



# Student Experience and Student Success

## Thought Paper

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Submitted to Provost and Vice-President, Academic, Dr. Teri Balsler

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On behalf of the Student Experience and Student Success Self-Study Team<sup>1</sup>

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## Executive Summary

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This thought paper is the result of work conducted by the Student Experience & Student Success Self-Study Team, which looked at what student success means and explored Dalhousie's role in ensuring it. The findings, themes, recommendations and insights contained within are intended to assist the Provost and Vice-President, Academic in exploring, establishing and articulating Dalhousie's future strategic priorities related to this area.

This self-study team was organized into two subcommittees that each explored a focus area (undergraduate and graduate/professional) through four lenses (systemic barriers, recruitment/admission, early degree success/retention, and completion/graduate outcomes).

The subcommittees were guided by four goals:

1. Investigate and analyze emerging themes and trends as they relate to student success.
2. Provide recommendations on how to improve and enhance the student experience at Dalhousie University.
3. Consider how to provide a transformative student experience at Dalhousie.
4. Highlight systemic barriers that impact student success.

In their research, the self-study team gave extensive consideration to all previous work at Dalhousie in this area, particularly the 2015 Belong Report. The team was also deliberate about utilizing existing survey data in order to avoid reinventing existing research. Moreover, the self-study team was intentional and holistic in applying a critical lens to both the interpretation of the questions before them and their process to ensure this self-study was undertaken from an equity, diversity and inclusion perspective.

The outcomes of the self-study process are articulated in this paper, including the findings of their consultations, focus groups, an assessment of pre-existing survey data, and a literature review. Additionally, this paper offers a theoretical framework, which provides context for understanding the literature review and recommendations. The paper concludes by articulating the team's take on "what success will look like" related to the student experience and student success.

The self-study team's recommendations are conveyed in four main areas they identified as having the most impact on student success and experience: 1) Sense of belonging, 2) Future readiness, 3) Equitable admission, and 4) Systemic barriers.

Related to "what success will look like," this paper offers two key assertions. First, Dalhousie cannot create a single definition of student success because the student experience varies widely depending on a wide variety of factors, including individual lived experiences and histories. Second, there is a significant and ongoing call for cultural change at Dalhousie in order for the institution to more proactively and broadly address and consider systemic barriers and their impact on historically marginalized populations. At the heart of this cultural change is a

need to more fully centre students in Dalhousie's decision-making and more fully consider how the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner may differ from the 200+ years of tradition Dalhousie has been built on.

The paper concludes by exploring the learnings from the pandemic response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The self-study team sees this historical moment as an important opportunity to continue the rapid culture changes required by the pandemic response in an effort to permanently advance the institution's ability to deliver an exceptional student experience and support student success.

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## I. Background and Context

In 2018, with the arrival of a new Provost and Vice-President, Academic, a number of consultations began to determine Dalhousie's future strategic priorities. Through this process, grassroots conversations were launched to ensure the entire university community was engaged in the consultation process. This began with the Provost Listening Survey, which inquired about the experiences and concerns of faculty, staff, and student community members (See Figure 1).

Informed by these consultations, online learning circles were developed. These were "open format sessions meant for individuals to come together to meet informally to read and discuss topics of mutual interest that would help to inform the university strategic priorities and plan" (Dalhousie Learning Circle Brightspace page).

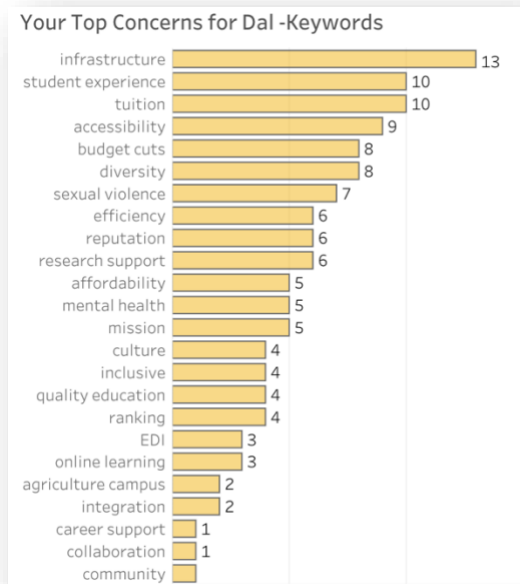


Figure 1: Provost Learning Survey

Those learning circles informed the creation of eight themed self-study groups, each tasked with exploring a context, defining issues, proposing priorities and suggesting high-level recommendations.

Each self-study team was co-led by one staff and one faculty member and included members drawn from diverse stakeholder groups across the university community, including faculty, staff and students.

One of the eight identified themes, which is the subject of this thought paper, was **Student Experience and Student Success**.

The purpose of this self-study team was to explore what student success means and what Dalhousie's role is in ensuring it. The focus was

also on examining the student experience and how Dalhousie can foster long-term success for its students as global citizens and lifelong learners.

### Learning from Dalhousie's pandemic response

In the midst of the drafting of this thought paper, the world entered the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Worldwide, the pandemic response has had an impact on almost every societal and economic norm. Here on campus, the response has challenged the entire Dalhousie community to rethink how we operate as a university.

Dalhousie is built on over 200 years of tradition. Change often moves through the system slowly in a way that may, at times, seem like unresponsiveness to calls for renewal. "Traditional"

teaching methods are embraced at Dalhousie, and there is a tendency to be slow to consider alternative methods until there is no choice but to do so. The pandemic response has showed us we have the ability to be responsive to changing situations and student needs.

Though the move to emergency remote learning was challenging, it also revealed Dalhousie's ability to be responsive and adopt a student-centric approach that puts student needs at the heart of the decision-making process. In an incredibly short time, Dalhousie has adjusted regulations, classes have been revamped and grading methods have been reviewed to account for the impact of circumstances on students.

Interestingly for the purposes of this self-study thought paper, many of the common themes in the concerns expressed during the self-study process were addressed rather efficiently in the shift to remote learning during the pandemic response. In addition, issues related to systemic barriers have been front and centre in ongoing pandemic response discussions as it has been recognized that students are now living in environments that shows the inequities of student experiences.

In this way, Dalhousie can draw inspiration and energy from the pandemic response, because it underlines that when there is sufficient motivation and pressing need, Dalhousie has the capacity for change and ability to adapt.

The pandemic experience and response has added a new question that accentuates the findings and recommendations of this thought paper. How can we apply the responsiveness we discovered during the pandemic response to make rapid and measurable changes to the student experience and student success at Dalhousie? Put another way, how can we alter our decision-making processes and continue to critically examine how we think about student success and what it means to have a sense of belonging to the institution with a sense of urgency similar to the one present during a global health crisis?

## II. Self-Study Team: Purpose and Process

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The strategic purpose of the Student Experience & Student Success Self-Study Team was to assess at what student success means and explore Dalhousie's role in ensuring it, along with exploring how the student experience at Dalhousie fosters students' long-term success as global citizens and life-long learners (Appendix A). Team members for this self-study consisted of faculty, staff and student community members, representing various constituencies and campuses.

Through discussion informed by a review of available institutional data and surveys, we initially established three subcommittees: undergraduate; graduate and professional students, and institutional and systemic barriers. These subcommittees were tasked with focusing on two areas: recruitment and admission and early degree success and completion by examining students' experiences and concerns.

