluation whereby the policy evaluation itself can lead to various outcomes for the policy. Howlett et al. (2009) suggest that ultimately, there are three possible outcomes that can be deduced from the evaluation stage in the policy cycle: successful, wanting and failure. If the policy is deemed successful, it will move forward as is. However, if it is deemed wanting then revisions are needed, the policy should be fed back through the policy cycle. Finally, if the outcome is deemed failure then the policy should be dismissed. Hence, the evaluation stage in the policy cycle can lead to lessons learned that will ultimately impact the success or failure of the policy.

Given the severity of mental health problems and disorders among university and college students, it is evident that the need for action is pressing. It is important for Ontario universities and their communities to realize the seriousness of the mental health issues faced by their

students and to understand the impact they can have on students' mental health (Canada Newswire, 2012). The College Student Alliance (2012) reports that the Ontario government recognizes both the unique mental health challenges and the high prevalence of mental illness among post-secondary students. They recommend that a specialized post-secondary education (PSE) framework be used by the province to create policy initiatives to help students achieve optimal mental health (College Student Alliance, 2012). With Statistics Canada (2013) reporting 783,198 registered undergraduate students in Ontario, the need to develop policies that support the mental health of university students is paramount. Many universities across the province have implemented a policy creating a fall break in hopes of alleviating students' stress and anxiety. While there is limited research on university-initiated interventions that alleviate school related stress, there is essentially no empirical evidence to support that supposition.

Policy implementation evaluation is crucial for determining its effectiveness (Nilsen, Roback, & Cairney, 2013) and this may be particularly true in higher education (Reale & Seeber, 2013). Evaluation studies are necessary for policy creation as well as establishing effective implementation and determining successful outcomes (Stufflebeam, 2003). Similar to healthcare, where health policy is often enacted on the prescription pads of physicians (Rachlis, 2005), university policy often only becomes evident through institutional decisions and this is not always an effective approach (Angermeyer & Matschinger, 2009). The fall break is a good example of this approach. In an attempt to reduce stress, many universities and colleges implemented a policy for a break in the fall semester. While there is limited research on university-initiated interventions to alleviate school related stress, there is even less known about the appropriateness of these mental health initiatives across post-secondary campuses (Heck et al., 2014). Much of the evidence that is available is quantitative, coming from a post positivist

paradigm and does not examine the essence of being a student or the experience of a fall break on students' mental health. There is no baseline evidence regarding the stress levels or mental illness prevalence of incoming students to post-secondary institutions, or to the same for students through the course of their studies. This lack of baseline evidence creates a serious challenge for attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of the fall break policy.

Possible interventions to support the mental health of university students is of considerable interest. It is important to effectively formulate, implement, and evaluate mental health policies within post-secondary institutions. The purpose of this paper is to appraise whether a policy for “fall break week” in fact does reduce students’ stress and anxiety for university students.

### **Methodology**

This paper offers the third of three papers in this case study and uses both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence to collect self-report data on mental health outcomes associated with the fall break. In case study evaluations a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that includes both contrasting realist and interpretive perspectives can be used (Yin, 2014). As such, this is an analysis of quantitative data from the fall break survey and qualitative data from the fall break Focus Groups in relation to Howlett et al.’s (2009) evaluation stage of the policy cycle. Using survey data to be triangulated in case studies may increase rigour and is useful in evaluative case study research (Yin, 2014). Hence, survey data was used to provide quantitative evidence on the impact of the fall break policy. Focus group data was used to provide qualitative evidence aimed at uncovering students’ lived experience of the fall break in the context of how the fall break influenced mental health as a means of evaluating the fall break policy at Brock.

## Methods

### Fall break survey

In January of 2014 (Year 1) ethics was approved, and then renewed in January of 2015 (Year 2) and January of 2016 (Year 3), through the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB) of which the thesis supervisor, Madelyn Law submitted, to distribute our fall break survey. The surveys were distributed over the course of three days, from 11-2 each day, during the last week of January in partnership with BUSU, who suggested the best time to run the surveys based on prior experience. Students were asked to read the consent form, then fill out the survey either on the spot or to take a slip with information on how to fill the survey out online. Sampling for the survey was purposeful with students randomly selected from various locations across campus.

In year one (2013/2014), once the students completed the survey, they were given a debriefing letter and were invited to sign up to participate in focus group sessions the following week. Students were also given an opportunity to leave their contact information to receive a final copy of this research report upon completion of the study. In year one (2013/2014) the fall break survey included eight items to which numbers 2 to 7 were scored using a Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree.

After careful review of year one (2013/2014) and productive feedback from students, faculty and staff, some revisions were made to the study design and additional items were added to the survey. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016), once the students had completed the survey, they were given a debriefing letter and were given an opportunity to leave their contact information to receive a final copy of the research report upon completion of the study. The fall break survey included eight of the same items from year one (2013/2014) to which

numbers 3 to 7 were scored using a Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) the fall break survey also included an additional six items with varying response options, five of which only applied to students in their third or fourth year of study. Analysis focused on nine items from the fall break survey. Table thirteen details these nine items.

Table 13  
Fall break survey items.

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

### Focus Group Data

Focus groups are useful for exploring emotional experiences (Tracy, 2013) and, as such, can help to capture students' lived experiences of the fall break. Sampling for the focus groups was purposeful and include participants who were registered in undergraduate courses in one academic institution that has implemented a fall break, of which those students experienced (Tracy, 2013). As such, focus group participants from random locations across the Brock campus were purposefully asked to participate in the interview sessions. In the fall break

assessment, the week following the administration of the fall break survey, focus group sessions were conducted over the course of the same three days of the week that the surveys were run. Students were given lunch at each of these focus group sessions for participating in year 1 (2013/2014). In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) students were given a ten dollar Brock gift card at each of these sessions. In year one of data collection (2013/2014) three focus group sessions were conducted. Undergraduate students in either years 1-4 of study were purposefully selected upon completion of the survey. In year two of data collection (2014/2015) only two focus group sessions were conducted over the course of two of the same days of the week that the surveys were run as no new themes were emerging and the research theme saturation had been reached. In year three (2015/2016) three focus group sessions were conducted in order for saturation to be reached. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) undergraduate students in either years 1-4 of study were purposefully selected across various locations on Brock campus just before conducting the focus group interviews. In years one (2013/2014) and two (2014/2015) focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour in length. Once initially greeted, focus group participants were asked to take a few minutes to read and sign the consent form while having a pizza lunch before starting each of the three sessions. The interviewer was careful to build rapport by making small talk initially and then through active listening and encouraging responses during the interview. In this way, trust was established. The interviewer was reflexive about appearance, body language and creating a safe interview space so participants felt comfortable to share.

The same semi-structured interview guide was used for the focus groups in year one (2013/2014) and years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) of the fall break assessment as a basis for open dialogue between the participants and the interviewer. These questions focused

on uncovering students' lived experience of the fall break in the context of how the fall break influenced mental health. The main topics of discussion are detailed in Table fourteen.

Table 14

Semi-structured interview guide for the fall break Focus Groups

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

In the spring of 2018, 10 Faculty interviews were conducted over the course of two months (May-June). Two professors from each faculty were randomly selected from a list on Brock's website. Faculty participants were sent an invitation email and then a reminder email one week later. If a reply was not given, an additional professor from the corresponding Faculty was randomly selected and emailed an invitation to participate. This process was continued until two professors from each Faculty consented to participate with a minimum of one additional invitation email having to be sent up to a maximum of four additional invitation emails having to be sent. Upon replying to the email invitation, faculty participants were emailed a consent form as well as a Doodle poll to arrange a mutually agreeable date and time for the interview to occur. Participants voluntarily consented to participate and were not given any compensation for participating. Interviews ranged from twenty to forty-five minutes in length. Nine of the interviews occurred in corresponding faculty offices. One interview was done via Skype as the faculty participant was working remotely for the semester. Once initially greeted, faculty participants were asked if they had a chance to read and sign the consent form and then consent

forms were collected as well as if they had any questions prior to the interview taking place. Interviews were audio recorded.

The same semi-structured interview guide was used for each of the ten faculty interviews as a basis for open dialogue between the faculty participants and the interviewer. These questions focused on uncovering faculty's perceptions of the fall break in the context of how the fall break influenced student's mental health and the structure of their courses. The main topics of discussion related to the faculty and courses taught. These included what faculty each professor was from, the undergraduate courses taught in the fall semester and if these were required or elective, if they had to change the structure of their courses as a result of the break, and when the majority of assignments/tests were assigned. Discussion topics also related to faculty perceptions on the fall break. These included on the benefits and drawbacks of the fall break, if faculty have seen a difference in their students' performance as a result of the break, what effect the fall break has on student stress in relation to years prior to the fall break, and overall perceptions of the fall break on students' mental health.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the fall break survey, as well as focus group data from the fall break assessment, were analyzed and compared against Howlett et al.'s (2009) last stage in the policy cycle: evaluation. Survey data analysis included descriptive statistics as well as Chi-Square, Kruskal-Wallis and two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study and faculty using Stata 13 to see if there are any associations between gender and faculty, gender and year of study and year of study and faculty. All focus groups were transcribed verbatim and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers and the research assistants. This data was triangulated to explain the evaluation cycle in the policy process in order to provide details of the



case. This was another step in the iterative explanatory process and provided an explanation of the evaluation cycle of the fall break policy. From this analysis, policy learning occurred and other plausible explanations were uncovered. Explanation building can be used to provide insights into causal links in the policy process (Yin, 2014). Since the policy cycle is iterative (Howlett, 2009) and explanation building is also iterative (Yin, 2014), this fits well as an analytic strategy to offer policy alternatives.

**Quantitative measures.** In year one (2013/2014) descriptive statistics as well as two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study, age (BUSU surveys), and program were examined using SPSS on each of the above variables. In order to increase power, some variables were collapsed to make one larger category or reduced to make smaller categories. For instance, initially there were 44 programs in the data set with very few numbers, therefore descriptive statistics as well as two way ANOVAs including all programs and then again with only the top three were analyzed. The Gender variable initially included male, female and other and was reduced to just male and female, removing the other category. The age category initially had ages 1-24 as their own category with 25+ grouped together and was re-categorized with 17 and 18 grouped together, ages 19-21 on their own and 22+ as one group.

In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) descriptive statistics, as well as Chi-Square, Kruskal-Wallis and two-way ANOVAs by gender, year of study and faculty were examined using Stata 13 on each of the above variables. In order to maintain consistency, year one (2013/2014) data was re-analyzed using Stata 13 on each of the same variables using the re-categorized variable for gender. Data from surveys was triangulated against the qualitative focus groups and interviews to begin building an explanation on the fall break policy.

**Qualitative measures.** Explanation building was used to analyze qualitative data and offer rival explanations and policy alternatives on the fall break policy (Yin, 2014). As such, focus group and interview data were analyzed using a thematic analysis method that included open coding, axial coding and theming. All focus groups and faculty interviews were transcribed verbatim using a secure transcription service (rev.com) and then themed using an intercoder agreement among the researchers and the research assistants (Miles et al., 2014; MacPhail, Khoza, Abler, & Ranganathan, 2016). This allowed for rich, thick data to be triangulated between the surveys, focus groups and faculty interviews to explain the evaluation of the fall break policy. Triangulated data was used to explain the evaluation cycle in the policy process as part of an iterative process used to provide details of the case.

## **Results**

### **Fall break survey**

**Participants.** Overall, participation in the fall break survey increased in each year of data collection. In year one (2013/2014) of the fall break survey participants included 713 students in years 1-4. Of those, 267 were male and 446 were female. In year two (2014/2015) of the fall break survey participants included 1124 students in years 1-4. Of those, 354 were male and 770 were female. In year three (2015/2016) of the fall break survey participants included 1234 students in years 1-4. Of those, 398 were male and 836 were female.

**Survey.** Analyses revealed that for all three years of data collection (2013-2016) most of the students spent their time during the fall break either doing schoolwork or relaxing. Moreover, after experiencing the fall break the majority of participants in each year of data collection reported that the break reduced their stress levels and this percentage decreased a little in each year of data collection. In year one (2013/2014) of the fall break survey only 35.5% of students

that perceived an increase in workload before the break also perceived an increase in their stress before the break. Alternatively, only 28% of students who perceived an increase in workload after the break also perceived an increase in their stress after the break. In year two (2014/2015) of the fall break survey only 31.3% of students who perceived an increase in workload before the break also perceived an increase in their stress before the break. On the other hand, only 22.5% of students who perceived an increase in workload after the break also perceived an increase in their stress after the break. However in year three (2015/2016) of the fall break survey 33.3% of students who perceived an increase in workload before the break also perceived an increase in their stress before the break, which is a slight increase from the year prior. Then again, slightly more, 25.7%, of students who perceived an increase in workload after the break also perceived an increase in their stress after the break than the previous year. While the majority of participants from Survey 1 (BUSU survey, before experiencing the break) and Survey 2 in both year 1 (fall break survey, after experiencing the break, 2013/2014), year 2 (fall break survey, after experiencing the break, 2014/2015) and year 3 (fall break survey, after experiencing the break, 2015/2016) perceived the break to reduce stress levels and were in favour of the fall break, approximately one third of participants perceived their workload and resulting stress to increase before the break.

As such, even though a small percentage of participants perceived their workload and stress to go up before and after the break, the majority of participants from BUSU survey (before experiencing the break, 2012/2013) and the fall break survey year one (after experiencing the break, 2013/2014), year 2 (fall break survey, after experiencing the break, 2014/2015) and year 3 (fall break survey, after experiencing the break, 2015/2016) perceived the break to reduce stress

levels and were in favour of the fall break. Moreover, the majority of students spent no days on campus during the fall break.

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

Keeping in mind that the following items were scored using a scale from 1-5 where 1 equals strongly agree, 2 equals agree, 3 equals neutral, 4 equals disagree and 5 equals strongly disagree: With regard to students' perceptions of the break reducing school related stress, all participants agreed, with a tendency to strongly agree, that the break did reduce their stress. There were no significant interactions or differences by gender but there is a trend from year one (2013/2014) to year two (2014/2015) for females to more strongly agree that the break reduces stress (50.9% males to 53.4% females, year one and 66.4% males to 73.2% females, year two). However, there were significant differences when looking at year of study and faculty. First year students were significantly more likely to strongly agree that the break reduced their school related stress. In years two (2014/2015) and three (2015/2016) first year and second year students were more likely to strongly agree that the break reduced their school related stress. Moreover, in year one (2013/2014) math and science students were significantly more likely to be neutral that the break reduced school-related stress. In years two (2014/2015) and three

(2015/2016) no significant associations were found by faculty and year of study. Table fifteen represents the associations by gender, faculty and year of study related to the break reducing stress.