Soon after our work began, it was evident that we should pivot and imbed institutional and systemic barriers within both of the other two committees in order to ensure that those topics remained an ever-present focus (Appendix B). These subcommittees were each led by a chair and were tasked with developing high-impact recommendations that would enable Dalhousie to take strategic steps to noticeably improve the quality of the student experience and to help ensure student success across all Dalhousie campuses.

Once established and solidified, the subcommittees articulated four goals that guided our work:

1. Investigate and analyze emerging themes and trends as they relate to student success.
2. Provide recommendations on how to improve and enhance the student experience at Dalhousie University.
3. Consider how to provide a transformative student experience at Dalhousie.
4. Reveal systemic barriers that impact student success.

In order to honour and leverage past work and initiatives, these subcommittees carefully considered work that had been done previously at Dalhousie. We also ensured that we were intentional and holistic in applying a critical lens to both our interpretation of the questions before us and our approach to conducting the self-study.

To begin with, we analyzed Dalhousie retention rates and examined work that had been done as part of that strategic priority process. Two findings stood out and shaped our early thinking.

Currently, Dalhousie experiences approximately 16% attrition rate of students from year one to year two (December of year one to December of year two). Although there have been some initiatives developed to address this issue, our exploration did not reveal evidence that these initiatives have “moved the needle” very much. Additionally, there was a feeling among the self-study team that senior student issues often go unaddressed, particularly the concerns of graduate students. We also felt that there had been limited work done previously at Dalhousie related to the student experience, particularly in terms of students’ sense of belonging.

As our process unfolded, we built on our background research and subcommittee work by conducting a number of additional consultations, including:

- Senior team strategy planning
- Senate think tank
- Student focus groups
- Faculty & staff Black CAUCUSS
- Welcome back session

Additionally, our team was cognizant of and deliberate about the need to use available information and data rather than spending available time and resources conducting additional focus groups and surveys that would replicate previous research. Guided by this emphasis, our team conducted an analysis of numerous pre-existing assessment tools, including:

- Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC), 2019 First-Year Student Survey

- CUSC, 2017 Middle-Years Student Survey
- CUSC, 2018 Graduating Student Survey
- National Student Survey on Engagement, 2017 First Year and Senior-Year Survey
- National College Health Assessment (NCHA) II, Spring 2019
- Educational Advisory Board (EAB) Campus Climate Survey, Spring 2016
- International Student Barometer (ISB), Autumn 2017
- Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS), 2019
- Dalhousie Campus Climate Survey, 2019

Informed by this research, and through our initial discussions and decisions about the Team's structure and focus, we agreed that for the purposes of this self-study we would focus on two areas and explore them through four lenses.

**Focus Areas:**

1. Undergraduate experience
2. Graduate/professional student experience

**Lenses:**

1. Systemic barriers
2. Recruitment/admission
3. Early degree success (retention)
4. Completion/graduate outcomes.



## Linking the 2020 self-study back to 2015 Belong Report

**African Nova Scotians** and **Transgender/queer** groups have the highest proportion of respondents that experience anxiety when coming to work or coming to school, with **7 out of 10** and **8 out of 10** respondents reporting feeling anxious at least sometimes/ocassionally.

People with disability/differing abilities, West Asian, Sout East Asian and **2SLGBTQA+** respondents also reported more frequent experiences of anxiety when coming to work or study at Dal, with a little over half reporting feeling anxious at least sometimes.

By contrast, **Latino, White, East Asian, South Asian and Aboriginal respondents** reported lower frequencies of self-reported anxiety, with roughly **6 in 10** stating that it occurs rarely or never.

Figure 2: Belong Report

As the self-study team was forming, it was clear that we had an opportunity to extend and build on previous work undertaken at Dalhousie. To ensure continuity of insights, the self-study team committed to being informed by, and attentive to, the 2015 Dalhousie [Belong Report: Supporting an inclusive and diverse university](#), authored by a 12-person group that held over 60 consultation sessions.

Most of that 12-person group, as well as their outreach meetings, consisted of representatives from historically marginalized populations. These individuals and groups were engaged deeply in order to help bring their stories to the forefront and access the wisdom and insights of their experiences of racism, isolation and marginality at Dalhousie.

As this 2020 self-study team's consultation process unfolded, many of the experiences relayed during the Belong Report process in 2015 were also expressed once again. Feelings of disrespect, not feeling included and marginalization were all frequently communicated during the consultations that informed this thought paper.

In particular, one of the strongest reoccurring themes that arose in 2015 and again in 2020 was skepticism that anything will actually change. As the 2020 self-study process unfolded, many members of our historically marginalized communities expressed, once again, that they feel disengaged and wary of another process in which they are asked for their opinion but left with the impression that significant change is unlikely.

Given that the concerns surfaced by the Belong Report process align with findings of this self-study, we have reiterated key recommendations from the Belong Report in the recommendations of this self-study thought paper to underscore important work that remains to be done.

### III. Adopting a Critical Approach and Lens

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Underlining the importance of adopting an equity, diversity and inclusion lens for this self-study process, charter for the Student Experience and Student Success self-study team charter states:

You cannot talk about student success without ensuring that you take an EDI lens. Success looks different for different students and this is important to acknowledge and recognize. Not only is it important to ensure that students feel that they are valued as a whole person, it is essential for the institution, faculty and staff to consider their work

within the frame of EDI. This lens will be integrated into the very fabric of this self-study, the recommendations as well how we move forward. Using critical approaches to student success will be paramount to the success of this work. (Appendix A)

Guided by this assertion, the co-leads of our self-study team established early on in the process that we would engage in this work through a critical approach and lens.

In order to ensure that we were truly looking at this work through an equity, diversity and inclusion lens, we worked to integrate concepts of critical theory and anti-oppression into all stages and elements of our work, including the consultations and recommendations.

*“Institutional oppression occurs when those from the dominant groups take for granted that their values are organizationally supported, thereby, giving them tangible power and acquisition of resources to shape and define how decisions and policies are made and, indirectly, determine who should benefit from them.” (Ying Yee, 2008).*

Critical theory centers the lived experiences of historically marginalized peoples in order to identify and locate ways in which societies produce and preserve specific inequalities through social, cultural and economic systems (Heiser et al., 2017). This approach works to interrogate “by and for whom” to ensure that we constantly consider power and privilege and ensure these topics do not go unexamined (Heiser et al., 2017).

Critical theory causes us to acknowledge our own subjectivity and ways in which our positionality influences our practice (Heiser et al., 2017). Being more critical in our work helps any person, group or process to better understand and expose systems and institutions that regulate behaviour and perpetuate inequitable outcomes (Heiser et al., 2017). It also questions common sense assumptions and norms that are taken for granted.

Critical practitioners are highly attentive to differences between groups and seek to remedy underlying systemic inequities that produce differential outcomes by exposing and addressing power, privilege and structure (Heiser et al., 2017). The critical theory of anti-oppression means giving up power, being inclusive of all groups, having representation from these groups and having joint decision-making about policy procedures and practices (Wong & Ying Yee, 2010). It works to offset the common tendency to impose dominant values on marginalized communities while failing to take into account the reality of inequality (Wong & Ying Yee, 2010).

A critical approach and lens is a way of naming oppression that happens against certain people, based on their identities. It also provides a way to work toward ending that mistreatment, oppression, and violence toward that particular group.

As referenced by Wong & Ying Yee (2010), to work within an anti-oppression framework, one must:

- Analyze power.
- Recognize that all power imbalances are socially constructed.

- Be continuously conscious of how to accurately identify what is and what is not oppression.
- Know how to identify the processes by which power imbalances occur simultaneously at the individual, organizational and systemic level, resulting in the exclusion of social groups.
- Address inequalities at the individual level.
- Critically evaluate whether actions have a positive impact on rebalancing power and reducing systemic inequalities within the community organizational culture.

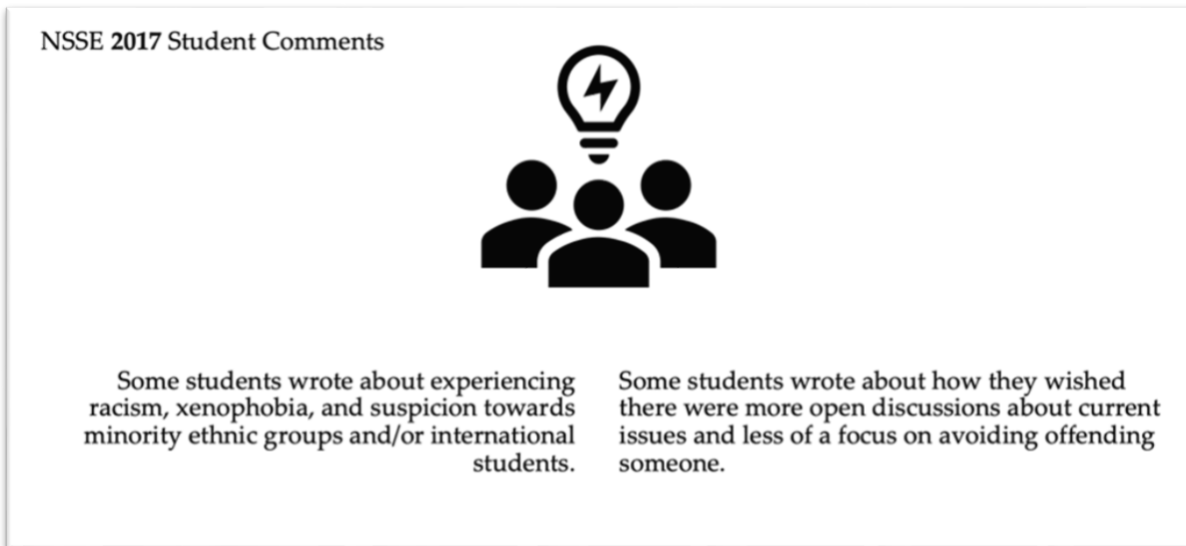


Figure 3: 2017 NSSE Report

According to the Universities Canada report “Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Canadian Universities: 2019 Report on the National Survey,” barriers to EDI have impacts related to a number of specific areas, including:

- lack of resources
- difficulty attracting and retaining diverse talent, including senior leadership
- institutional systems policies, structures and cultures that can hinder progress
- a lack of data on institutional challenges
- and insufficient information on best practices for EDI

*“Don’t waste money on accessibility or inclusion concerns. The university does too much for these already. Focus on bringing in the best students and the best faculty and everything else will fall into place”*

*Dalhousie 2020 BAC report comment from a member in the community.*

This is similar to what this self-study team discovered and experienced. For example, a reoccurring theme that arose in relation to our work was the need to change the culture on campus as a *precondition* of being truly inclusive of students at Dalhousie.

## IV. Overarching Themes: Consultations, Focus Groups and Surveys

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In preparation for this thought paper, the co-leads and self-study team identified common themes and similarities that arose through the process of consultations, focus groups and assessment of survey data.

These themes and similarities are as follows:

- Students want the opportunity to pick and choose information and programming that is relevant to them.
- Students want to connect directly with people with a focus on developing relationships.
- Through focus groups, it appeared that students have an easier time connecting with resources on the AC campus (although they couldn't always name the direct service, they could name the person it is associated with.) Halifax campus students had a more difficult time even knowing about services.
- Students who had accessible faculty and utilized office hours emphasized the importance of this connection.
- Employability was raised by a variety of stakeholders for different reasons.
  - o As evidenced by the comments in the focus groups, students who were in Faculties with co-op programs (Management, Science, and Engineering), were more knowledgeable about central and faculty-specific resources than those who were not.
  - o Students outside of these programs were often unaware of these supports.
  - o Faculty and staff indicated the importance of helping students understand the supports and services available to them and how this relates to post-graduate outcomes.
- Equity, diversity and inclusion, and discussions around systemic barriers, were raised by all stakeholder groups.
- A need to provide as consistent a student experience as possible was frequently addressed.
- Continue to build upon the relationship and connection between Faculties and Student Affairs.
- Connect with more academic options outside of the classroom, e.g. experiential learning.
- How do we define success as an institution?
- Need to increase transparency of communication.
- Expand definition of who we consider student.
- Examine power dynamics and relationships especially between faculty and students and faculty and staff.
- Embed EDI practices into what it means to be at Dalhousie and all programs and services.
- Importance of normalizing help-seeking behaviours.

Additionally, a theme that was evident and easily identified in many of the consultation sessions, including the Welcome Back workshop, was that most (if not all) of the issues identified have a connection to student success and experience, either directly or indirectly.

For example, here are some additional themes related to student experience and success that were common throughout the various consultations:

- The need for Dalhousie to develop a common identity that everyone can see themselves in to create a sense of community and institutional pride. What is Dalhousie's niche and purpose? What is our promise to students?
- A common orientation required for all students to introduce key academic competencies recognizing the different levels of competencies needed by student type.
- Addressing the barriers of the institution and how we help students navigate these within the institution; and work to remove them.
- What does a modern and valuable student experience/learning environment look like and how can Dalhousie be the frontrunner in this area?
- How do we address the employability and future readiness of our students, connecting them to employment as well as experiential learning opportunities.

## V. Overview: Assessment of Survey Data

One of the things that the committee was cognizant about (as mentioned above) was the need to use the information and data that we had as opposed to conducting more focus groups and surveys. Therefore, in addition to the above, we also conducted an analysis of numerous assessment tools, including:

- Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC), 2019 First-Year Student Survey
- CUSC, 2017 Middle-Years Student Survey
- CUSC, 2018 Graduating Student Survey
- National Student Survey on Engagement, 2017 First Year and Senior-Year Survey
- National College Health Assessment (NCHA) II, Spring 2019
- Educational Advisory Board (EAB) Campus Climate Survey, Spring 2016
- International Student Barometer (ISB), Autumn 2017
- Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS), 2019
- Dalhousie Campus Climate Survey, 2019

(For details of the data that was explored, please refer to Appendix C)

In order to fully interpret the assessment data, the self-study team first identified a number of research questions.

These questions are as follows:

1. What do students say about infrastructure (i.e. – classroom space, technology, etc.)?
2. Where do students access support(s) and how do they rate it?
3. What do students say about sense of community and whether they feel this (or not)?