Table 15  
Break reduces stress

Variable	Mean Year 1 (2013/2014)	Mean Year 2 (2014/2015)	Mean Year 3 (2015/2016)
Break reduced stress	X=1.73	X=1.41	X=1.38
*First year students	X=1.52	X=1.4	X=1.37
*Second year students		X=1.33	X=1.27
*Business	X=1.78	X=1.57	X=1.34
*AHSC	X=1.69	X=1.31	X=1.5
*Math and Science	X=2.16	X=1.49	X=1.34
*Humanities	X=1.56	X=1.46	X=1.34
*Social Science	X=1.63	X=1.35	X=1.29
*Education	X=1.74	X=1.32	X=1.3
Scored from 1-5 with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree			

Moreover, students in study years two through four (82% in year one, 2013/2014) and third through fourth (87% in year two, 2014/2015) and fourth (87.2% in year three, 2015/2016) also agreed that, compared to previous years where there was no break, the implementation of a break did decrease stress. In these students, there were no significant interactions or differences by gender, faculty or year of study. There were also no significant differences from year one of the study (2013/2014) to year two (2014/2015) to year three (2015/2016). For those students who perceived an increase in workload before the break, over the three years of data collection, there was a general trend towards a neutral effect that the increase in workload before the break increased their stress before the break (2.68 in 2013/2014, 2.88 in 2014/2015 and 2.98 in 2015/2016). There were no significant interactions or differences by gender or faculty. However, students in first and second year were more likely to respond either disagree or strongly disagree that either workload or stress increased after the break in all three years of data

collection. Considering whether an increase in workload after the break increased students' stress, the majority of students also remained neutral ( $X = 3.2$ ). There were no interactions or differences by gender or year of study. However, there was a slight difference by faculty, with those students in Math and Science leaning more toward disagree ( $X = 2.16$ ) in year one (2013/2014). Overall the majority of students did not perceive workload or stress increasing either before or after the break but analyses did reveal that increased workload is positively correlated to stress. For those students who did report increased workload before or after the break, they also reported greater stress.

### **Fall break Focus Groups**

In year one (2013/2014) focus group participants included 13 students from years 1-4 in faculties of Education, Health Sciences and Social Sciences. Of those, 3 were male and 10 were female and were in either. In year two (2014/2015) focus group participants included 10 students from years 1-4 in the faculties of Social Sciences and Applied Health Sciences. In year three (2015/2016) focus group participants included 10 students varying in years 1-4 the faculties of Applied Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Education and Goodman School of Business. Of those, 2 were female and 8 were male. Focus group theming revealed three major themes. These include stress; timing; de-stress. For the purposes of this research, only those themes that relate to stress and de-stress are included.

**Stress.** This theme represents the factors around student stressors. Student stressors were both school related and self-related, both of which have an impact on student's perceived stress. A sub-theme of de-stress also emerged as a way for students to de-stress from their academic pressures. Students reported using various strategies to try and cope with their stress.

*School related stress.* Students experience different kinds of school related stressors. School related stress included writing exams, having multiple assignments due at the same time, too heavy a workload, poor time management, money, grades, missing classes and living away from home. For instance, when asked what contributes to their stress levels as a student one participant describes how exams and assignments are stressful. “Exams, assignments are all due at once, generally at the same time” (Focus Group 1, 2014). Another student described what it felt like to have multiple assignments due before the break. “The week before the break every single thing was due, every midterm, it was the worst week. It created so much stress it was absolutely ridiculous” (Focus Group 1, 2015). Poor time management is also a school related stressor. Some participants reported having a difficulty determining how much time to dedicate to each course and assignment. For instance, one participant suggested that “Poor time management skills. I think in the fall my habit is part of working up to assignments becoming due that builds stress and usually it’s not the best use of time” (Focus Group 2, 2016).

Another participant describes the stress of how they always feel like something is hanging over them:

I would say having the feeling of always being behind because there’s always something you could be doing. Like for example you have to read for every class so like there’s always something there no matter what. Right? (Focus Group 2, 2015)

Another participant concurs that:

Yeah, I’d definitely have to agree with you these assignments yes are stressful especially when they’re a lot of them due at one time, but I would say the most stressful is knowing that you’re always behind. Unless you’re reading 24/7 there’s for me personally there’s no way for me to ever be ahead or on top of everything because I’m not a fast reader and having to read 150 pages of a book in one class is crazy to

me because I have to read 50 pages in another class and 20 pages in another class so I would definitely deem readings are very stressful (Focus Group 3, 2014).

Living arrangements while at university also cause students to experience stress. Living away from home is perceived by some students to be a school related stress. However, living at home and going to university may also cause feelings of stress. One participant states:

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

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

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

Whether one is receiving financial assistance or not, money, or a lack thereof, can make students to experience feelings of stress while they are at school. One participant describes this stress:

Or if you don't even get OSAP, some people they need OSAP but they don't qualify. Like my roommate, her parents aren't even living in the country right now and because of her parents she can't get OSAP but she can't get that financial assistance from them so I mean that stresses her out (Focus Group 1, 2015).

Prioritizing schoolwork and free time was important to students and also sometimes a cause of their stress and anxiety. One issue with prioritizing is efficient time management like being able to know which assignment to work on first when more than one is due at the same time and



which assignments or exams to spend the most time on or knowing when it is okay to skip class, catching up on readings instead of going out or relaxing. One participant explains how they prioritize schoolwork as:

The funny thing with that is I definitely agree if I've been in class for 4 hours I'll come home and I'll watch a TV show online but as I'm watching a TV show I feel guilty because I feel I should be doing something else because how I prioritize it is student, staff, and then self (Focus Group 2, 2014).

Another participant suggests that:

I also think for me it's like trying to manage everything. I tend to try and prioritize what's the most important thing but they're all really important, like when you have 3 or 4 things due in the same amount of time when are you going to start working on them? (Focus Group 2, 2015).

*Self-related stress.* Self-related stress included things like volunteer commitments, feelings of guilt and not being able to relax. For many of the participants self-related stress included ways in which they de-stress or trying to fit in doctor appointments and other personal appointments, having time to go grocery shopping, missing parents, uncertainty about the future, and having a part time job. Many participants juggle both school and volunteer commitments which can sometimes cause them to experience feelings of stress. One participant describes this as:

Yeah, I have to agree with that because I do volunteer outside of school as well but because the place I volunteer at is in Toronto it makes it harder for me to balance that and I actually can't. So, I want to volunteer but I can't during the school year because of the stress of school because I know like if I take a day off to go volunteer with

them and have fun and do my interest I'll be a day behind in everything else and it just adds to the stress (Focus Group 1, 2014).

Even feelings of guilt regarding missing classes can also cause students to experience feelings of stress related to self. One participant describes this feeling as "Like being in my 4<sup>th</sup> year now, I feel so guilty when I miss a class. Like in first year I didn't really care but I feel so guilty when I miss a class now" (Focus Group 2, 2015). Another participant goes on to add about missing classes that that "You know it's important and you know you should be there" (Focus Group 1, 2014).

As students' progress throughout their academic years, even their future is something that also weighs heavily on their minds and causes students to experience feelings of stress. One student describes this as:

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

**De-stress.** A theme related to stress was how students de-stress. In other words, how they relieve stress. This includes things like having time to relax, going home and taking their mind off of school. One participant describes the fall break as helping them to de-stress, "Yeah it helped me de-stress cause you got to relax and didn't have to worry about school" (Focus Group 2, 2014)..

Another student describes how they de-stress as "Like lay on the couch watch wrestling for 3 hours that's how I de-stress" (Focus Group 1, 2016). Some participants relayed that going home is a way to de-stress. One participant likened this to, "Nothing like going home and having a home-cooked meal. That's a good stress reliever" (Focus Group 1, 2014).

**Coping strategies.** Some of the ways students coped with their stress was by giving themselves a reward, catching up on schoolwork, relaxing, practicing good time management skills and by balancing interests with schoolwork. For instance, having a drink or food they enjoyed for doing so many hours of

schoolwork, having free time where they did what they wanted, doing nothing, going home for holidays.

One participant describes their reward system as “I will watch TV for 2 hours if I felt like I did a good job studying” (Focus Group 1, 2016).

Another student states that:

So if I’ve had a really stressful week and I think I did really well on something I’ll reward myself with a Pepsi. I know that sounds really cheesy but because there’s so much going on at school right? If I’ve done like so much work in one week it’s just kind of that extra little reward you’re like ‘aww’ I can sit down and enjoy this and like take 5 minutes to myself and just cope (Focus Group 2, 2015).

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

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

Another participant discusses the how they use the combination of studying and hanging out with friends and family:

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

Practicing good time management skills was another way students coped. This included planning ahead, writing things in a calendar, doing readings early and staying on top of schoolwork. When asked how to deal with the stress of juggling school and a job and/or volunteer commitments,

time management was a way that students perceived helped them cope. For instance, in one exchange between participants during the focus group one student states that “I would say scheduling. Scheduling placement, school, work whatever else like extracurricular. It’s hard to balance everything” (Focus Group 1, 2014). And then another participant pipes in that “I mean I guess time management is a huge thing” (Focus Group 1, 2014).

Students also coped by balancing interests with schoolwork. Some ways they did this were to visit family and friends, do volunteer work or sports. For instance, one participant describes using balancing between school and extracurricular activities as a way to cope with stress as:

I think in terms of coping you have to balance between your interests and your Education. I think that balance comes more into perspective when you want to reward yourself. I will watch TV for 2 hours if I felt like I did a good job studying. That’s how I cope, by doing things I like (Focus Group 2, 2016).

Another way for students to cope is to have time for themselves or free time. To be able to make themselves important for free time or to go the doctor or take care of any other personal (non-school) related tasks.

I had a doctor’s appointment; I did things that I needed to do that I don’t necessarily have time to do during the regular week or that I have to squeeze in to at some point so I think it was beneficial in that sense that I concentrated on myself (Focus Group 3, 2016).

Related to free time are extracurricular activities that are important to students. They need time to do volunteer activities they enjoy and do by choice, not obligation. Students also like to have time to exercise or play sports or go to the gym. Going home, participating in holidays, and spending time with pets and friends are also activities that are important to students and help them de-stress. For instance one participant suggests that “the school related stress is getting all that work done to be able to do extracurricular” (Focus Group 2, 2016). Another participant enjoys spending time with their family and

friends. “My family’s like a big sports family, and we like to watch sports together. I spent a lot of time with my family, with my friends and with my dog” (Focus Group 2, 2015).

### **Faculty Interviews**

In all, there were 10 faculty who participated in the individual interviews. Faculty participants represented two professors that teach undergraduate courses in the fall term from each faculty of: Social Sciences, Applied Health Sciences, Humanities, Mathematics and Science and Goodman School of Business. Faculty interviews revealed one major theme called: impact; structure; timing. For the purposes of this research, only those themes that relate to impact and subsequent sub-themes of label and structure are included.

**Impact.** This theme represents the factors around the impact the fall break has had on student stress and anxiety. Faculty perceive the break as having both a positive and negative impact on student stress and anxiety with many benefits and drawbacks to the break. Participant G describes students getting a rest as a benefit of the break that helps to relieve student stress and anxiety.

The benefits are I guess the students seem to appreciate the mental break. So, assignments due here or there and then, you use it, for students to get their work done.

And then, you have a due date at the end of the break, so there are the rests, the physical and mental rest. And so, I think, its purpose is well-served, the mental break and the physical break is totally relevant and useful (2018).

Participant E also agrees that the break is beneficial for students but also for faculty themselves:

I think the break is an excellent idea if it's used properly by both faculty and students.

After a long summer off, and particularly for new students who are coming to university for the first time, they get hit hard in the jump from high school to

university. A break is a time for them to stop, take a breath, catch up on things that they might have not done, including those things that take longer, like reading your textbook or assigned papers or something and potentially getting caught up on work because of assignments or upcoming midterms, which jumps immediately to my second part of the question (2018).

Participant H describes that another benefit of the break is that it allows students to take time to digest what is expected of them in their course work, allowing them to understand what is expected of them and get organized for the rest of the semester and thereby relieving stress and anxiety.

The benefits certainly are, it's a mental health initiative to provide students with a Break in the early part of the year after they've found out all the things they need to do in their courses and have listened to the assignments. So I think it's useful in that respect, I think that's its main benefit (2018).

Some faculty participants perceived that a drawback of the break was that it has had no impact whatsoever on student mental health. Other faculty suggested that there have not been benefits or drawbacks from the break. Participant B suggests there have not been any noticeable benefits on student's mental health from the break.

I haven't really noticed any great benefits. So from a mental health perspective, I don't find that student's mental health is any better or that I haven't found, I haven't discerned anything mental health wise that's been patently beneficial (2018).

Participant A concurs that:

I think I've been out of first year for quite a while now so no, I don't have, and I don't notice any difference in our students. I mean everybody looks, I think everybody looks

forward to the break and then we move on and it's just the same as the spring reading week (2018).

Many faculty participants agreed that a drawback to the break is that it breaks the flow and/or momentum of the semester and this in turn can create stress and anxiety for students. Participant J describes this as:

From a learning point of view, I think it's actually detrimental, because most courses are even more different. Maybe it's different between level, like year one, two, but at the courses that I teach, we're really getting into the thick of things. It's sort of like if you've ever been jogging, you reach that, you reach a steady state and you just start, hit your pace, then somebody makes you stop to like to tie your shoe or something. And then it's really hard to get everybody up and running again, because people will check out, they don't use their break for what we think they would (2018).

Participant I agrees that:

Because five weeks in, you're just getting up to momentum. And I'm finding although the week between has helped students decompress, they didn't have the momentum in the course and it's almost like starting over (2018).

Another drawback of the break that some faculty perceived is that it condensed the semester and now faculty and students have less time to spread out assignments within the semester. Participant K likens this to:

So, I guess that would be a disadvantage, since the exam's might be more closely spaced together for students and the instructors, too, or that even the day to day schedule of exams might be, earlier or later exams, they're trying to compress more exams into the same period (2018).

More specifically, faculty perceived the condensed December timetable to cause stress and anxiety in students. Participant F describes this drawback:

The main drawback to the break, particularly the first couple years it was put in place, was it compressed the December exam schedule. That's my main concern, we're trying to have it all. I mean, if we're saying this is supposed to make it less stressful, well, we should make the semester less stressful. Not just say, okay, here's a week off and then, okay, we're going to make your life miserable at the end (2018).

Participant B concurs that:

It does shorten the time of December exams; it's detracted from what could be some good learning that can happen through an exam period. Where, if students have the time to dedicate to studying for each exam and they need a little bit of time to kind of have the space to really engage in exams and learn (2018).

*Label.* Within the theme of impact and in relation to both benefits and drawbacks of the fall break policy, two sub-themes emerged. The first sub-theme relates to how the break is labelled within the Brock institution. For instance, if the fall break is called "fall break", it has a different connotation than if it is called "Reading Week". Participant B likens this to:

See I approach it, I think, different from students. Where I see it as a reading week to work on things, so I will make due dates right after, I don't think that's how students use it. I think students use it to go home or they see it as a break or they see it as a time to work and make money. They see it as a time away from school versus a time of school. I think, fundamentally, I think of it as a week of school. So I think there's sort of a misunderstanding amongst everybody about what this week is really supposed to be (2018).



Moreover, Participant I questions:

This next question I would say with it, in relation to mental health is it a reading week or should we call it a break? Let's call it what we really mean by it, let's name it that way and I think that would be a very strong leadership perspective and personally I look forward to it. I still think a lot of faculty think of break as reading week (2018).