4. What resources do students say assist them while in university?
5. What are some barriers to success students indicate?
6. Based on the data results what are our strengths? What are our gaps?
7. How do students relate their experience to career?
8. How long do students indicate it takes them to complete their degree at Dalhousie? What are some of the barriers?
9. What is the average debt load of students? How do finances play into their success?
10. How safe do students feel on campus? What are factors that influence their “safety”?
11. How does the student experience compare when they first arrive on campus versus nearing the end of the degree?
12. How does the graduate student experience differ?

According to the 2017 NSSE Consortium Report, first year and senior level students both indicated “improving the quality/availability of study spaces” and “improving the quality of classrooms or lecture halls” as being the two items that the university most needs to address in order to improve the academic/learning experience outside of the classroom.

## Infrastructure

NSSE 2017 Student Comments

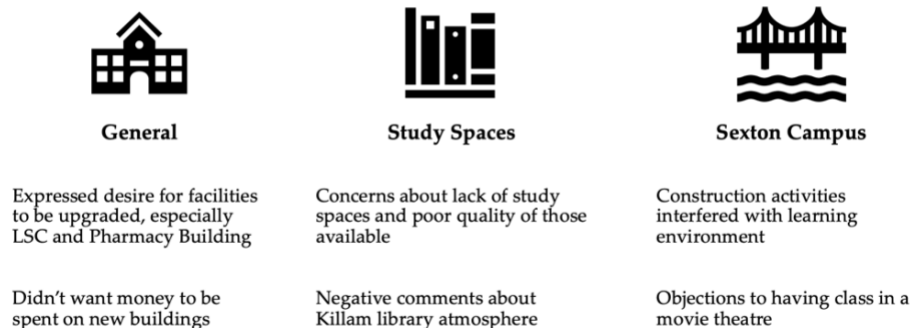


Figure 4: 2017 NSSE Report

When examining the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) survey data (2017-2019), we see differences in how satisfied students are with the institution as they move through their degree. 73% of first-year students indicated that they were very satisfied/satisfied with the concern shown to them as a student by the institution. This is compared to only 57% of senior level students. Although it can be argued that the longer a student is at the institution, the more challenges they may face, it is worth noting that many of our supports and services are frontloaded to first-year students, and we need to look beyond first year to assess student needs.

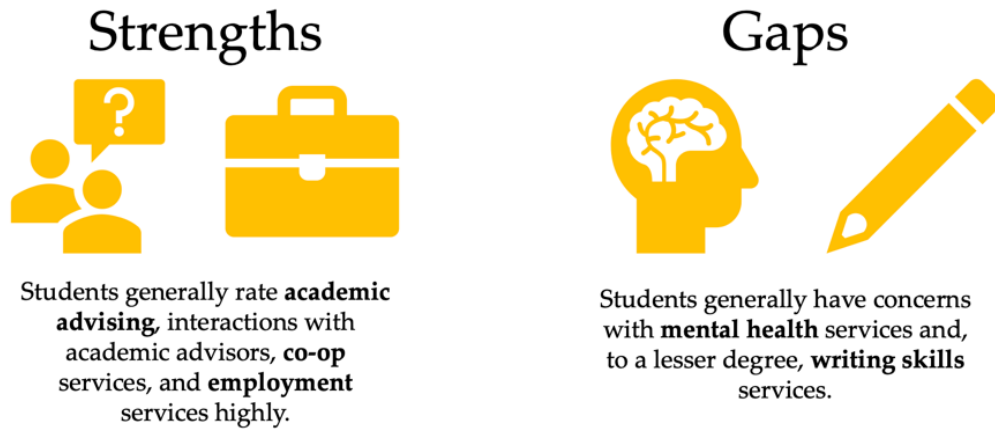


Figure 5:2019 CUSC Report

We see this trend arising again with the question “How much does your institution emphasize supports to help students succeed academically?” in the 2017 NSSE survey. Thirty-three percent of first year students felt that the institution provided some/very little, while 48% of senior year students indicated some/very little. As indicated in the literature review below, ensuring that students are prepared academically is essential to their success. Although this support is essential for students in the first year of their program, it is just as important for upper-year students to be supported academically as they move into more challenging aspects of their program.

According to the results of the Dalhousie 2016 Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) survey, 73.6% of first-year Dalhousie students reported participating in an orientation program before or after arriving on campus during Fall of 2015. Although many students reported more than 80% satisfaction in most aspects of orientation, there is still room for improvement. 13.5% of students indicated dissatisfaction with information received around understanding academic expectations, 17.2% were dissatisfied with the supports around personal and social transition to university, 10.1% were dissatisfied about the amount of resources they received on campus life and 12.9% were dissatisfied with information about student services. The highest level of dissatisfaction was around confidence-building at 19.4%.

## Infrastructure

### Strengths



Students are generally satisfied with social facilities.

### Gaps



Parking and study spaces are main points of dissatisfaction.

Figure 6: 2017 NSSE Report

CUSC can also provide important information about matching expectations to experiences. CUSC surveys students on several indicators to determine whether student expectations match their actual experiences after attending university for a term. This provides us with a wealth of information on how to better align expectations with experiences. Academics and finances appeared to be the two areas that students faced the most incongruences. Sixty-one percent of students indicated that the cost of going to university was much higher than they expected. In addition, 49% indicated that they underestimated the debt they might need to take on to complete their degree, 46% of students indicated that the time they had to put into coursework was more than they expected, and 43% found university courses to be more academically demanding than they thought it would be. Finally, 41% indicated that their course grades were much less than they expected them to be.

## Community

### Strengths



Students feel a **greater sense of community** overall than comparison group.

### Gaps



Some room for improvement in Dal's emphasis on **encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds**.

Figure 7: 2017 NSSE Report



Sense of belonging is a major consideration throughout this thought paper that was a continual theme throughout the self-study process and this survey data assessment. According to the 2017-2019 CUSC Surveys, 81% of first year students felt as if they belong at Dalhousie. Unlike earlier insights, this feeling is the same for senior students: 81%. In this way, Dalhousie is faring better than our comparator group of universities. One of the most interesting findings was that the classroom was where students indicated the highest sense of belonging, but, conversely, was also where historically marginalized students indicated the most harms were done.

There are also similarities around sense of community in the campus climate survey. Respondents self-identifying as a racialized person had lower ratings on most dimensions of Campus Climate, particularly their perceptions of Dalhousie as isolating, homogeneous and racist. Only 4 in 10 respondents self-identifying as a racialized person state Dalhousie's climate is inclusive and non-racist versus 6 in 10 for all respondents. And only half of self-identifying racialized persons see Dalhousie as a welcoming and respectful place versus 7 in 10 of all respondents.

## Community

NSSE 2017 Student Comments



Students who live in residence report finding it easy to make friends, while students who live off-campus commented on difficulty making friends.



All comments regarding school spirit were negative.



Some concerns reported about inclusion and diversity.

Figure 8: 2017 NSSE Report

A good indicator of a positive, healthy campus climate experience for Dalhousie community members is the levels of anxiety reported by students. According to the Campus Climate survey, there is a great deal of variation in the levels of self-reported anxiety across groups. African Nova Scotians and Transgender/queer groups have the highest proportion of respondents that experience anxiety when coming to work or school, with 7 out of 10 and 8 out of 10 respondents reporting feeling anxious at least sometimes/occasionally. People with disabilities/differing abilities, West Asian, South East Asian and 2SLGBTQA+ respondents also reported more frequent experiences of anxiety, with a little over half reporting feeling anxious at least sometimes. By contrast, Latino, white, East Asian, South Asian and Indigenous respondents reported lower frequencies of self-reported anxiety, with roughly 6 in 10 stating that it occurs rarely or never.

As we analyzed the data, it was apparent there is a gap when it comes to assessment data of graduate students. Not much data exists, especially in comparison to undergraduate student data. Although Dalhousie did participate in the 2019 Canadian Association for Graduate Studies CGPSS survey, we only had 200 respondents. As such, the data from the survey needs to be considered with that relatively small sample size in mind.

Overall, the students that responded were satisfied with their experiences at Dalhousie. Most satisfied with their academic experience (80% good – excellent), and least satisfied with their student life experience at 69% (good – excellent). In terms of obstacles related to their degree, 73% of students indicated financial pressures as at least a minor obstacle. Conversely, immigration laws or regulations were not at all an obstacle for most respondents.

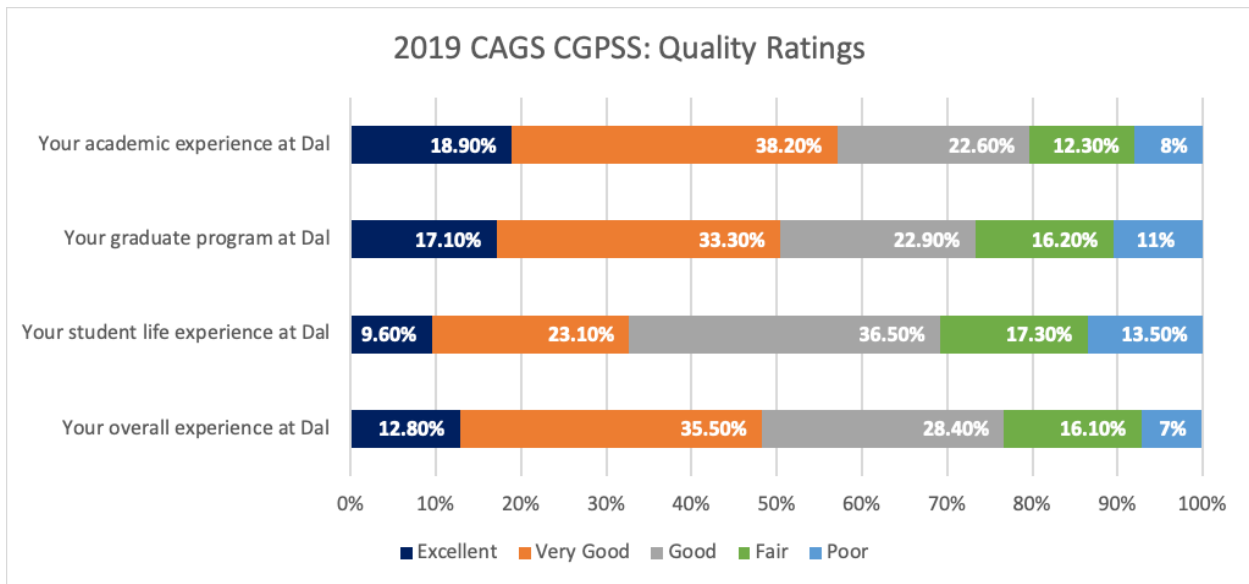


Figure 9: 2019 Canadian Graduate Student Survey

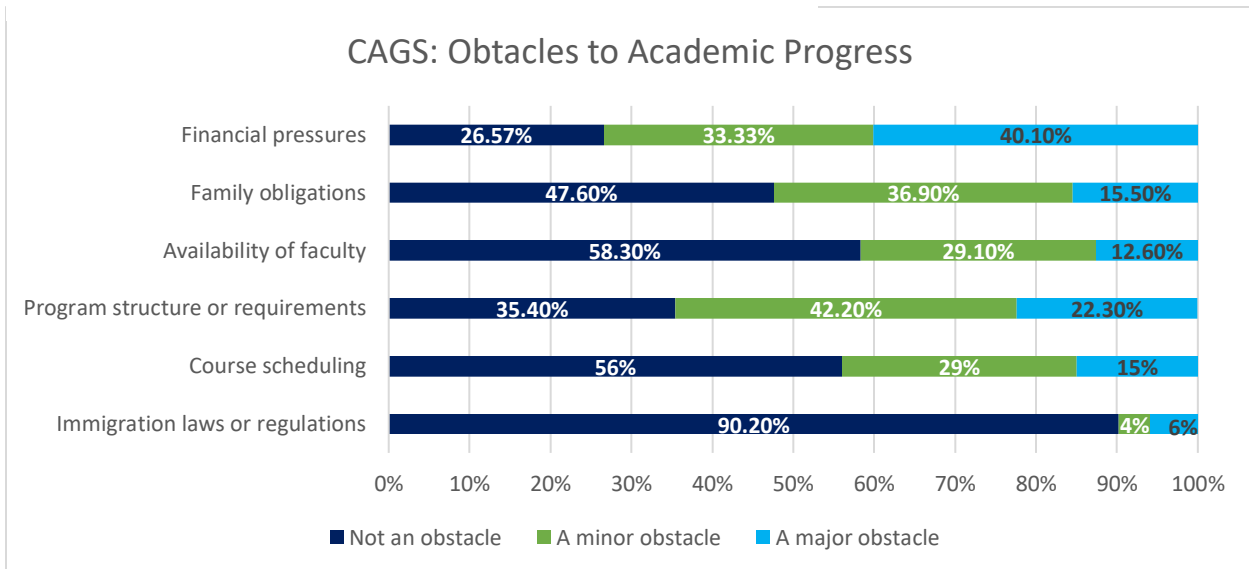


Figure 10: 2019 Canadian Graduate Student Survey

## VI. Theoretical Framework for Insights, Recommendations and Future Strategic Directions

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As this thought paper was being drafted, the co-leads of our self-study team recommended adopting a theoretical framework to provide a structure for understanding and contextualizing our findings and recommendations. In particular, a framework will be helpful in framing the findings of the literature review and organizing the recommendations.

A theoretical framework also has the potential to add value during the process of exploring and deciding on future strategic directions at Dalhousie related to Student Experience and Student Success.

To this end, the co-leads have suggested adopting the framework outlined in the 2016 book, *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most* authored by Charles C. Schroeder, Peter Felten, Betsy O. Barefoot, John N Gardner, Leo M. Lambert, and Freeman A. Hrabowski III.

While this book focuses on the undergraduate experience, our belief is that the principles outlined by this framework are equally valuable for thinking about the graduate and professional student experience.

The theoretical framework we have adopted for this thought paper includes the six core themes and commitments of *The Undergraduate Experience*, which the authors use to demonstrate evidence-based insights about what leads to institutional success in creating an exceptional undergraduate experience.

Those six core themes and commitment are as follows:

1. Learning
2. Relationships
3. Expectations
4. Alignment
5. Improvement
6. Leadership

As context for understanding this framework, here is a brief explanation of each theme and commitment, along with a list of the action principles the authors identify within each theme.

(All of what follows is drawn/paraphrased from Barefoot, et al. *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most*.)