Faculty participants perceive that what students do on the break has an impact on their stress and anxiety and if the break is seen as a benefit or a drawback. For instance, some faculty perceive the break to be beneficial if students spend their time catching up. Participant B suggests that "It should be helping them catch up. Catch up on sleep, catch up on work, catch on whatever they're needing to catch up on" (2018).

On the other hand, some faculty perceive that if students do not use the break to catch up on schoolwork, this can be a drawback with a negative impact on student stress and anxiety.

Participant D describes this as:

So I think it actually, scheduling wise, is worse for the students unless they plan to use that full week to study, which they don't. They use it to take a break and travel. A lot of them are traveling and then I think that that is harder on them. I know that they would, as stressful as it is, they prefer to get things done before the break because they're going away, or having a relaxing break, and they don't want to use it to study (2018).

Part of this impact relates to how students and faculty perceive the policy as either a fall break or a Reading Week, this correlates with how the University labels the policy. Participant A relays this confusion as "I would say most of them go back home and or some of them go on vacation, very much like the spring break. So I don't actually think a lot of them actually spend reading week reading" (2018). Participant B goes on further to say that:

I think for a student who's maybe just coming here for the first year, maybe they live far away, it's a chance for them to go home and visit family and that's really important to have that opportunity. I think students use it to go home or they see it as a break or they see it as a time to work and make money. They see it as a time away from school versus a time of school (2018).

*Structure.* A second sub-theme that emerged relates to structure. Structure can be the type of course, how a course is set up, the level of the course, the length of the course, the Faculty the course is in and most importantly, when assignments and due dates are placed within a course. All of these things have an impact on student mental health and whether faculty perceive the break as being a benefit or a drawback. For instance, Participant H describes a structure related drawback of the break as:

I think some of the drawbacks is it puts pressures on programs, especially the teacher education around the fall, when we're trying to fit a lot in. And so it takes a week out, and that causes problems to the point where we've started the program in August (2018).

Other faculty participants have suggested that the fall break has impacted how they structure their courses and the due dates they place on assignments. Participant D suggests that:

It didn't, but whenever each year when I go through and align things the fall break happens at a weird time and it moves times, and so I'll have to move when the exam is around the time of the break (2018).

Participant E agrees that:

I make it my policy never to have a midterm on the week back after the reading break, because I figure that just blew the water out of the reason for having a break. So the break has become a place where people are expected to be preparing for things on the first week

they get back. I know students will complain that they have three mid-terms in one week on Monday through Tuesday, or Tuesday/Wednesday on the first week back. And I often don't have people in classes because they're preparing for midterms because they got crunched on that time (2018).

Participant D goes on to suggest that the pile up of assignments before and after the break cause stress and anxiety in students “And so you hear the students being stressed before the break and right after the break with their assignments” (2018).

### **Discussion**

Overall, findings from this study indicate that the majority of student participants perceive the break to reduce their stress. Compared to previous years before the break, students strongly agree that the break reduces stress. In each year of data collection an improvement across student responses can be seen, indicating that in each year of the break more students are in favour of the break and perceive there to be less stress and anxiety as a result of the break. Students like the timing of break, even with revised December exam schedule. Moreover, overall, workload and correlated stress do not significantly increase before or after the break and these responses also improve in each year of data collection. Overall the majority of faculty also think the break is beneficial to student's mental health. While there seems to be a disconnect with students' perceptions as some faculty perceive the break to cause some students stress and anxiety as a result of a condensed December exam timetable and a condensed semester and so are not completely sure if the break is beneficial, the majority of faculty agreed that it is also beneficial for students to have that week off from classes and would not want to see the fall break taken away. Table sixteen represents the fall break policy evaluation in relation to the last stage of Howlett and Ramesh's (1995) policy cycle.

Table 16

Fall break policy evaluation in relation to the last stage of the policy cycle.

Stage in Policy	Phase of applied problem solving	What worked	What didn't work
Policy evaluation	Monitoring results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived benefit</li> </ul>	Lack of baseline data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only three years of data collection</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Five stages of the policy cycle and their relationship to applied problem solving. Howlett and Ramesh, 1995)

The literature is replete with evidence suggesting post-secondary students have higher levels of stress (Adlaf et al., 2001; Mostafaei, 2012; Stallman, 2010). This is not surprising given the significant demands in university and college (Hartley, 2011). A common theme in the literature is that university and college students have unique mental health issues, resulting in this group reporting the highest occurrences of mental health problems and/or illnesses (Hussain, Guppy, Robertson, & Temple, 2013; Wagner & Young, 2013). In particular there is evidence to suggest that undergraduate students experience the highest prevalence in the population of depression (Eisenberg et al., 2007).

It is well established that there is a relationship between academic performance and health (El, 2010). Mental health disorders and perceived level of positive mental health are related to both suicide behaviour and poor academic performance (Keyes et al., 2012; Tremblay, et al., 2008). There is also a wide array of information on effective and/or recommended promotion and prevention strategies to help students deal with stress. Some of these include: early interventions (Stallman, 2010), stress prevention and management techniques (Alzahem, Van der Molen, De Boer, 2013; Cherkil, Gardens, & Soman, 2013), creating positive experiences (Bono, Glomb, Shen, Kim, & Koch, 2013), increased physical activity (VanKim & Nelson, 2013); skill-oriented programs (Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013); coping skills coursework (Pereira, 2008);

increased counseling and support services (Amritha, Srikanth, Srivatsa, Thirunaukarasu, & Susiganeshkumar, 2013). None of these are global, passive, interventions such as a fall break.

The prevalence and severity of mental health issues is increasing across Ontario post-secondary campuses (Canada Newswire, 2012). This suggests that university and college students are an emerging high-risk population (Stallman, 2010). Policies for effective interventions based on empirical evidence for success are a priority. It is important for Ontario universities and their communities to realize the seriousness of the mental health issues faced by their students and to understand the impact they can have on students' mental health (Canada Newswire, 2012). In an attempt to reduce stress of undergraduate students, many universities and colleges have implemented a policy for a break in the fall semester. While this break varies by length and placement within the semester what is consistent in every case is that the policy was implemented in the absence of evidence to indicate if it is either necessary or potentially effective. This presents an enormous dilemma when evaluating the policy. The single greatest challenge in evaluating the effect of a fall break policy on the mental health of undergraduate students is the lack of baseline data from previous cohorts without a mid-term break. In the absence of such data, it is difficult to establish causality between changes – if any and in what direction- resulted to students' mental health status from the implementation of the fall break policy.

### **Policy Evaluation**

Policy evaluation is an important step in the policy process as this is where policy learning occurs. This learning gives an indication of the success or failure of said policy (Howlett et al., 2009). From this learning, policy revisions and possibly new decisions may occur. Any policy evaluation raises questions of how we measure and what should we look at? Is it inherently vital

to the success or failure of a policy that evaluation constantly occurs? “This conception not only helps to make sense of policy evaluation and removes it from the narrow technocratic concerns characteristic of administrative evaluation, but also helps to identify the different learning styles that can emerge in the evaluative process and their propensities to contribute to different types of policy outcomes and dynamics” (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 195). Yet, policies in post-secondary institutions are often implemented without evidence of their need or effectiveness. While the fall break policy was implemented this way as well, this post-hoc evaluation has added to the policy learning that influenced the decision making to maintain the fall break policy.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While learning from this research has led to policy recommendations, it is not without limitations. Any research done post-hoc is at risk for recall bias. In order to mitigate this, surveys and focus groups were conducted a short time after the fall break fell in each year of data collection. Another possible limitation could be self-report perceptions of stress. Future research should include using diagnostic criteria for DSM or tested/standard measurement tools, tests or measures of mental health. Moreover, this research did not examine diverse sub-populations or address priority populations such as international and Aboriginal students. These populations might have unique student stress and anxiety. Future research should include these populations to give a broader scope of the impact the fall break policy has on student’s mental health. Finally, future research should be done to evaluate if there is a correlation of visits to student services related to mental health and student retention by examining these records from years before and after the break.

### **Policy Implications**

In order to establish whether a fall break would be a reasonable and effective policy to

reduce student stress and anxiety, evidence about the causes of that stress, in relation to the structure of a semester, is required (Pilato et al., OGPRC, 2014). Once the ebb and flow of stress/anxiety levels relative to the varying demands of the term are understood, an effective response could be designed, and implemented with its effect scrutinized. The present response of inserting a break in classes at mid-term, with no constraints on the scheduling of known acute stressors such as exam and assignments, is arbitrary and almost impossible to determine if effective. In effect, it is akin to using a very blunt object to solve a multi-faceted problem. Comprehensive evidence about any policy to support the mental health of students requires a range of indicators to be determined prior to implementation. In the absence of data collected ad hoc, an analysis of data from historical sources is required – hospital admissions, reported mental-illness, drop-out rates, course withdrawal rates, along with post-hoc reports from students who experienced a fall term with no break (Pilato et al., 2014, OGPRC). Continued evaluation is needed to determine if indeed the fall break policy is the best policy for relieving student stress and anxiety as per its intention. While students perceive the break to have a positive impact on their school related stress and anxiety, it is not without problems. Though the institution recognized the need to support students relieve their stress and anxiety in the fall semester, the solution appeared to be reactive as opposed to proactive and lacked clarity that lead to confusion around how the break should be spent and was ultimately experienced by both faculty and students.

The timing of the break fluctuates based on when Thanksgiving falls, thus it is important to constantly evaluate policies and to iteratively go back and forth so the policy evolves with changing times. Moreover, both faculty and students perceived the label of the break to cause confusion as to how the time during the break in the fall semester should be spent and this ultimately affected how students experienced the break. How you label the break has an impact

on how each faculty thinks the break should be spent and how students think the break should be spent and ultimately, how the break is experienced by students and their perceptions. There seems to be a disconnect with students' and faculty's perceptions, as some faculty perceive the break to cause some students stress and anxiety as a result of a condensed December exam timetable and a condensed semester. While these faculty are not completely sure if the break is beneficial, the majority of faculty agreed that it is also beneficial for students to have that week off from classes and would not want to see the fall break taken away. There is also some confusion with how the time during break should be spent. Again, there seems to be a disconnect from faculty and students on how to spend the break. Faculty see it as a time for students to catch up on schoolwork but the majority of students spent the break relaxing/vacationing. From the first year of the three-year pilot to the third, where Thanksgiving week fell in the semester changed from directly in the middle to five weeks in the semester. While the surveys revealed that students like break where it is, the focus groups and faculty interviews revealed that the timing breaks the momentum but that it also makes sense to have it during Thanksgiving week. Moreover, how courses are structured and where assignments fall within the semester have an impact on how students experience the break and this ultimately has an impact on whether the break positively impacts their mental health.

Finally, the focus groups revealed key insights into understanding stress and coping among university students about how students like to de-stress that have practical implications that should be considered in any policy aimed at promoting students' mental wellness.

### **Publication**

This manuscript will be submitted to the following academic journal: Canadian Journal of Higher Education. (<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe>)



## Chapter Eight: Final Discussion

### Discussion

This case study investigation into mental health policy in post-secondary education utilized a case study methodology and a conceptual framework informed by constructive theoretical assumptions. Case study methodology allowed the researchers to understand the shared meanings of the fall break at Brock University through an appraisal of the policy that represented the perspectives of students, faculty and policy makers (Yin, 2014). In particular, an embedded single intrinsic evaluative case study approach was used to explain the single instrumental case Brock's post-secondary institutional policy of having a break in the fall to reduce stress among its undergraduate student's policy process (Cresswell, 2013). Hence, the fall break policy at Brock was evaluated by examining the units of the policy cycle and included different levels of data collection and analyses at each level of policy appraisal using both quantitative and qualitative data sources (Yin, 2014). As such, the fall break policy at Brock was appraised against Howlett et al.'s (2009) stages in the policy cycle that include formulation, implementation and evaluation. The policy process was examined and possible policy alternatives were derived. The overarching research objectives were: 1) To provide a post policy implementation analysis from a critical analysis lens to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy development and implementation in relation to what is known about best practices for policy development and implementation (Paper #1 and #2) and 2); to appraise whether a policy for "fall break week", in fact, does reduce students' stress and anxiety for university students (Paper #3). Explanation building was used to analyze data from surveys, documents, focus groups, faculty and informant interviews on rival explanations, offering policy implications and alternatives on the fall break policy at Brock (Yin, 2014).

This research was presented as three papers with multiple sources of evidence collected, analyzed and triangulated as follows:

**Paper One.** Paper one appraised the formulation of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose was to provide a post policy implementation analysis from a critical analysis lens to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy development in relation to what is known about best practices for policy development. Paper one analyzed quantitative data from the BUSU surveys and qualitative data from documents and an informant interview. This allowed for rich, thick data to be obtained. Data was triangulated in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) formation stage of the policy cycle. Ultimately, policy decisions were based on many different considerations and support for the rationale for the break. Many different policy actors were involved in these decisions. However, the policy users were not necessarily engaged in policy creation and this is a design flaw. Brock needed to include voices of those impacted by the break in the creation, namely students and faculty. Their voices were included in providing justification for the break but not in its design and this perhaps, had an impact on policy creation. How the break is labelled is also important to consider in the creation stage. Confusion about what the break is called adds to confusion about how break should be used. If it is a break, this has different connotations than reading week and this can have an impact on how the break is experienced. Implementation considerations were part of the policy decisions for the policy creation too. This is also an important consideration in the creation stage of the policy cycle. Decision makers wanted to put the break where it would be least disruptive to students and discussed the best time for and placement of the break in the fall semester, however, did not take into consideration the fluctuation of when Thanksgiving falls within the semester from year to year. Moreover, while

evaluation was included in policy decisions for a three-year pilot, this may not be an accurate representation of the impact the policy has on student mental health.

**Paper two.** Paper Two appraised the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose was to provide a post policy implementation analysis using a critical analysis lens perspective to compare, contrast and evaluate the policy implementation. Data included a range of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that included both realist and interpretive perspectives (Yin, 2014). Paper Two analyzed quantitative data from the fall break surveys and qualitative data from documents, the fall break Focus Groups, Faculty and Informant Interviews in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) implementation stage of the policy cycle. Data was triangulated and provided explanation for the implementation of the fall break policy at Brock. Timing of the fall break had an impact on how students and faculty experienced the break and thus influenced perceptions on the impact that the break had on student mental health. The timing changed each year from first year to now. The timing of the policy made sense the first year but post implementation, faculty report that the timing breaks up momentum in the course and how the course is structured. This is true for students too. In the first year of data collection, students liked the timing of the break and while overall, across all three years of data collection, students liked the timing of the break. In the focus groups with students we started to hear students say that the break came too soon in the semester and that it broke up the momentum. However, the majority of students still liked the timetable the way it is, even with a condensed December exam schedule.