## **1. Learning**

Learning must be at the heart of our work and at the top of our priorities. It is critical for us to support learning as students to strive to question their assumptions, inquire into the effectiveness of their work, partner with peers to solve problems and make evidence-informed decisions. Learning needs to occur everywhere, not just the classroom. It is essential to consider what learning is happening for students, both inside and outside of the classroom and ensure that this learning is embedded and connected.

### **Action principles:**

1. Take institutional responsibility for student learning.
2. Create opportunities for learning in and out of the classroom.
3. Recognize the complexity of meaningful learning.
4. Help students integrate learning experiences.
5. Promote and reward learning for everyone at the institution.

## **2. Relationships**

Relationships are essential to the university experience. A vibrant and inclusive community emerges from the quality of the relationships that strengthens it. Strong institutions value strong relationships and they do not leave these to chance. Relationships are cultivated and nurtured intentionally at all levels.

### **Action principles:**

1. Make relationships central to learning.
2. Create pathways to lead students into relationships with peers, faculty and staff.
3. Nurture both learning and belonging through relationships.
4. Encourage everything on campus to cultivate relationships; celebrate and reward relationship building.

## **Expectations**

Clear and high expectations are central to the value and impact of an institution. Thriving institutions have a sharp focus on the excellence of the entire student experience, including everything from admissions and financial aid processes to graduation and alumni affairs. These expectations are communicated clearly and consistently, touching everyone from prospective students and employees to experienced faculty and staff.

### **Action principles:**

1. Focus expectations on what matters most to student learning and success.
2. Communicate, and reiterate, high expectations.
3. Set expectations early.
4. Implement policies and practices congruent with espoused expectations.
5. Help individuals and groups develop the capacity to set and meet their own expectations.

## **Alignment**

Align resources, policies and practices with their educational purposes and student characteristics, just as well-designed courses align goals and assessments. Thriving institutions transform silos into systems by supporting cross-unit coordination and by paying more attention to the student experience than to how the organizational chart divides up the campus.

### **Action principles:**

1. Make alignment a shared goal.
2. Align administrative practices and policies.
3. Align academic programs and campus practices.
4. Challenge students to align their learning.
5. Leverage the benefits of alignment.

## **Improvement**

Excellent institutions critically assess student progress and their own effectiveness on specific, relevant measures and then use the results of that process to help students deepen their learning and faculty and staff to make improvements in their programs. The nature and quality of those outcomes should be directly connected to an institution's mission and a student's goals.

### **Action principles:**

1. Recognize that assessment is fundamental to improvement.
2. Focus assessment on improving what matters most.
3. Commit to using evidence to inform changes.
4. Involve everyone in the process of making change.
5. Adapt best practices from elsewhere.
6. Cultivate an ethos of positive restlessness.
7. Model the process of improvement for students and the institution.

## **Leadership**

Leaders need to share a sense of vision and purpose. People throughout the organization need to see themselves as part of the leadership team. To thrive, everyone at the institution needs to be asking, "How does my work contribute positively to students' learning?" Students' education is a shared responsibility for all of us on campus. Retention rates and time to degree are important means when evaluating an institution but they are not the proper ends of undergraduate education.

### **Action principles:**

1. Lead through collaborative practices.
2. Articulate clear, aspirational goals linked to institutional mission and values.
3. Cultivate a culture that keeps students and learning at the centre of decision-making.

4. Foster shared responsibility and leadership at all levels of the institution.
5. Make strategic choices and take informed risks.
6. Focus on dynamic, improvement-oriented planning, executing and communicating.

## VII. Literature Review

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For ease of reference and interpretation, we have organized the following literature review around the theoretical framework suggested above.

### **Learning**

**Key themes: creating environments, prompt feedback, normalize help-seeking behaviours**

In their highly-quoted article, Chickering and Gamson (1987) cite seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education that work for many different types of students. Chickering and Gamson (1987) determine that high-quality practice in education includes: contact between students and faculty; reciprocity and cooperation among students; active learning techniques; prompt feedback to students; emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. To increase engagement, contact between faculty and students must be regular and meaningful and occur both inside and outside the classroom (Zepke and Leach, 2005). Course design is perhaps the single most important activity faculty engage in to improve student learning.

Undergraduate students are often uncomfortable expressing confusion around course material. This can be particularly acute for students who have doubts about whether they belong in university or in a discipline, such as first-generation students or women in disciplines traditional dominated by males.

Liddell et al. (2014) found that students' experiences out of class, such as internships and practica, were perceived as being more significant to the socialization process than in-class experiences.

### **Relationships**

**Key themes: High-impact practices, mentorship, sense of belonging**

Once students enroll in university, their actual experiences within the first year are the best predictor of persistence, as evidenced in the literature as well as Dal-specific data. The degree of connectedness between students and their institution, especially with their educational programs, is what is called student engagement (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009). Engaged students are very connected. They are more likely to persist in their studies and be successful. Their engagement can mitigate against any entering characteristics that place them at risk of not having success and perhaps of dropping out (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009).

Students who form a broad network and develop relationships with other students are more successful educationally, are more satisfied, and are most likely persistent in their studies (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009). It is important for institutions to encourage and promote that students “develop a portfolio of relations that can provide key resources (academic as well as social)” over the freshman year (Thomas, 2000 in University of Fraser Valley Report, 2009). Students who become involved will develop more commitment to the institution and their education goals and, in turn, are more likely to persist through to graduation. A student-centered campus environment is one that supports learning and encourages involvement. The campus environment plays a role in increasing the likelihood of students’ integration into the learning community. The environment should promote a greater sense belonging. According to Astin (1993), peers have considerable influence on students’ decisions to persist and asserts that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years”.

The process of socialization in graduate school is also a key aspect of graduate student success, both academically and in students’ transitions to professional life (Adler & Adler, 2005; Gardner, 2005; Irani et al., 2014; Liddell et al., 2014; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Ramirez, 2017; Reiff & Ballin, 2016; Weidman et al., 2001). Through the socialization process, “persons internalize behavioral norms and standards and form a sense of identity and commitment to a professional field” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 6). According to Gardner (2005), socialization occurs “on multiple levels and within distinct contexts that influence the student and (their) satisfaction and success in the degree program” (p. 737). Gardner (2005) identified five major themes in successful graduate student socialization, including students’ need to balance academic, personal, and professional responsibilities; students’ processes of transitioning to scholarly independence; students’ efforts to make sense of the ambiguity in program guidelines and expectations; students’ intellectual and personal development; and faculty, peer, and financial support.

Factors that can lead to barriers to successful graduate school socialization include being an off-campus or distance student, being a first-generation graduate student, being an international student, and being a member of an underrepresented or marginalized group (Dua, 2007; Hyun et al., 2007; Irani et al., 2014; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Ramirez, 2017). Irani et al. (2014) found that graduate students participating in distance or off-campus coursework likely feel a greater sense of isolation than students participating in on-campus educational experiences, and that this lack of connectedness can have a negative impact on their success. Portnoi and Kwong (2011) found that first-generation master’s students have more difficulty deducing the norms and expectations of graduate school than other graduate students, and that many have difficulty developing connections and managing “feelings of inadequacy” (p. 413). Studies also show that graduate students from underrepresented and/or marginalized groups, as well as international students who experience cultural, social, and language barriers, have greater difficulty with socialization than other graduate students (Dua, 2007; Hyun et al. 2007; Ramirez, 2017).

Having supportive relationships with supervisors and faculty members has been shown to be one of the key factors in graduate student emotional well-being, (Ali et al., 2016; Alkerlind &

McAlpine, 2017; Barnes, 2010; Di Pierro, 2017; Hyun et al., 2006; Klomparens et al., 2008; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007; Roach et al., 2019; Woloshyn et al., 2019). As Woloshyn et al. (2019) explain, within the graduate school classroom, professors can create inclusive environments, build nurturing relationships with students, provide accommodations, and promote relevant support services. For those graduate students who have designated supervisors, a highly functional relationship is essential, both to academic success and emotional well-being (Hyun et al., 2006; Klomparens et al., 2008; Roach et al. 2019). Due to students' preferences for supervisors to display "academic integrity, constructive feedback, open communication, and bonding" (p. 1243), Roach et al. (2019) recommend training programs for supervisors focusing on the psychosocial needs of students and the interpersonal aspects of supervision, and stress the importance of helping supervisors build "micro-counseling skills" (p. 1243) similar to those utilized in clinical psychology.

According to the research on thriving, creating a sense of community on campus is the single best way to help all students thrive. The four key elements of creating a sense of community include membership, ownership, relationship and partnership. Students who experience a greater sense of community, also see the institution as being more committed to their welfare, delivering on its promises and providing an appropriate space to connect others in meaningful way (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004).

As mentioned above, having supportive relationships with supervisors, advisors, and professors is a key aspect of graduate student mental health. These relationships are also recognized as essential components of overall graduate student success (Breunig & Penner, 2016; Duranczyk et al., 2015; Klomparens et al., 2008; Roach et al., 2019; Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). For graduate students with designated supervisors, such as those undertaking theses, their relationship with their supervisor is of the utmost importance (Ali et al., 2016; Alkerlind & McAlpine, 2017; Barnes, 2010; Breunig & Penner, 2016; Klomparens et al., 2008). According to Breunig and Penner (2016), open, clear communication, including the setting of mutually agreed upon expectations, as well as cultural and contextual understanding, are key aspects of a successful student/supervisor relationship. According to Klomparens et al. (2008), it is the responsibility of the faculty supervisor to set expectations in consultation with the student, and to make implicit expectations explicit. They recommend examining the "many graduate education processes and structures" and asking, "What explicit expectations might be set early on to maximize the use of time and productivity and prevent misunderstandings or conflicts from arising in the first place?" (Klomparens et al., 2008, p. 16). Students and faculty members enter into the supervisee-supervisor relationship with underlying expectations of their own role, as well as the role of the other person (Ali et al., 2016; Barnes, 2010; Roach et al., 2019). Ali et al. (2016) found that students and supervisors are in agreement that the supervisor should be interested in the student's research, the supervisor should provide constructive feedback and help the student with time management, and that the supervisor should help the student in areas of relative weakness. Research shows students also believe supervisors should provide an appropriate level of support while encouraging students to work as independently as possible, and that caring, supportive



supervisors were preferred over supervisors who focused only on the technical aspects of research (Ali et al., 2016; Roach et al., 2019).

## **Expectations**

### **Key themes: growth mindset, challenge and support**

Institutions typically measure student success in two ways: retention and graduation rates. However, there are four major factors (personal, academic, social and institutional) that shape the quality of students' educational experiences. The dominant theoretical model in the research literature is the Student Integration Model, originally developed by Vincent Tinto in the 1970s. Simply put, according to Tinto, students do not persist in their studies because of a lack of integration into the educational community (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009). Persistence is a function of the interactions between an individual student and the educational environment. Therefore, the degree of "fit" between the student's motivation to learn and academic ability and the institution's characteristics is a significant factor in determining the likelihood of a students' decision to persist (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009).

Students must have a clear understanding of what the university's expectations are and must see their "fit" with the institution. Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995) argue that students whose expectations align with their actual experience are more likely to persist and graduate. We recognize that many students begin their studies without a proper understanding of how to navigate a complex environment like a university. Alf Lizzio, a faculty member at Griffith University in Australia, and researcher in the first-year experience, summarizes it in this way:

We inadvertently place all of our students 'at-risk' when we do not explain and negotiate the 'rules of the game' with them. When students have to guess or infer what increases or decreases their chances of success they are likely to 'get it wrong' at least some of the time. The evidence suggests that we often unjustifiably assume or take for granted that students know what is expected of them. Commencing students often are not in a position to make realistic appraisals of the requirements of the job of being a uni student. In this sense, risk can be defined as a student misjudgement or misappraisal of course demands and their required investment (students' misconceptions or mistaken expectations about what is required). Risk is reduced (and chances of success increased) if we engage upfront in the process of assertively and supportively shaping expectations and contracting with students (Lizzio, 2011).

Students transitioning into post-secondary for the first time have developed a frame of reference that is not based upon any direction-depth experiences in universities and colleges. They may form false or possibly idealistic portrayals of the experience that could differ considerably from reality (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009). This is more often true for first generation students who often have no parental or other role models upon which to shape their expectations. Students need to feel comfortable with the institutional processes and in the organizational culture (Zepke and Leach, 2005). Although there are many communities within one institution that are interrelated and overlap each other, the "process of academic

and social integration (involvement) can be understood as emerging from student involvement with faculty and student peers in the communities of classrooms” (Tinto, 1997, p.617).

Institutions must clearly hold high expectations for their students to succeed. While high expectations alone do not guarantee high engagement, they set a tone within the organizational culture and motivate all to explore the many ways to create the conditions for students’ success (University of Fraser Valley report, 2009).

Tying this to the notion of holistic student retention is the concept of thriving. Thriving is defined as being “full engaged intellectually, socially and emotionally in the college experience (Schreiner, 2010). Looking beyond academic success and graduation, thriving students are those who are engaged in the learning process, invest effort to reach important educational goals, manage their time and commitments effectively, connect in healthy ways to other people, are optimistic about their future and positive about their present choices, and are committed to making a meaningful difference in the world around them (Schreiner, 2010). As applied to students in the post-secondary setting, the word thriving involves five scales of success, including: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, social connectedness and diverse citizenship (Schreiner, 2010) Engaged learning is the positive energy that one invests in their own learning, which is evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening in the moment and involvement in learning activities (Schreiner, 2010). These students can think purposefully about their university experience and environment, while processing content and ideas meaningfully. Academic determination emphasis student’s ability to set goals, regulate their learning as well as investment of effort and time management (Ryff & Keyes, 1995 as cited in Schreiner, 2010). Positive perspective represents ways in which students view their life, they see their future with confidence, expect good things and are able to reframe negative events into learning experiences. As a result of this positive perspective, they tend to be more satisfied with the university experience and life in general (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson and McIntosh, 2009 as cited in Schreiner, 2010). Social Connectedness involves having positive relationships, feeling heard and feeling connected to others. Diverse citizenship relates to one’s contributions to the culture (Schreiner, 2010). Thriving students take the time to help others and respond with openness and curiosity. They want to make a difference in their community, as well as society (Schreiner, 2010). This fits closely with what we know of Dalhousie students, many of whom identify themselves as “conscientious achiever”, that is, concerned with issues of social justice, equity and diversity. They want to make their community better, for all.