**Paper three.** Paper Three appraised the evaluation of the fall break policy at Brock. The purpose was to appraise whether a policy for fall break week, in fact, does reduce students' stress and anxiety for university students in the absence of baseline data. This paper used both

qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence to collect self-report data on mental health outcomes associated with the fall break. Data from the fall break surveys provided quantitative evidence on the impact of the fall break policy. Focus group data from the fall break Focus Groups was used to provide qualitative evidence aimed at uncovering students' lived experience of the fall break, in the context of how the fall break influenced mental health as a means of evaluating the fall break policy at Brock. Faculty interview data was also analyzed to provide contextual information on faculty perceptions on the impact of the fall break policy. Data was triangulated and provided explanation on the impact of the fall break policy in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) evaluation stage of the policy cycle. Lack of baseline evidence made it difficult to evaluate the impact of the break on student mental health. The single greatest challenge in evaluating the effect of a fall break policy on the mental health of undergraduate students is the lack of baseline data from previous cohorts without a mid-term break. In the absence of such data, it is difficult to establish causality between changes – if any and in what direction- resulted to students' mental health status from the implementation of the fall break policy. Even still, thus far the majority of students like the break, want to keep the break and perceive that it has a positive impact on their mental health. Participants from the BUSU survey (before the break, 2012/2013) to the fall break survey year one (after the break, 2013/2014) were comparable in terms of year of study, which is useful to help establish a baseline. In the fall break survey year two (after the break, 2014/2015) the overall number participants increased from the previous year. This is reflected in each year of study. Moreover, our initial results suggest that believed stress reduction prior to experiencing the fall break is also comparable to perceived stress reduction after experiencing the break. In other words, before the implementation of the break students reported that having a break would relieve their stress and

anxiety and post implementation, students reported that the break did reduce stress and anxiety for most students.

However, there seems to be a disconnect with students’ and faculty’s perceptions, as some faculty perceive the break to cause some students stress and anxiety as a result of a condensed December exam timetable and a condensed semester. While these faculty are not completely sure if the break is beneficial, the majority of faculty agreed that it is also beneficial for students to have that week off from classes and would not want to see the fall break taken away. There is also some confusion with how the time during break should be spent. Again, there seems to be a disconnect from faculty and students on how to spend the break. Faculty see it as a time for students to catch up on schoolwork but the majority of students spent the break relaxing/vacationing. Finally, from the first year of the three-year pilot to the third, where Thanksgiving week fell in the semester changed from directly in the middle to five weeks in the semester. While the surveys revealed that students like break where it is, the focus groups and faculty interviews revealed that the timing breaks the momentum but that it also makes sense to have it during Thanksgiving week.

**Policy Implications**

When analyzed in relation to Howlett et al.’s (2009) policy cycle, triangulated data from all three papers revealed that the fall break policy at Brock was created with good intentions.

Table seventeen represents analysis from all three papers in relation these five stages.

Table 17  
Fall break policy appraisal in relation to the policy cycle.

Stages in policy cycle	Phases of applied problem solving	What worked	What didn’t work
Agenda setting	Problem recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need policies aimed at student mental health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is this the best policy?</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does this policy relieve student stress and anxiety?</li> </ul>
Policy formulation	Proposal of solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fall break policy</li> <li>• Right policy instruments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy alternatives not considered</li> <li>• No policy model/framework</li> </ul>
Decision-making	Choice of solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various policy actors involved in decision making</li> <li>• Many considerations were weighed</li> <li>• Practical evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not based on scientific evidence</li> <li>• Label changes</li> <li>• Policy users not engaged</li> </ul>
Policy implementation	Putting solution into Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation evaluation</li> <li>• Motivated and compliant</li> <li>• Right policy actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing changes</li> <li>• Placement questioned by faculty and students</li> <li>• No policy alternatives</li> </ul>
Policy evaluation	Monitoring results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived benefit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of baseline data</li> <li>• Only three years of data collection</li> </ul>

Five stages of the policy cycle and their relationship to applied problem solving (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995).

**Interrelated.** The policy cycle is iterative, and we can see this was an iterative process in the fall break policy. The issues in the policy creation inevitably had an impact on implementation and evaluation. This is a cyclical relationship and we saw this with our policy. During its creation, how to label the break became an issue and this in turn effected how the students and faculty understood the break and ultimately experienced the break and how and when it was implemented. In turn, how students experienced the break had an impact on their perceptions on the impact of the break on student stress and anxiety. The context of university players (administrators and other policy makers) and consumers (faculty and students) changes and so should policies change or grow and journey in context to those policy actors and users at the time. Evidence would have helped influence the decisions in the creation stage and could

have avoided implementation issues as well. Thus, while the institution recognized the need to support students to relieve their stress and anxiety in the fall semester, the solution appeared to be reactive as opposed to proactive and lacked clarity that lead to confusion around how the break should be spent and was ultimately experienced by both faculty and students. As such, mental health policies are not always reflective of the people the policies are intended to help. Sometimes mental health policies in post-secondary education settings are ineffective due to a lack of evidence-based initiatives that students actually use (Bartee & Kelly, 1978). Nonetheless, evidence based on research leads to more choice of well-informed policy alternatives (Hanney et al., 2003). It is all inter-related. University policies and the way a professor teaches, and the assignments and the way the course is structured, all have an impact on student stress and anxiety.

**Label.** The label of the fall break policy has changed from creation to each year of implementation. Initially it was called fall break week, but then it was called fall reading week and was listed on the academic calendar as such. How you label the break has an impact on how each faculty thinks the break should be spent and how students think the break should be spent and ultimately, how the break is experienced by students and their perceptions of its impact. Both faculty and students perceived the label of the break to cause confusion as to how the time during the break in the fall semester should be spent and this ultimately affected how students experienced the break. The label has different connotations and we can see this reflected in students from first year, not knowing what to do with the break, to faculty thinking it is intended for students to catch up on work. Hence, there is a bit of a disconnect between faculty and students on what the break is meant for and this is a design issue that also effects implementation and evaluation. If it is meant to be a break and students are using it to catch up, if they have no

down time, then it is not a break. Moreover, how students spend the break can have an impact on stress and anxiety and their mental health and thus, we cannot dictate what that means for each student. Either way, it is clear that both faculty and students do not want to lose the break. This begs the question of how do we make a policy that impacts all students or majority of students positively then? At the very least the intention of the fall break policy needs to be clearly articulated across the university, with some direction provided as to this intention for both faculty and students, while recognizing that this may be tricky as the university cannot dictate how to run professor's courses. As we saw in this research though, what you label the break can cause confusion and has an impact on how each professor thinks break should be spent and how students think the break should be spent.

**Timing and placement.** The timing of the break created policy issues during the implementation and evaluation stages that could have been mitigated in the creation stage. The policy made sense the first year of implementation, but in each year thereafter both faculty and students relay concerns over the timing of the break and the placement within the semester. Faculty and students were not really included in the creation discussions around the timing of the break and in turn, five years post implementation faculty and students do not necessarily like the timing of the break. For both faculty and some students, their perceptions are that the timing breaks up momentum in the course. This is a policy implication. The timing has an impact on how courses are structured and when assignments are due. Moreover, how courses are structured and where assignments fall have an impact on how students experience the break, where the break falls has an impact on how courses are structured and where assignments fall and this has an impact on students stress and anxiety as evidenced by some students reporting that their workload and stress went up either directly before or after the break. Thus, the timing of the



break needs to go where it will have the most impact on students' stress and anxiety. However, overall faculty like the break, think students can use the break and don't want to see the break gone, while the majority of students like the timing of the break where it is. It is important then, to constantly evaluate policies and to iteratively go back and forth so the policy evolves with changing times. While Senate used the three year pilot assessment of the break to solidify its implementation as a formal policy, we saw differences in how the break was experienced by faculty and students beyond those three years.

**Continued and updated evaluation.** As part of the policy process, evaluation needs to iteratively happen during the life of the policy (Howlett et al., 2009). Failure to properly evaluate the policy can have an impact on the life of the policy (Weimer & Vining, 2011). While evaluation was designed during the creation stage of the fall break policy, it was only evaluated for the first three years piloted and this evidence was used to base decisions to implement the fall break as a formal policy. However, this evaluation of the fall break policy revealed that there is a bit of a discrepancy between the data collected in the first three years post implementation to five years post implementation. As the context of university players and consumers changed so should the policies change or grow in context to those policy actors and users at the time. Further evaluation presented to decision makers would have encompassed the policy changes that include the context of the policy and those changing policy actors involved. As part of the iterative policy process we can see that evaluation should have continued, as now there are problems with the timing of the break. Thus, it is inherently vital to the success or failure of a policy that evaluation constantly occurs (Howlett et al., 2009). As the policy naturally evolves so can decision makers change, students change and campus climate can also change with a new evolving focus on mental wellness initiatives, student mental health may also evolve and so will

mental health policies and implementation issues. At the very least it is important to re-evaluate the policy every few years to make sure the policy is still effective and successful.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The fall break policy lacked any baseline data to suggest the utility of its creation aside from practical evidence from students and those policy actors involved in its formulation. Future research of the creation of mental health policies in higher education should include baseline data as this research can have an important role in policy formation (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Another limitation is that data that was only collected from students the first three years of the policy and as the ebb and flow of the semester changed as a result of the break, so did the timing in relation to calendar year and when Thanksgiving falls. Future research of this mental health policy in higher education should further investigate the best timing of the break in order to provide optimal outcomes for student mental wellness. At the time of this research, there was a challenge in obtaining student mental health records internally, including student health services usage, reported mental-illness, drop-out rates and course withdrawal rates. Future research should investigate these in relation to the fall break policy. Collecting baseline evidence prior to policy creation and implementation would help in determining if the policy has a positive impact on students' stress and anxiety. It is difficult to go back and collect data post-hoc and puts the research at risk for recall bias as students had to think back to their stress levels before and after the break. Policies for effective interventions based on empirical evidence for success should be a priority. Future research should examine empirical evidence about the utility of a fall break policy as part of the policy decisions during the creation stage.

Moreover, only one informant participant agreed to participate in this research. Perhaps if more informants agreed to participate, their collective voices could help to more fully capture how the fall break policy was created. Furthermore, this research does not explain the impact that the label has on how students perceive the impact of the break. Future research should explore the impact of how the policy is labelled has on how students and faculty understand and ultimately experience the break. Finally, this research offers no insight into if the fall break policy has an impact on retention. Future research could examine if there is a link between the positive impact of the fall break on student mental health and retention.

### **Key Insights**

Stress and anxiety have a significant impact on students' mental health (Mostafaei, 2012). Research suggests that post-secondary students may experience particularly higher levels of stress with unique mental health issues and report high incidences of mental health problems (Adalf et al., 2001; Hussain et al., 2013; Wagner & Yeong, 2013). More specifically, research indicates that undergraduate students experience the highest prevalence of depression (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Although the fall break was intended to support students' mental well-being, it does not necessarily address mental illness and depression experienced by some students. There are significant demands in post-secondary education that include "high stakes academic pressure, minimal academic support, potential social isolation and long term financial debt" (Hartely, 2011, p. 596). While the fall break policy was implemented to relieve student stress and anxiety, it did little to address those substantial demands experienced by students that have been stated by Hartely (2011). For some students, the break actually created more academic pressure and stress instead of its intended purpose to minimize school related stress. Moreover, since the majority of students did not spend any days on campus during the break, the policy did little to provide

students with the academic support they need. Not to mention for those students who were not able to go home over the break, this could have potentially isolated them even further.

Although the prevalence, severity and persistence of mental health issues is increasing across post-secondary campuses, there is limited research on university-initiated interventions that alleviate school related stress and there is essentially no empirical evidence to support that supposition. While they may be well intentioned, mental health policies in higher education are not always applicable for those they are meant to help. Evidence based policies need to be formulated so that they align the interests of the individual users and policy makers (Teghtsoonian, 2009) in order to be effective. It is clear that student mental health is a priority in post-secondary institutions across Canada and there is an increasing responsibility for post-secondary institutions to create and implement effective policies aimed at relieving student stress and anxiety. This is further reflected in that many post-secondary institutions have created mental health policies as part of a larger, broad, sweeping mental health strategy across their campuses.

These insights come from a researcher perspective, and it is clear that creating policies aimed at reducing stress and anxiety for post-secondary students is not an easy task. There are internal and external pressures that can influence the policy decisions made throughout the creation, implementation and evaluation stages of these policies. Yet, many post-secondary institutions have implemented a policy for a fall break without any evidence to support its effectiveness. Appraisals of mental health policies aimed at reducing school related stress and anxiety in post-secondary students can help provide evidence based on research that offer post-secondary institutions more choice of well-informed policy alternatives (Hanney et al., 2003).

**Overall Reflections**

Taking into consideration that this research was funded through an internal university grant, this research has both a theoretical and a practical conclusion regarding the utility of a fall break policy in higher education . While the evidence here provided data on whether or not to formally implement the fall break policy, the policy cycle was not entirely reflective of well-established policy processes. Thus the conflicts faced by researchers and those policy administrators making policy decisions for creating and implementing the policy became clear. The researcher believed that analyzing the fall break policy cycle from the creation, implementation and evaluation perspective would provide guidance for the success or failure of the policy. However, in conducting this research through the co-construction of knowledge with the policy decision makers and users, the enormity of the task of addressing student mental health and reality of the way in which policies are created and implemented in post-secondary campuses became fervently clear. In the end, it is the researcher's position that while the fall break policy may not be entirely practical, the policy actors truly cared about the mental well-being of its students and policy decisions were made with this at the forefront.

### References

- Adlaf, E. M., Gliksman, L., Demers, A., & Newton-Taylor, B. (2001). The prevalence of elevated psychological distress among Canadian undergraduates: Findings from the 1998 Canadian Campus Survey. *Journal of American College Health, 50*(2), 67-72.
- Alzahem, A. M., Van der Molen, H. T., & De Boer, B. J. (2013). Effect of year of study on stress levels in male undergraduate dental students. *Advances in Medical Education & Practice, 4*, 217-222.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.) DSM-5*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.) DSM-5 and diagnoses for children*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- American Psychiatric Association. (n.d.). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: Cultural Disorders*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Amritha, K., Srikanth, S., & Srivatsa, V. G. (2013). Stressful life events: Effect on mental health of medical students. *Indian Journal of Medical Specialties, 4*(2), 254-258.
- Analysis. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster online*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Angermeyer, M. C., Holzinger, A., & Matschinger, H. (2009). Mental health literacy and attitude towards people with mental illness: A trend analysis based on population surveys in the eastern part of Germany. *European Psychiatry, 24*, 225-232.

- Annells, M. (1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology: philosophical perspectives and current use in nursing research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 23, 705-713.
- Appraisal. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster online*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Atieno, O. P. (2009). An analysis of the strengths and limitation of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 13, 13-17.
- Azline, A., Khairul Anuar, A., Iszaid, I., Syahira, S., Hisham Awad, A., & Muhamad Hanafiah, J. (2018). Policy arena of health policy-making process in developing countries. *International Journal of Public Health and Clinical Sciences*, 5(3), 32-48.
- Bardach, E. (2012). *A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press/Sage.
- Bartee, E. M., Kelly, J. M., Vanderbilt University., Nashville, TN, & Owen Graduate School of Management, Center for Research on Human Service Systems (1978). *Rethinking Mental Health Policy*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Baum, F., & Friel, S. (2017). Politics, policies and processes: A multidisciplinary and multimethods research programme on policies on the social determinants of health inequity in Australia. *BMJ Open*, 7(12), 1. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.brocku.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=127161483&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, (4), 544.
- Blackwell, T. (2015, July 20). As media coverage of suicides becomes more common, debate rages over whether that is a positive change. *National Post*. Retrieved from

- <http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/as-media-coverage-of-suicides-becomes-more-common-debate-rages-whether-that-is-a-positive-change#>
- Bono, J. E., Glomb, T. M., Shen, W., Kim, E., & Koch, A. J. (2013). Building positive resources: Effects of positive events and positive reflection on work stress and health. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(6), 1601-1627.
- Bowtell, E. C., Sawyer, S. M., & Rosalie, A. A. (2013). Should I send a condolence card? Promoting emotional safety in qualitative health research through reflexivity and ethical mindness. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19(9), 652-663.
- Brock University (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.brocku.ca>
- Buchanan, J. L. (2012). Prevention of depression in the college student population: A review of the literature. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 26(1), 21-42.
- Burke, J. G., Lich, K. H., Neal, J. W., Meissner, H. I., Yonas, M., & Mabry, P. L. (2015). Enhancing dissemination and implementation research using systems science methods. *International Journal of Behaviour Medicine*, 22, 283-291.
- Byrd, D. R. & McKinney, K. J. (2012). Individual, interpersonal, and institutional level factors associated with the mental health of college students. *Journal of American College Health*, 60(3), 185-193.
- Campbell, M., Fitzpatrick, R., Kinmonth, A., Sandercock, P., Peter, S., Spiegelhalter, D., & Tyrer, P. (2000). Framework for design and evaluation of complex interventions to improve health. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, (7262), 694.
- Canadian Health Promoting Campuses (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://healthpromotingcampuses.squarespace.com>



- Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) (2018). *What is mental health?* Retrieved from <https://cmha.ca/about-cmha/frequently-asked-questions>
- Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Ontario. (2018). *Workplace mental health promotion: What is mental health and mental illness?* Retrieved from <http://wmhp.cmhaontario.ca/workplace-mental-health-core-concepts-issues/what-is-mental-health-and-mental-illness>
- Canada Newswire. (2012). Fostering good mental health across Ontario's campuses is vital to college students' success. *Canada Newswire*. Retrieved from <http://www.newswire.ca>.
- Carneiro, P., Crawford, C., & Goodman, A. (2007). The Impact of Early Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills on Later Outcomes. *IDEAS Working Paper Series from RePEc*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1698184873/>
- Carter, S. M., & Little, M. (2007). Justifying knowledge, justifying method, taking action: Epistemologies, methodologies, and methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1316-1328.
- Centre for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2006). The current status of mental health in schools: a policy and practice analysis. *Centre for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA*.
- Chen, F., & Stevens, R. (2017). Applying lessons from behavioral economics to increase flu vaccination rates. *Health Promotion International*, 32, 1067-1073. Doi: 10.1093/heapro/daw031
- Cherkil, S., Gardens, S., & Soman, D. K. (2013). Coping styles and its association with sources of stress in undergraduate medical students. *Indian Journal of*

- Psychological Medicine*, 35(4), 389-393.
- Clancy, M. (2013). Is reflexivity the key to minimizing problems of interpretation in phenomenological research? *Nurse Researcher*, 20(6), 12-16.
- College Student Alliance. (2012). Policy Paper: Mental health in Ontario's post-secondary education system. Retrieved from <https://www.collegestudentalliance.ca/>
- Conley, C. S., Durlak, J. A., & Dickson, D. A. (2013). An evaluative review of outcome Research on universal mental health promotion and prevention programs for higher education students. *Journal of American College Health*, 61(5), 286-301.
- Cranford, J. A., Eisenberg, D., Serras, A. M. (2009). Substance use behaviors, mental health problems, and use of mental health services in a probability sample of college students. *Addictive Behaviors*, 34, 134-145.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : choosing among five approaches (3rd ed.)*. Los Angeles : SAGE Publications, c2013.
- Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (2003a). The foundations of social research. *Meaning and Perspectives in the Research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (2003b). Constructionism: The making of meaning. In *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Daley, K. J. (2007a). Paths of inquiry for qualitative research. In *Qualitative Methods for family studies and human development* (pp. 43-60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daley, K. J. (2007b). Positioning the self: Role of considerations and practices of reflexivity. In *Qualitative methods for family studies and human development* (pp. 187-207). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeLeon, P. H. & Williams, J. G. (1997). Evaluation research and public policy formation. *The American Psychologist*, 52(5), 551-552.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *The handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Deutsch, N. L. (2004). Positionality and the pen: Reflections on the process of becoming a feminist researcher and writer. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(6), 885-902.
- De Welde, K., & Stepnick, A. (2015). *Disrupting the culture of silence: confronting gender inequality and making change in higher education*. Stylus Pub. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00778a&AN=bu.b2820089&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- DiPlacito-DeRango, M. (2016). Acknowledge the barriers to better the Practices: Support for Student Mental Health in Higher Education. *Canadian Journal For The Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, 7(2), 1-12.
- Dobrow, M. J., Goel, V., & Upshur, R.E.G. (2004). Evidence-based health policy: context and utilisation. *Social Science & Medicine*, 58, 207-217.
- Dobrow, M. J., Goel, V., Lemieux-Charles, L., & Black, N. A. (2006). The impact of context on evidence utilization: expert groups developing health policy recommendations. *Social Science & Medicine*, 63, 1811-1824.

Donatelle, R. J. & Thompson, A. M. (2011). Psychosocial health. In B. Faught and Madelyn Law (Eds.). *Health: the basics (5th ed.)* (pp.). Toronto, ON: Pearson Canada.

Doyle, S. (2007). Member checking with older women: A framework for negotiating meaning. *Health Care for Women International*, 28, 888-908.

Dupuis, S. L. (1999). Naked truths: Towards a reflexive methodology in leisure research. *Leisure sciences: An interdisciplinary journal*, 21(1), 43-64.

Eisenberg, D., Gollust, S. E., Golberstein, E., & Hefner, J. L. (2007). Prevalence and correlates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among university students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 77(4), 534-542.

El, A. W. (2010). Is the health and wellbeing of university students associated with their academic performance? Cross sectional findings from the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 7(2), 509-527.

Elwood, J. (2013). The role(s) of student voice in 14-19 education policy reform: reflections on consultation and participation. *London Review of Education*, 11(2), 97-111. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2013.799807>.

Field, B., Booth, A., Ilott, I., & Gerrish, K. (2014). Using the knowledge to action framework in practice: A citation analysis and systematic review. *Implementation Science*, 9(172), 1-14.

Fine, J.G., & Davis, J.M. (2003). Grade retention and enrollment in post-secondary education. *Journal of School Psychology*, 41(6), 401-411.

Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 209-230.

- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 36, 717-732.
- Franklin, C., Kim, J., Ryan, T., Kelly, M., & Montgomery, K. (2012). Teacher involvement in school mental health interventions: a systematic review. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 34(5), 973-982.
- French, R. & Oreopoulos, P. (2017). Applying behavioural economics to public policy in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 50(3), 599-635.
- Goffin, P. (2017, August 12). How many post-secondary students die by suicide each year? No one knows for sure. *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/08/12/how-many-ontario-post-secondary-students-die-by-suicide-each-year-no-one-knows-for-sure.html>
- Guba, E. C. (1990). The alternative paradigm dialog. In Guba, E. C. (Ed.). *The paradigm dialog* (pp. 17-27). London, UK: Sage.
- Guba, E. C., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), (pp. 191-215). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hanney, S. R., Gonzalez-Block, M. A., Buxton, M. J., & Kogan, M. (2003). The utilisation of health research in policy-making: concepts, examples and methods of assessment. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 1(2) 1-28.
- Hartley, M. T. (2011). Examining the relationships between resilience, mental health and academic persistence in undergraduate college students. *Journal of American College Health*, 59(7), 596-604.

- Heck, E., Jaworska, N., DeSomma, E., Dhoopar, A. S., MacMaster, F., Dewey, D., and MacQueen, G. (2014). A survey of mental health services at post-secondary institutions in Alberta. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 59*(5), 250-258.
- Holloway, B., Reed, T., Imbrie, P. K., & Reid, K. (2014). Research-informed policy change: a retrospective on engineering admissions. *Journal of Engineering Education, 103*(2), 274-301.
- Howlett, M. (2009). Policy analytical capacity and evidence-based policy-making: lessons from Canada. *Canadian Public Administration, 2*, 153-175.
- Howlett, M., & Giest, S. (2015). Policy cycle. In James D. Wright (editor-in-chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, (2nd ed., pp. 288-292). Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., & Perl, A. (2009). *Studying public policy: policy cycles & policy subsystems* (3rd ed.). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Howlett, M., & Ramesh, M. (1995). *Studying public policy: Policy cycles and policy subsystems*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Huddleston, A. (2014). Achievement at whose expense? A literature review of test-based grade retention policies in U.S. schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 22*(18), 1-31.
- Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental health problems and help-seeking behavior among college students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 46*, 3-10.
- Huriya, J. (2011). The behavioral economics of education: new directions for research. *Educational Researcher, 40*(9), 446-453.

- Hussain, R., Guppy, M., and Temple, E. (2013). Physical and mental health perspectives of first year undergraduate rural university students. *BMC Public Health, 13*(1), 1-11.
- Implementation. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.reference.com>
- Johnson, J. (2007). Know when to hold 'em: data retention policies. *Knowledge Quest, 36*(2), 50-53.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education. *Fundamental elements & Issues*. New York: Routledge.
- Kelly, N., Garvey, J., & Palcic, D. Health policy and the policy making system: a case study of primary care in Ireland. *Health Policy, 120*(8), 913-919. doi: <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.brocku.ca/10.1016/j.healthpol.2016.06.006>
- Keyes, C. L. M., Eisenberg, D., Perry, G. S., Dube, S. R., Kroenke, K., & Dhingra, S. S. (2012). The relationship of level of positive mental health with current mental disorders in predicting suicidal behavior and academic impairment in college students. *Journal of American College Health, 60*(2), 126-133.
- Koch, A., Nafziger, J., & Nielson, H. S. (2015). Behavioral economics of education. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 115*, 3-17.
- Kumar, A. (2012). Using phenomenological research methods in qualitative health research. *International journal of human sciences, 9*(2), 791-804.
- Kutcher, S., & McLuckie, A. for the Child and Youth Advisory Committee, Mental Health Commission of Canada (2010). *Evergreen: A child and youth mental health framework for Canada*. Calgary, AB: Mental Health Commission of Canada.

- Lacity, M., & Janson, M. (1994). Understanding qualitative data: A framework of text analysis methods. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 11(2), 137-155.
- LaRue, M. (2011) The role of certified athletic trainers in the recognition and referral of mental health issues in intercollegiate student-athletes. *Dissertation Abstracts international: Section B: the Sciences and Engineering*, 72(2-B), 838.
- Laswell, H. D. (1956). *The decision process: seven categories of functional analysis*. College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland Press.
- Leigh, A. (2015). How behavioural economics does and can shape public policy. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 26(2), 339-346.
- Liamputtong, P. (2013). Unobtrusive methods. In C. T. Fischer (Ed.), *Qualitative Research Methods* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (pp. 98-117). USA: Oxford University Press.
- Lunau, K. (2012, September 5). The mental health crisis on campus. *Macleans's*. Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/the-mental-health-crisis-on-campus/>
- Macleans (2020). University rankings 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.macleans.ca/education/university-rankings/university-rankings-2020/>
- MacPhail, C., Khoza, N., Abler, L., & Ranganathan, M. (2016). Process guidelines for establishing intercoder reliability in qualitative studies. *Qualitative Research*, 16(2), 198-212. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115577012>
- Malterud, K. (2001). Qualitative research standards: standards, challenges, and guidelines. *Lancet*, 358(9280), 483-488.



- Mannan, H., El Tayeb, S., MacLachlan, M., Amin, M., McVeigh, J., Munthali, A., & Van Rooy, G. (2013). Core concepts of human rights and inclusion of vulnerable groups in the mental health policies of Malawi, Namibia, and Sudan. *International Journal Of Mental Health Systems*, 7(1), 1-13. doi: 10.1186/1752-4458-7-7
- Manwell, L. A., Barbic, S. P., Roberts, K., Durisko, Z., Lee, C., Ware, E., & McKenzie, K. (2018). What is mental health? Evidence towards a new definition from a mixed methods multidisciplinary international survey. *BMJ Open*, 5(6). Retrieved from <http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/6/e007079>
- Martin, M. (2010). Stigma and student mental health in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(3), 259-274. Doi: 10.1080/07294360903470969
- Marston, G. and Watts, R. (2003). Tampering with the evidence: a critical appraisal of evidence-based policy-making. *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 3(3), 143-163.
- McAuley, I. (2013). Behavioural economics and public policy: Some insights. *International Journal of Behavioural Accounting and Finance*, 4(1), 18-31.
- McCann, T., Lubman, D., & Clark, E. (2011). The experience of young people with depression: a qualitative study. *Journal of Psychiatric & Mental Health Nursing*, 19, 334-340.
- McConnell, T., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2011). Member checking and Heideggerian phenomenology: a redundant component. *Nurse Researcher*, 18(2), 28-37.
- Mental health. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster online*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>

- MentalHealth.gov (2017). *What is mental health?* Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). Chapter 4: Fundamentals of qualitative data analysis. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (pp. 69-104). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). Chapter 11: Drawing and verifying conclusions. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (pp. 275-322). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Ministry of Education. (2009). *Realizing the promise of diversity: Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*. Ontario: Canadian Government. Retrieved from <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf>
- Ministry of Children and Youth Services. (n.d.). *A shared responsibility: Ontario's Policy framework for child and youth mental health*. Toronto, ON.
- Mitchell, R. C. & Moore, S. A. (2015). Muse, ruse, subterfuge: transdisciplinary praxis in Ontario's post-secondary bricolage? *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 37(5), 393-413.
- Mitchell, R. C. (2011). Human rights and health promotion: A Canada fit for children *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 3&4, 510-526.
- Mitchell, R. C. (2003). Canadian health care and child rights-what are the links? *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 94(6), 414-416.
- Moore, S., Tulk, W., & Mitchell, R. (2005). Qallunaat crossing: the southern-northern divide and promising practices for Canada's Inuit young people. *The First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 2(1), 117-129.

- Moore, S. (2014). *Restorative practices in Ontario schools: findings and recommendations*. Ontario: Ontario Ministry of Education Safe and Accepting Schools Branch.
- Mostafaei, A. (2012). The relationship between stress and mental health in university students. *Annals of Biological Research*, 3(7), 3468-3473.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Mowbray, C. T., Mandiberg, J. M., Stein, C. H., Kopels, S. , Curlin, C. , Megivern, D. , Strauss, S. , Collins, K. and Lett, R. (2006), Campus Mental Health Services: Recommendations for Change. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76: 226-237. doi:10.1037/0002-9432.76.2.226
- Newson, R., King, L., Rychetnik, L., Bauman, A. E., Redman, S., Milat, A. J., Schroeder, J., Cohen, G., & Chapman, S. (2015). A mixed methods study of the factors that influence whether intervention research has policy and practice impacts: perceptions of Australian researchers. *BMJ Open*, 5, 1-12.
- Nilsen, P. (2015). Making sense of implementation theories, models and frameworks. *Implementation Science* 10(53), 1-13.
- Nilsen, P., Stahl, C., Roback, K., & Cairney, P. (2013). Never the twain shall meet? A comparison of implementation science and policy implementation. *Implementation Science*, 8(1), 1-12.
- Ohlmann, C. K. F., Kwee, . L., & Lees, R. (2014). Listening for the voices of resilience: a group of adolescents' experiences with suicide prevention education program. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 5(1), 24-46.

Okanagan Charter: An international charter for health promoting universities and colleges

(2015). Retrieved from

<https://internationalhealthycampuses2015.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2016/01/Okanagan-Charter-January13v2.pdf>

O'Keefe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: improving student retention. *College Student Journal*, 47(4), 605-613.

Park, M. M., Lencucha, R., Mattingly, C., Zafran, H., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2015). A qualitative study on the ethics of transforming care: examining the development and implementation of Canada's first mental health strategy. *Implementation Science*, 1-9.

Park, M., Zafran, H., Stewart, J., Salsberg, J., Ells, C., Roleau, S., Estein, O., & Valente, T. (2014). Transforming mental health services: a participatory mixed methods study to promote and evaluate the implementation of recovery-oriented care. *Implementation Science*, 9(119), 1-22.

Parvizrad, P., Charati, J. Y., Sadeghi, M. R., Mohammadi, A., & Hosseini, H. (2014). Relationship between mental health, demographic variables and academic achievement of medical sciences students. *Journal of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences*, 23(109), 265-271.

Pascal, J., Johnson, N., Dore, C., & Trainor, R. (2010). The lived experience of doing phenomenology. *Qualitative Social Work*, 10(2), 172-189.

Pederson, D. E. (2012). Stress carry-over and college student health outcomes. *College Student Journal*, 46(3), 620-627.

- Pereira, H. R. (2012). Rigour in phenomenological research: reflections of a novice Researcher. *Nurse Researcher*, 19(3), 16-19.
- Peston, M. (2013). Towards an economic theory of higher education. *Higher Education Review*, 46(1), 19-30.
- Pfeffer, A. (2016, September 26). Ontario campus counsellors say they're drowning in mental health needs. CBC News. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/mental-health-ontario-campus-crisis-1.3771682>
- Pilato, K. A. (2014). Fall break policy and student mental health outcomes. *Policy Brief*. Presentation from: *Ontario Graduate Policy Research Challenge Award Ceremony*. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities: Toronto, ON.
- Pilato, K. A. (2013). Abstract submission to The Canadian Public Health Association Conference: *Exploring the impact of a fall break on student mental health outcomes*. Toronto, ON.
- Policy. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster online*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Popovic, T. (2012). Mental health in Ontario's post-secondary education system. *Policy Paper: The College Student Alliance*, Toronto, ON: The College Student Alliance.
- Rachlis, M. (2005). *Prescription for excellence: how innovation is saving Canada's health care system*. Toronto, ON: Harper Collins Canada.
- Reale, E. & Seeber, M. (2013). Instruments as empirical evidence for the analysis of higher education policies. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 135-151.
- Renger, R., Bartel, G., Foltysova, J. (2013). The reciprocal relationship between

- implementation theory and program theory in assisting program design and decision-making. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 28(1), 27-41.
- Science. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.reference.com>
- Robotham, D. & Julian, C. (2006). Stress and the higher education student: a critical review of the literature. *Journal of Further & Higher Education*, 30(2), 107-117.
- Rosenthal, B. & Wilson, W. C. (2008). Mental health services: use and disparity among diverse college students. *Journal of American College Health*, 57(1), 61-68.
- Ross, S., Cleland, J., & Macleod, M. J. (2006). Stress, debt and undergraduate medical student performance. *Medical Education*, 40(6), 584-589.
- Saewyc, E. M., Konishi, C., Rose, H. A., & Homma, Y. (2014). School-based strategies to reduce suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and discrimination among sexual minority and heterosexual adolescents in Western Canada. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 5(1), 89-112.
- Sanderson, I. (2002). Evaluation, policy learning and evidence-based policy making. *Public Administration*, 80(1), 1-22. doi:10.1111/1467-9299.00292
- Sarantakos, S. (2013). *Social research*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, P. (2018). Policy process in higher education. In J.C. Shin & P. Teixeira (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*. Springer, Dordrecht. Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1\\_151-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_151-1)
- Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9),

9-15.

- Shaw, R. (2010). Embedding reflexivity within experiential qualitative psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 7, 233-243.
- Solberg Nes, L., Evans, D., & Segerstrom, S. (2009). Optimism and college retention: mediation by motivation, performance, and adjustment. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(8), 1887-1912.
- Sparkes, A. C. (1992). The paradigms debate: An extended review and a celebration of difference. In Andrew C. Sparkes (Ed.). *Research in physical education and sport* (pp. 9-60). London: Falmer Press.
- Statistics Canada. (2013). Postsecondary enrolments, by program type, credential type, classification of instructional programs, primary grouping (CIP\_PG), registration status and sex. *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/pick-4770029>.
- Stallman, H. M. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, 45(4), 249-257.
- Stufflebeam D.L. (2003) The CIPP Model for Evaluation. In: Kellaghan T., Stufflebeam D.L. (eds) *International Handbook of Educational Evaluation*. Kluwer International Handbooks of Education, vol 9. Springer, Dordrecht
- Tamin, S. K. (2013). Relevance of mental health issues in university student dropouts. *Occupational Medicine*, 63(6), 410-414.
- Tancred, T. M., Schleiff, M., & Peters, D. H. (2016). Health policy and systems research training: global status and recommendations for action. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 94(7), 491-500.

- Tanenbaum, S. J. (2005). Evidence-based practice as mental health policy: three controversies and a caveat. *Health Affairs*, 24(1), 163-173. doi: org/10.1377/hlthaff.24.1.163
- Teghtsoonian, K. (2009). Depression and mental health in neoliberal times: a critical analysis of policy and discourse. *Social Science & Medicine*, 69, 28-35.
- The Honourable Broten, L. (2012). Bill 13. *1st Session, 40th Legislature, Ontario, 61 Elizabeth*.
- The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada. (n.d.). In *Primer on population health* (Chapter 14). Retrieved from <http://http://www.afmc-phprimer.ca/>
- The Institute for Education Leadership. (2014). *Leading safe and accepting schools project: 2014 survey results and views from the field (Executive summary)*. Ontario.
- Timmerman, N., & Metcalfe, A. S. (2009). From policy to pedagogy: the implications of sustainability policy for sustainability pedagogy in higher education. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 39(1), 45-60.
- Tower, M., Rowe, J., & Wallis, M. (2012). Investigating patients' experiences: methodological usefulness of interpretive interactionism. *Nurse Researcher*, 20(1), 39-44.
- Tracy, S.J. (2013). *Interview planning and design: Sampling, recruiting, and questioning*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tremblay, P., Harris, R., Berman, H., MacQuarrie, B., Hutchinson, G., Smith, M. A., Braley, S., Jelley, J., & Dearlove, K. (2008). Negative social experiences of university and college students. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 38(3), 57-75.
- Trussell, D. E. (2013). *Lecture one ethical considerations*. Personal collection of Dawn



- Trussell, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.
- Trussell, D. E. (2010). Gazing form the inside out during ethically heightened moments. *Leisure Studies*, 29(4), 377-395.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.trc.ca>
- Tuohy, D., Cooney, A., Dowling, M., Murphy, K., & Sixsmith, J. (2012). An overview of interpretive phenomenology as a research methodology. *Nurse Researcher*, 20(6),17-20.
- van Bon-Martens, M., van de Goor, L., Holsappel, J., Kuunders, T., Jacobs-van der Bruggen, M., te Brake, J., & van Oers, J. (2014). Original Research: Concept mapping as a promising method to bring practice into science. *Public Health*, 128504-514. doi:10.1016/j.puhe.2014.04.002
- VanKim, N. A. & Nelson, T. F. (2013). Vigorous physical activity, mental health, perceived stress and socializing among college students. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 28(1), 7-15.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching Lived Experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Venema, M. (2017, January 26). Four suicide deaths at the University of Guelph has some students calling it a crisis. *CTV News Kitchener*. Retrieved from <https://kitchener.ctvnews.ca/guelph/four-suicide-deaths-at-the-university-of-guelph-has-some-students-calling-it-a-crisis-1.3259373>
- Vertakova, Y., & Vlasova, O. (2015). Methodical Approach to the Formation and

- Implementation of Socio-Economic Policy of Regional Health Care Development. *Procedia Economics And Finance*, 27(22nd International Economic Conference of Sibiu 2015, IECS 2015 "Economic Prospects in the Context of Growing Global and Regional Interdependencies"), 692-701. doi: 10.1016/S2212-5671(15)01050-3
- Waddell, C., Shepherd, C., Cody, A., Chen, A., & Boyle, M. (2013). Creating comprehensive children's mental health indicators for British Columbia. *Journal of Community Mental Health*, 32(1), 9-27.
- Wagner, M. and Yeong, R. (2013). Stress, sleep, grief: are college students receiving information that interests them? *College Student Journal*, 47(1), 24-33
- Walt, G., Shiffman, J., Schneider, H., Murray, S. F., Brugha, R., & Gilson, L. (2008). 'Doing' health policy analysis: methodological and conceptual reflections and challenges. *Health Policy and Planning*, 23, 308-317.
- Walter, H., Gouze, K., Cicchetti, C., Arend, R., Mehta, T., Schmidt, J., & Skvaria, M. (2011). A pilot demonstration of comprehensive mental health services in inner-city public schools. *Journal of School Health*, 81(4), 185-193.
- Weist, M. (2003). Commentary: promoting paradigmatic change in child and adolescent mental health and schools. *School Psychology Review*, 32(3), 336-341.
- Weimer, D. L. & Vining, A. R. (2011). *Policy Analysis: concepts and practice* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Longman/Pearson.
- Westerhoff, G. J. & Keyes, C. L. M. (2010). Mental illness and mental health: the two continua model across the lifespan. *J Adult Dev*, (17), 110-119. doi: 10.1007/s10804-009-9082-y

- World Health Organization. (2014). *Mental health: a state of well-being*. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/)
- World Health Organization (WHO). (n.d.). Health service planning and policy-making: A toolkit for nurses and midwives (module 4: policy development process). Retrieved from [http://www.wpro.who.int/publications/docs/hsp\\_mod4\\_1E08](http://www.wpro.who.int/publications/docs/hsp_mod4_1E08)
- World Health Organization. (2009/2010). Social determinants of health and well-being among young people. *Health behaviour in school-aged children (HBSC) Study: International Report from the 2009/2010 Survey*.
- Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case study research: design and methods* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Zeng, G., Boe, E., Bulotsky- Shearer, R., Garrett, S., Slaughter-Defoe, D., Brown, E., & Lopez, B. (2013). Integrating US Federal efforts to address the multifaceted problems of children: a historical perspective on national education and child mental health policies. *School Mental Health, 5*(3), 119-131.
- Zepke, N. (2007). Educational, quality, institutional accountability and the retention discourse. *Quality in Higher Education, 13*(3), 237-248.
- Zida, A., Lavis, J. N., Sewankambo, N. K., Kouyate, B., Moat, K., & Shearer, J. (2017). Analysis of the policymaking process in Burkina Faso's health sector: case studies of the creation of two health system support units. *Health Research Policy & Systems, 15*1-17. doi:10.1186/s12961-017-0173-0
- Zivin, K., Eisenberg, D., Gollust, S. E., & Golberstein, E. (2009). Persistence of mental health problems and needs in college student population. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 117*, 180-185.

### Appendix A

#### Fall Break Across Ontario Universities

University	Name	Timing	Duration of Break
Algoma	Study Week	October/Thanksgiving	1 week
Brock	Fall break Week	October/Thanksgiving	4 days
Carleton	Fall break	October 22-26	1 week
Guelph	Fall Study Break Day	October/Thanksgiving	1 day
Hearst	Semaine d'étude	October 22-26	1 week
Lakehead	Fall Reading Week	October/Thanksgiving	4 days
Laurentian	Fall Study Week	October/Thanksgiving	1 week
McMaster	Mid-term Recess	October/Thanksgiving	1 week
Nipissing	Study Week	October/Thanksgiving	1 week
OCAD	Study Week	October/Thanksgiving	1 week
Ottawa	Reading Week	October 22-26	1 week
Queen's	Fall Mid-term Break	October 25-26	2 days
Royal Military College	Fall break	October/Thanksgiving	2 days
Ryerson	Fall Study Week	October/Thanksgiving	1 week
Trent	Residential Reading and Laboratory Week	October 22-26	1 week
Toronto	Fall Reading Week	November 5-9	1 week
University of Ontario	Curricular Period	October/Thanksgiving	4 days
Waterloo	Fall Term Study Days "Fall break"	October/Thanksgiving	2 days
Windsor	Reading Week	October/Thanksgiving	4 days
Western	Fall Study Break Day	October/Thanksgiving	4 days
Wilfred Laurier	Fall Term Study Break	October/Thanksgiving	4 days
York	Fall Reading Days	October/Thanksgiving	4 days

## Appendix B

### Policy Appraisal Cycles

Author	Title	Steps
Bardach, 2012	A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Problem definition</li> <li>2. Assemble evidence</li> <li>3. Policy alternatives</li> <li>4. Select criteria</li> <li>5. Project outcomes</li> <li>6. Consider alternatives</li> <li>7. Decide</li> <li>8. Publish/share/tell story/dissemination</li> </ol>
Weimer & Vining, 2011	Policy Analysis, edition no 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gather information</li> <li>2. Organize analysis</li> <li>3. Cost-benefit analysis: assessing efficiency (consider alternatives)</li> <li>4. Using Research/statistics</li> <li>5. decide</li> </ol>
Howlett et al. (2009)	The five stages of the policy cycle	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agenda-setting</li> <li>2. Policy formulation</li> <li>3. Decision-making</li> <li>4. Policy implementation</li> <li>5. Policy evaluation</li> </ol>
Laswell, 1956	The decision process: seven categories of functional analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Intelligence</li> <li>2. Promotion</li> <li>3. Prescription</li> <li>4. Invocation</li> <li>5. Application</li> <li>6. Termination</li> <li>7. Appraisal</li> </ol>

### Appendix C

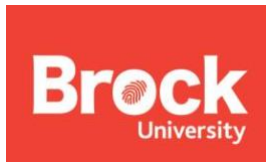
#### Types of Research in Policy Process

Classic/purist/knowledge driven model	Linear sequence from research to knowledge to action.
Problem-solving/engineering/policy driven model	Identification of a problem and request for alternative solutions. Also follows a linear sequence from problem identification, request for research, research, knowledge, action.
Interactive/social interaction model	Not linear. Process of interactions between researchers and policy users.
Enlightenment/percolation/limestone model	Research used to provide insight, theories, concepts and perspectives, expanding the ways research is utilized.
Political model	Research findings used by opposing sides in an “adversarial system of policy making”
Tactical model	When research is used tactically by policy makers to respond to a pressing issue in need of action.
Conceptual modelling	Knowledge that informs complex circumstances that will model the nature of policy problems and alternatives.
Data-based policy	Uses empirical findings to influence policy decisions. Knowledge-driven approach.
Constrained modelling	A restricted range of knowledge is available due to constrained political conditions.
Strategic research	Lay and technocratic policy actors compete for power and resources using competing evidence
Symbolic payback	Science is used as a cultural symbol in which there is a political pay-off in supporting research. Research informed policies might be more likely supported
Symbolic argumentation	Policies based on reasons of interest, ideology or intellect.
Paradigms	Accepted ways of interpreting reality and facing problems will influence policy making and are reflective of the dominant paradigms of the times.

(Hanney et al., 2003)

**Appendix D**

REB Clearance Form, Fall Break Survey and Focus Groups



Brock University

Research Ethics Office Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035 Email: reb@brocku.ca

Social Science Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

---

DATE:

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

1/17/2014

LAW, Madelyn Health Sciences

13-168 - LAW Faculty Research

FILE: TYPE:

TITLE:

STUDENT: SUPERVISOR:

Exploring the impact of a fall break on students' perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes

**ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED**

Type of Clearance: NEW Expiry Date: 1/30/2015

The Brock University Social Sciences Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the

University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from 1/17/2014 to 1/30/2015.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before 1/30/2015. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page at <http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms>.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

1. a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
2. b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
3. c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
4. d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research. Approved:



Note:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jan Frijters, Chair  
Social Sciences Research Ethics Board

Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.



## Appendix E

### Fall Break Survey Year One

The following is a survey to assess the impact fall break had on students to see if there is a need for a fall break. By agreeing to complete this survey, I recognize that my responses will be used for research purposes on the fall break. I am aware that I will remain anonymous and all identifying information will be kept confidential.

Gender: M\_\_\_\_\_F\_\_\_\_\_

Year of Study: 1\_\_\_\_\_2\_\_\_\_\_3\_\_\_\_\_4\_\_\_\_\_

Department/Faculty: \_\_\_\_\_

For each of the following statements please circle the answer that best describes your experience.

1. On fall break I did:

mostly schoolwork

mostly work for pay

mostly relaxed/vacation

mostly volunteered

other. Please specify\_\_\_\_\_

2. The fall break was useful in reducing my school related stress levels.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

3. The fall break led to an increase in workload BEFORE the break.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4. The increase in workload BEFORE the break led to an increase in your stress levels.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5. The fall break led to an increase in workload AFTER the break.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

6. The increase in workload AFTER the break led to an increase in your stress levels.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

7. The best time for a break in the first semester is:

Thanksgiving week      Third week in      Fourth week in      First week in  
(same as last year)      October      October      November

8. **If you are in your second, third or fourth year of study only:**

Compared to other years, did you find the fall break had an increase or a decrease in your stress levels?

Increase\_\_\_\_\_ Decrease\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for participating in this survey.

## Appendix F

### Fall Break Survey Years Two and Three

The following is a survey to assess the impact fall break had on students to see if there is a need for a fall break. By agreeing to complete this survey, I recognize that my responses will be used for research purposes on the fall break. I am aware that I will remain anonymous and all identifying information will be kept confidential.

Sex: M \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_

Year of Study: 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Department/Faculty: \_\_\_\_\_

For each of the following statements please circle the answer that best describes your experience.

1. On fall break I did:
  - mostly schoolwork
  - mostly work for pay
  - mostly relaxed/vacation
  - mostly volunteered
  - other(please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
  
2. During the fall break how many days were you on campus?
 

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7
  
3. The fall break was useful in reducing my school related stress levels.
 

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
  
4. The fall break led to an increase in workload BEFORE the break.
 

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
  
5. The increase in workload BEFORE the break led to an increase in your stress levels.
 

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
  
6. The fall break led to an increase in workload AFTER the break.
 

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
  
7. The increase in workload AFTER the break led to an increase in your stress levels.
 

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
  
8. The best time for a break in the first semester is:

Thanksgiving week  
(Same as this year)

Third week in  
October

Fourth week in  
October

First week in  
November

9. The fall break means that there may be less time for final exams or require an earlier start to the fall term. Would you prefer (*circle choice*):
- (a.) An earlier start to the school year to allow more time for final exams in December
  - (b.) Keeping the schedule (start of term, fall break, and final exams) as it was this year
  - (c.) Not having a fall break in order to have both a normal start to the term and more time for exams

**If you are in your third or fourth year of study only:**

10. Compared to other years, did you find the fall break had an increase or a decrease in your stress levels?

Increase \_\_\_\_\_ Decrease \_\_\_\_\_

**If you are in your third or fourth year of study and you had exams in the December exam period only:**

11. How many final exams did you have during the December exam period?
- 0            1            2            3            4            5            6 or more

12. Was the starting date of the fall Term problematic for you in any way relative to years before the fall break?

Significant problems    Moderate problems    Minor problems    Some problems    No problems at all

13. Did you find that this year's December exam schedule (i.e., time slots from 8am to 11pm) was more or less stress inducing than previous years (i.e. 9am to 10pm)?

Much more stress    Somewhat more stress    A little more stress    No change in stress    Less stress

14. Relative to other years what effect did you find this year's December exam schedule had on your performance on exams?

Very detrimental    Somewhat detrimental    Mildly detrimental    No detriment    Beneficial

Thank you very much for participating in this survey.

## Appendix G

### Focus Group Interview Guide

Thank you for coming to our focus group to discuss the fall break and mental health. The purpose of this research project is to understand the student's perceptions of how the fall break impacted on your mental health in relation to school-related stress levels. We are interested to hear about your experiences during the fall with school and what you perceive to be the benefits and challenges to having the fall break. All the information you provide here today will be confidential and you will not be connected with your data. All the information will be presented in aggregate form. We ask that you do not discuss what comes up in the focus group session to be respectful each of the participants. Please have a read over the consent form and if you have any questions please let me know. One copy is for you and the other is for me. Then we will begin the focus group session.

Before we get started please fill out the following information: (this will be given to the students on a sheet of paper)

Sex: M\_\_\_\_\_F\_\_\_\_\_  
Year of Study: 1\_\_\_\_\_2\_\_\_\_\_3\_\_\_\_\_4\_\_\_\_\_  
Department/Faculty: \_\_\_\_\_

We would like to make sure that everyone gets a chance to talk and participate so we will look to everyone to respond and interact in the discussion.

#### Questions:

1. We will go around the table and ask that you share what you did on your fall break.
2. When you first heard that Brock was going to have a fall break –What did you think would be the benefit or drawbacks to this fall break?
3. Now that you have experienced the fall break, what did you see as the benefits or the drawbacks to having this fall break?
4. Thinking about the whole term, when did you feel the majority of your workload happened in terms of your courses?
5. Thinking about your school related stress levels through the semester – when would you say yours were the highest and why? How do you think the fall break factored into your stress levels? Increase? Decrease?
6. For those individuals who are in second year or higher, what did you think about the break? Did increase or decrease your school related stress levels?

Thank you very much for participating in this focus group interview.

## Appendix H

### Debriefing Letter Fall Break Survey

#### Debriefing Letter

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to fill out our survey. We appreciate you taking the time and effort to be involved in a study that will help us to understand the student's perceptions of the fall break and how this may relate to school related stress and mental health outcomes. If you are ever in need of services related to mental health please consider contacting Health Services at 905-688-5550 x3243 and you can visit their website at <https://brocku.ca/health-services/location-hours>. Brock also has a personal counseling office that can be found at <http://www.brocku.ca/personal-counselling> and their phone number is 905-688-5550 x4750. If you have any questions or concerns about the project, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

Madelyn Law

[mlaw@brocku.ca](mailto:mlaw@brocku.ca), 905-688-5550 ext 5386

#### Debriefing Letter

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to fill out our survey. We appreciate you taking the time and effort to be involved in a study that will help us to understand the student's perceptions of the fall break and how this may relate to school related stress and mental health outcomes. If you are ever in need of services related to mental health please consider contacting Health Services at 905-688-5550 x3243 and you can visit their website at <https://brocku.ca/health-services/location-hours>. Brock also has a personal counseling office that can be found at <http://www.brocku.ca/personal-counselling> and their phone number is 905-688-5550 x4750. If you have any questions or concerns about the project, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

Madelyn Law

[mlaw@brocku.ca](mailto:mlaw@brocku.ca), 905-688-5550 ext 5386

## Appendix I

### Letter of Invitation Fall Break Focus Groups

#### Letter of Invitation

#### **Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes**

Principal Investigator: Dr. Madelyn Law, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences, Brock University

I, Dr. Madelyn Law, Principal Investigator from the Department of Health Sciences at Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes.

A focus on mental health on university campus has received increasing attention over the past few years. The National College Health Assessment has conducted a survey to understand issues faced by university students in relation to topics of substance use, mental health and various other factors related to health behaviors. This survey has outlined important statistics in relation to mental health in relation to depression, emotions, loneliness, suicide and anxiety of the university student population. This survey is conducted at three year intervals and although the rates have not increased significantly in most areas, they have also not decreased. In an effort to help students cope with school related stress, universities have looked to what they can do to influence policy and programs that would in turn help students and create a more mental health friendly campus environment. To this end, some universities across Ontario incorporated a fall break in the hopes that this would help to alleviate school related pressures and stress. Although there is no evidence available that suggests that these fall breaks have been successful in obtaining this aim.

In 2013, Brock University had its first fall break which was hoped to result in support for students and their mental health. To this end, the following research project will focus on the evaluation of this fall break from a mixed methods approach to gather student perceptions of the fall break on their mental health outcomes. This is a qualitative study using a focus group session to gather an understanding from you, the student, on your perceptions of the fall break. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group session with other Brock students. The focus group will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. The focus group will be recorded.

There are no direct benefits of participating in this study to you as a participant. However, the potential benefits to the scientific community will be an enhanced understanding of your perceptions of the impact of the fall break on mental health outcomes for students.

This project will include 8-10 participants in three different focus group sessions.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Madelyn Law, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Principal Investigator

(905) 688-5550 ext. 5386

[mlaw@brocku.ca](mailto:mlaw@brocku.ca)

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board (File # REB 13-168).



## Appendix J

### Consent Form, Fall Break Focus Groups

**Date:**

**Project Title: Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes**

**Principal Investigator:** Madelyn Law

Dr. Madelyn Law, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences, Brock University, (905) 688-5550, ext. 5386, [mlaw@brocku.ca](mailto:mlaw@brocku.ca)

#### INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of the proposed research project is to understand student perceptions of the fall break on the impact on their mental health outcomes.

#### INVOLVEMENT

Should you choose to participate in the outlined study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group session that will take approximately 30-45 minutes with 8-10 other Brock students. The session will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.

#### POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

There are no direct benefits for your involvement in this study. It is possible that you may feel a certain level of anxiety thinking back to their stress levels as they relate to school in the fall. As well, the social risk may be present if you choose to reveal sensitive personal information. In order to reduce these risks we would ask that you only share information that you comfortable with other individuals hearing and we will ask that individuals involved in the session do not talk about other opinions outside of this session.

The potential benefits to the scientific community will be an enhanced understanding of student perceptions of how the fall break influenced their school related stress levels and impacted mental health in general. This information will in turn help to guide evidence based decision making as it relates to school policy and program development.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, a pseudonym may be used. Results of this study will reflect an aggregate grouping of themes commonly discussed by participants involved in the study.

The audio recording of the focus group sessions will be stored on a password protected research computer in Dr. Law's research office. Any hard copies of the transcripts will be stored in a locked research cabinet in Dr. Madelyn Law's office. Data will be kept for seven years after which time all transcript hard copies will be shredded, and all related computer files deleted.

These transcripts will be deleted off of the research computer and hard copies will be shredded. Access to data will be restricted to Dr. Madelyn Law and Ms. Pilato (research assistant).

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question at any time. You are welcome to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so with no penalty. During the focus group session you are free to withdraw by telling the focus group facilitator that you are leaving the session. To withdraw from the study you may contact Dr. Madelyn Law at the contact number provided above. However, we would like to note that it may be difficult to delete your specific responses from the interview transcript due to the number of individuals in the session.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available to you in a report format that will be emailed to you at your request. Results are anticipated to be completed by May 2014.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Madelyn Law using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [REB 13-168]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix K

### Informed Consent, Fall Break Survey

**Date:**

**Project Title: Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes**

**Principal Investigator:** Madelyn Law

Dr. Madelyn Law, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences, Brock University, (905) 688-5550, ext. 5386, [mlaw@brocku.ca](mailto:mlaw@brocku.ca)

### INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. I, Dr. Madelyn Law, Principal Investigator from the Department of Health Sciences at Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled “Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes”.

A focus on mental health on university campus has received increasing attention over the past few years. The National College Health Assessment has conducted a survey to understand issues faced by university students in relation to topics of substance use, mental health and various other factors related to health behaviors. This survey has outlined important statistics in relation to mental health in relation to depression, emotions, loneliness, suicide and anxiety of the university student population. This survey is conducted at three year intervals and although the rates have not increased significantly in most areas, they have also not decreased. In an effort to help students cope with school related stress, universities have looked to what they can do to influence policy and programs that would in turn help students and create a more mental health friendly campus environment. To this end, some universities across Ontario incorporated a fall break in the hopes that this would help to alleviate school related pressures and stress. Although there is no evidence available that suggests that these fall breaks have been successful in obtaining this aim.

In 2013, Brock University had its first fall break which was hoped to result in support for students and their mental health. The following research project will focus on the evaluation of this fall break from a mixed methods approach to gather student perceptions of the fall break on their mental health outcomes. This is the quantitative portion of the study where I would ask that you fill out the follow survey.

### INVOLVEMENT

Should you choose to participate I would ask that you fill out the survey on the next page which should take approximately 5 minutes of your time. You can then hand this into the research assistant.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

It is possible that the participants may feel a certain level of anxiety thinking back to their stress levels as they relate to school in the fall. If you require some assistance we have provided information for student health services and personal counseling services available at Brock. There are no direct benefits for your involvement in this study. The potential benefits to the scientific community will be an enhanced understanding of student perceptions of how the fall break influenced their school related stress levels and impacted mental health in general. This information will in turn help to guide evidence-based decision making as it relates to school policy and program development.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study. Results of this study will reflect an aggregate grouping of the data.

All data collected in this study will be stored in a locked research cabinet in Dr. Madelyn Law's office. Data will be kept for until the data analysis is complete and then the surveys will be destroyed. Access to data will be restricted to Dr. Madelyn Law and Ms. Pilato (research assistant).

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question at any time. You are welcome to withdraw from this study at any time by not filling out the survey and may do so with no penalty. However, once you have submitted this form we have no way to delete your survey responses as they are anonymous.

**PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available to you in a report format that will be emailed to you at your request, see next sheet. Results are anticipated to be completed by May 2014.

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Madelyn Law using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [REB 13-168]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

**CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time while filling out the survey. Completing and submitting the survey indicate consent.

**Appendix L**

**Debrief Letter, Fall Break Focus Groups**

**Research Results and Report Request Form**

Note: This form will be kept separate from consent form and interview data to ensure confidentiality.

I would like to receive the report with the results of this study. You may send this report to the email below:

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Research Results and Report Request Form**

Note: This form will be kept separate from consent form and interview data to ensure confidentiality.

I would like to receive the report with the results of this study. You may send this report to the email below:

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Research Results and Report Request Form**

Note: This form will be kept separate from consent form and interview data to ensure confidentiality.

I would like to receive the report with the results of this study. You may send this report to the email below:

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix M

### Faculty Interview Guide

Thank you for coming to our interview today to discuss the fall break at Brock and the impact on your teaching and courses and students' mental health. The purpose of this research project is to analyze the fall break policy in order to understand Faculty's perceptions on the fall break at Brock. We are interested to hear about your experiences during the fall with your teaching and courses as well as your perceptions on how the break has impacted students' mental health. All the information you provide today will be confidential and you will not be connected with your data. All the information will be presented in aggregate form. Please have another read over of the consent form and if you have any questions let me know. One copy is for you to keep and one is for me, once you have signed the consent for our interview can begin.

**What Department/Faculty are you from?:** \_\_\_\_\_

What are the Undergraduate courses that you taught in the fall Term? (please indicate the year, if course required for a degree, and size for each course)

**Course 1:** 100/200/300/400 level    required/elective    1-20, 21-40, 41-60,61-100, 101-200, 201+  
**Course 2:** 100/200/300/400 level    required/elective    1 20, 21-40, 41-60,61-100, 101-200, 201+  
**Course 3:** 100/200/300/400 level    required/elective    1-20, 21-40, 41-60,61-100, 101-200, 201+

#### Questions:

1. How did you spend your fall break? During the fall break what type of work were you mostly involved with?

#### Prompts:

undergraduate course work;  
graduate student supervision  
research and/or grant preparation and/or manuscript preparation  
volunteer work  
recreational pursuits  
other/Please specify.

2. What do you see as the benefits or the drawbacks to having a fall break?
3. Did the fall break have an impact on your work-related stress level?
4. Thinking about your work related stress levels through the fall semester, when would say yours were highest and why? How do you think the fall break factored into your stress levels? Increase? Decrease?
5. Did the fall break change the way your structure your courses?

6. Thinking about the whole term, when did you assign the majority of assignments/tests in your courses?

**Prompts:**

The majority of my term tests/ assignments occurred or were due BEFORE the fall break?

The majority of my term tests/assignments occurred or were due AFTER the fall break?

7. In relation to the fall break, in your course(s) when can students complete 50% of their course requirements?
8. If you were here prior to fall 2013, based on your experience from years prior to the fall break what effect did the fall break have on student stress:
9. Overall what is your perception of the fall break and students' mental health?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

## Appendix N

### Informant Interview Guide

Thank you for coming to our interview today to discuss the fall break at Brock and the creation and implementation of the policy. The purpose of this research project is to analyze the fall break policy in order to understand the impact, if any, on students' mental health and retention. We are interested to hear about your experiences during the creation and implementation of the fall break. All the information you provide today will be confidential and you will not be connected with your data. All the information will be presented in aggregate form. Please have another read over of the consent form and if you have any questions let me know. One copy is for you to keep and one is for me, once you have signed the consent for our interview can begin.

What was your role at Brock when the break was created?

What department were you from?

#### Questions:

1. Can you tell me about your role in the creation and implementation of the fall break?
2. Who was involved in the creation and implementation of the fall break?
3. Can you tell me about some of the decisions that were made in the formation of the break?
4. Who was involved in the decision making regarding the formation of the fall break? Was the decision to implement a fall break unanimous?
5. Were you in favour of the fall break? Why was this important? How did this factor into the decisions regarding the creation and implementation of the fall break?
6. Tell me about how the decisions to implement the fall break the week following Thanksgiving.

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.



## Appendix O

### Invitation Email Faculty Interviews

Dear Faculty,

Hello, my name is Kelly Pilato. I am the research assistant on the fall break assessment, a research project aimed at understanding student and Faculty perceptions of the fall break and the impact it had on students' mental health outcomes and retention.

The National College Health Assessment has conducted a survey to understand issues faced by university students in relation to topics of substance use, mental health and various other factors related to health behaviours. This survey has outlined important statistics in relation to mental health in regard to depression, emotions, loneliness, suicide and anxiety. It is conducted at three-year intervals and although the rates have not increased significantly in most areas, they have also not decreased. In an effort to help students cope with school related stress, universities have looked to what they can do to influence policy and programs that would in turn help students and create a more mental health friendly campus environment. To this end, some universities across Ontario incorporated a fall break in the hopes that this would help to alleviate school related pressure and stress. Although there is no evidence available that suggests that these fall breaks have been successful in obtaining this aim.

In 2013, Brock University had its first fall break, which was hoped to result in support for students' mental health. The purpose of the proposed research project is to understand Faculty perceptions of the fall break and the impact it had on students' mental health outcomes and retention.

We are interested in getting your opinion about the fall break and how it impacted your teaching and student mental health. Would you be willing to take a half an hour of your time for a face to face interview that will discuss your perceptions of the fall break at Brock?

Thank you!

Best Regards,

Kelly Pilato

**Appendix P**

## Follow-up Email correspondence with the Faculty

Dear Faculty,

Hello, my name is Kelly Pilato. I am the research assistant on the fall break assessment. I am emailing you to remind you that you were sent an email asking you to participate in an interview regarding your perceptions on the fall break that examines faculty perceptions of the fall break and mental health outcomes of university students. We are interested in getting your opinion about the fall break and how it impacted your teaching and student mental health. Would you be willing to take a half an hour of your time for a face to face interview that will discuss your perceptions of the fall break at Brock?

Best Regards,

Kelly Pilato

## Appendix Q

### Invitation Email Informants

Dear Informant,

Hello, my name is Kelly Pilato. I am the research assistant on the fall break assessment, a research project aimed at understanding student and Faculty perceptions of the fall break and the impact it had on students' mental health outcomes and retention.

The National College Health Assessment has conducted a survey to understand issues faced by university students in relation to topics of substance use, mental health and various other factors related to health behaviours. This survey has outlined important statistics in relation to mental health in regard to depression, emotions, loneliness, suicide and anxiety. It is conducted at three-year intervals and although the rates have not increased significantly in most areas, they have also not decreased. In an effort to help students cope with school related stress, universities have looked to what they can do to influence policy and programs that would in turn help students and create a more mental health friendly campus environment. To this end, some universities across Ontario incorporated a fall break in the hopes that this would help to alleviate school related pressure and stress. Although there is no evidence available that suggests that these fall breaks have been successful in obtaining this aim.

In 2013, Brock University had its first fall break, which was hoped to result in support for students' mental health. The purpose of the proposed research project is to understand how the fall break at Brock was created and implemented in order to better understand the impact it had on students' mental health outcomes and retention.

We are interested in getting your opinion about the fall break and how it came to be. Would you be willing to take a half an hour of your time for a face to face interview that will discuss your perceptions of the fall break at Brock?

Thank you!

Best Regards,

Kelly Pilato

**Appendix R**

## Follow-up Email correspondence with the Informant

Dear Informant,

Hello, my name is Kelly Pilato. I am the research assistant on the fall break assessment. I am emailing you to remind you that you were sent an email asking you to participate in an interview regarding your perceptions on the fall break that how the policy for the break was created and implemented. We are interested in getting your opinion about the fall break and how it came to be in order to better understand the impact it has on students' mental health and retention. Would you be willing to take a half an hour of your time for a face to face interview that will discuss your perceptions of the fall break at Brock?

Best Regards,

Kelly Pilato

**Appendix S**

## Email Response for Recruiting Participants

**From:** Madelyn Law; Kelly Pilato

**To:** (Insert Participants Email Address)

**Subject:** Thank You \_\_\_\_\_ for Inquiring about participating in “Exploring the impact of an education policy for a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes: a policy analysis”

**Attachment:** Letter of Information/Consent Form

We'd like to thank you for being interested in this study. Please review the attached letter of information and consent form to review details about the overview of the study. If you have any questions we would be happy to answer those with your preferred method of contact. Please reply back to this email indicating as such.

In order to set up the best time for a face to face interview, please follow the doodle poll on this link:

<https://doodle.com/poll/>

We are excited to begin this process with you and are anticipating your response.

Sincerely,

Kelly Pilato

kpilato@brocku.ca

## Appendix T

### Informed Consent, Faculty Interviews

**Date:**

**Project Title: Exploring the impact of an education policy for a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes: a policy analysis**

**Principal Investigator:** Madelyn Law

Dr. Madelyn Law, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences, Brock University, (905) 688-5550, ext. 5386, mlaw@brocku.ca

### INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. I, Dr. Madelyn Law, Principal Investigator from the Department of Health Sciences at Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled “Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes”.

A focus on mental health on university campus has received increasing attention over the past few years. The National College Health Assessment has conducted a survey to understand issues faced by university students in relation to topics of substance use, mental health and various other factors related to health behaviors. This survey has outlined important statistics in relation to mental health in relation to depression, emotions, loneliness, suicide and anxiety of the university student population. This survey is conducted at three year intervals and although the rates have not increased significantly in most areas, they have also not decreased. In an effort to help students cope with school related stress, universities have looked to what they can do to influence policy and programs that would in turn help students and create a more mental health friendly campus environment. To this end, some universities across Ontario incorporated a fall break in the hopes that this would help to alleviate school related pressures and stress. Although there is no evidence available that suggests that these fall breaks have been successful in obtaining this aim.

In 2013, Brock University had its first fall break which was hoped to result in support for students and their mental health. The following research project will focus on the evaluation of this fall break from a faculty perspective on student perceptions of the fall break on their mental health outcomes. This is the quantitative portion of the study where I would ask that you fill out the following survey.

### INVOLVEMENT

Should you choose to participate I would ask that you participate in a face to face interview that will take approximately 30-40 minutes of your time.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

There are no potential risks associated with this interview.

There are no direct benefits for your involvement in this study. The potential benefits to the scientific community will be an enhanced understanding of student perceptions of how the fall break influenced their school related stress levels and impacted mental health in general. This information will in turn help to guide evidence based decision making as it relates to school policy and program development.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study. Results of this study will reflect an aggregate grouping of the data.

All data collected in this study will be stored in a locked research cabinet in Dr. Madelyn Law's office. Data will be kept for until the data analysis is complete and then the surveys will be destroyed. Access to data will be restricted to Dr. Madelyn Law and Ms. Pilato (research assistant).

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question at any time. You are welcome to withdraw from this study at any time by not filling out the survey and may do so with no penalty. However, once you have submitted this form we have no way to delete your survey responses as they are anonymous.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available to you in a report format that will be emailed to you at your request, see next sheet. Results are anticipated to be completed by September, 2015.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Madelyn Law using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [REB #]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time while filling out the survey but that once I hit "submit" my data will no longer be able to be withdrawn.

By check-marking **all** of the boxes below, participants are agreeing to participate in the research study as mentioned above. Please note that all boxes must be checked to formally provide consent on participating in the study and that participants are advised to keep a copy for

themselves. Submitting of this form must be done electronically/online to provide consent to the research party.

- I agree to participate in this study described above and I have made this decision based on the information explained to me and read in this Letter of Invitation/Consent
- This study has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions and can get more information in the future
- I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time during the interview
- I understand that once I have completed my interview, I can still request to have it excluded from analysis by contacting members of the research party

\_\_\_\_\_ Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Email Address

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature



## Appendix U

### Informed Consent, Informant Interviews

**Date:**

**Project Title: Exploring the impact of an education policy for a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes: a policy analysis**

**Principal Investigator:** Madelyn Law

Dr. Madelyn Law, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences, Brock University, (905) 688-5550, ext. 5386, mlaw@brocku.ca

### INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. I, Dr. Madelyn Law, Principal Investigator from the Department of Health Sciences at Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled “Exploring the impact of a fall break on students perceptions of school related stress and mental health outcomes”.

A focus on mental health on university campus has received increasing attention over the past few years. The National College Health Assessment has conducted a survey to understand issues faced by university students in relation to topics of substance use, mental health and various other factors related to health behaviors. This survey has outlined important statistics in relation to mental health in relation to depression, emotions, loneliness, suicide and anxiety of the university student population. This survey is conducted at three year intervals and although the rates have not increased significantly in most areas, they have also not decreased. In an effort to help students cope with school related stress, universities have looked to what they can do to influence policy and programs that would in turn help students and create a more mental health friendly campus environment. To this end, some universities across Ontario incorporated a fall break in the hopes that this would help to alleviate school related pressures and stress. Although there is no evidence available that suggests that these fall breaks have been successful in obtaining this aim.

In 2013, Brock University had its first fall break which was hoped to result in support for students and their mental health. The following research project will focus on the evaluation of this fall break from a faculty perspective on student perceptions of the fall break on their mental health outcomes. This is the quantitative portion of the study where I would ask that you fill out the following survey.

### INVOLVEMENT

Should you choose to participate I would ask that you participate in a telephone or face to face interview that will take approximately 30-40 minutes of your time.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

There are no potential risks associated with this interview.

There are no direct benefits for your involvement in this study. The potential benefits to the scientific community will be an enhanced understanding of student perceptions of how the fall break influenced their school related stress levels and impacted mental health in general. This information will in turn help to guide evidence based decision making as it relates to school policy and program development.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study. Results of this study will reflect an aggregate grouping of the data.

All data collected in this study will be stored in a locked research cabinet in Dr. Madelyn Law's office. Data will be kept for until the data analysis is complete and then the surveys will be destroyed. Access to data will be restricted to Dr. Madelyn Law and Ms. Pilato (research assistant).

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question at any time. You are welcome to withdraw from this study at any time by not filling out the survey and may do so with no penalty. However, once you have submitted this form we have no way to delete your survey responses as they are anonymous.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available to you in a report format that will be emailed to you at your request, see next sheet. Results are anticipated to be completed by September, 2015.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Madelyn Law using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [REB #]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time while filling out the survey but that once I hit "submit" my data will no longer be able to be withdrawn.

By check-marking **all** of the boxes below, participants are agreeing to participate in the research study as mentioned above. Please note that all boxes must be checked to formally provide consent on participating in the study and that participants are advised to keep a copy for themselves. Submitting of this form must be done electronically/online to provide consent to the research party.

- I agree to participate in this study described above and I have made this decision based on the information explained to me and read in this Letter of Invitation/Consent
- This study has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions and can get more information in the future
- I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time during the interview
- I understand that once I have completed my interview, I can still request to have it excluded from analysis by contacting members of the research party

\_\_\_\_\_ Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Email Address

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature

**Appendix V**

Alphanumeric Pseudonym Example

Participant 1= A

Participant 7= B

Participant 2= C

Participant 10= D