Through the research on thriving in university students, however, it was found that although student thriving was influenced by a number of factors, the magnitude of these differed greatly across ethnicities. Evidence suggests that there is not one path to thriving in university, but many different pathways that vary depending on a student’s ethnicity (Schreiner, 2010). For example, racially visible students’ satisfaction and sense of belonging on campus are typically lower than what white students reported. Their relationships with faculty were qualitatively different and contributed differently to their learning gains (Cole, 2007; Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004 as cited in Schreiner, 2010), and their process of adjustment to university differs, along with the role that campus involvement plays in their success (Fischer, 2007 as

cited in Schreiner, 2010). This was like Dalhousie's own NCHA data. According to the 2016 NCHA data results, when asked how often students felt they "belonged to a community", 49.3% of white students indicated that they felt a sense of belonging almost every day or every day. Conversely, 36.5% of black students and 31% of Arab students indicated the same. Over 40% of Arab and Asian, and 35% of Aboriginal and Black students indicated that they 'never, once or twice' felt they belonged to a community, versus only 18.9% of white students. White students may experience contributors of thriving much differently than students of colour, specifically campus involvement, spirituality and sense of community. Therefore, it is important to help students become selective in the campus activities and organizations that are most likely to connect to their passions, identities and interests.

## **Alignment**

**Key themes: connection between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, academic advising, early and frequent feedback, early alert, communication**

In addition to supportive relationships with their designated supervisors, research also indicates mentoring and advising are important for graduate student success (Duranczyk et al., 2015; Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Spivey-Mooring and Apprey (2014) explain that mentoring programs are especially significant for "individuals of underserved and underrepresented racial, ethnic, multiethnic, and multiracial heritage", and that such programs have positive impacts on students' "academic and social experiences as well as their feelings of connectedness to (the) professional community" (p. 393). Research also indicates graduate students benefit from having multiple mentors focused on mentoring them in different areas of their lives (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). In addition, research shows that the most successful models are inclusive and integrated into the fabric of the graduate school program. Duranczyk et al. (2015) described a student-centered model in place at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, which included cohorts of graduate students and faculty members who participated together in formal and informal events and maintained communication throughout the academic year, as well as a policy of frequent, periodic one-on-one advising. According to Duranczyk et al., this model helped to increase civility between and among graduate students, improved the advising and mentoring process, prepared students for professional life, and created "a network of allies for graduate students and alumni from diverse and historically underserved populations" (p. 152).

When done well, there is no argument that good advising has a positive impact on student retention, being one of the major academic and social domains of the university experience that affect student decisions about staying or leaving. Metzner (1989) conducted a longitudinal investigation of first to second year retention rates of students enrolled at a public university in the United States. Results revealed that students who perceived advising to be of "good quality" withdrew from university at a rate that was 25% lower than that of students who reported receiving "poor advising" and they withdrew at a rate that was 40% less than that of students who received no advising at all (Cuseo, 2003). Data generated by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) from 469 institutions revealed that students reporting the highest degree of satisfaction with the quality of their academic advisement were most likely to

demonstrate the highest levels of student engagement in university (Kuh, 2002). In *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (2005), Kuh et al. writes that just as important as the time and effort students put into their coursework is the way institutional strategies connect students to the campus environment and high-impact learning experiences. As developed by the NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising: “academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students’ educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes.” It helps students to value the learning process, to apply decision-making strategies, to put the college experience into perspective, to set priorities and evaluate events, to develop thinking and learning skills, to make choices, and to value the learning process. This is what good academic advising does for students.

What good advising illustrates, is the importance of alignment, and the importance of all areas of the university working together. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1995):

If undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and student affairs administrations, must devise ways to deliver undergraduate education that are comprehensive and integrated as the ways students actually learn. A whole new mindset is needed to capitalize on the inter-relatedness of the in-and-out-of-class influences on student learning and the functional connectedness of academic and student affairs divisions.

This is also reflected in the Dalhousie Student Affairs 2020 Strategic Plan, with a focus specifically on working collaboratively with university and community partners:

1. Build a reputation within Dalhousie for exceptional student affairs practice.
2. Lead the creation of exceptional student experiences through partnerships.
3. Lead the development of an institutional-wide approach to how Dalhousie delivers services and supports to our students, working with Faculties.
4. Lead Dalhousie’s contribution to the professional communities of practice for student affairs regionally, nationally, and internationally to inform best practices, innovation, and scholarship.

## **Improvement**

**Key features: assessment, evidence-informed change, best practices**

Effective assessments require clearly articulated goals that are linked to the institution’s mission and priorities. Research shows that evidence is rarely sufficient to spark meaningful reform. To counter initiative fatigue and to enhance the chance of evidence-based action, institutions and individuals should commit to these five practices (Blaich & Wise, 2011; Kuh & Hutchings, 2015; Walvoord, 2010):

- Establish clear improvement priorities for sustained focus.

- Communicate about the educational value and anticipated outcomes of each initiative.
- Gather enough data to have a reasonable basis for action and ensure the student voice was centered.
- Foster conversation about and engagement with that data so that those in positions to act have the opportunity to understand the evidence and shape the actions.
- Identify and celebrate successes along the way.

Understanding the student experience is essential in the development of programming. By utilizing survey results, we can better plan and implement programming that is not only theory informed, but also based on what students tell us. Assessment that is not mindful of equity, however, can end up becoming a tool that promotes inequities, whether intentional or not” (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Whereas “equitable assessment calls for those who lead and participate in assessment activities to pay attention and be conscious of how assessment can either feed into cycles that perpetuate inequities or can serve to bring more equity into higher education” (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2000).

## **Leadership**

*Key features: student centric, commitment to students, shared responsibility*

Colleges and universities must lead in the way that addresses complex global problems and works to strengthen the fabric of civil society. To lead in higher education, requires a focus on relationships and collaboration. This includes shared governance, complex organizational structures and the premium on individual autonomy and critical dialogue, among other factors, means that leadership is indeed, a collective process.

## **VIII. Recommendations: Rapid Actions and Long-Term Approaches**

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While bearing in mind the consultations, student feedback, assessment and literature, our self-study team focused on delivering recommendations in four main areas that were identified as having the most impact on student success and experience.

Those four areas are:

1. Sense of belonging
2. Future readiness
3. Equitable admission
4. Systemic barriers

Once again, the purpose of this self-study team was to explore what student success means and what Dalhousie’s role is in ensuring it. The focus was also on examining the student experience and how Dalhousie can foster long-term success for its students as global citizens and lifelong learners.

To this end, a foundational question we asked, which relates to the importance of relationships and expectations mentioned above, is “What is it that we, as an institution, commit to students?” This is related to another central question: “How can we work to shift attitudes, mindsets and behaviours of faculty, staff and students to ensure that everyone experiences a sense of belonging?” This second question recognizes that there is a need for a shift in attitudes, mindsets, and behaviours among faculty, staff, and students; as well as institutional policies.

The following recommendations, all of which are broken into rapid actions and long-term approaches, are organized according to the theoretical framework outlined above:

## **Learning**

### **Rapid actions**

- Providing specific orientations for different student types (or ‘customizable’ information).
- More intentionality in providing research opportunities for undergraduate students.

### **Long-term approaches**

- Review online learning options, term offerings, class timing, etc. to be more applicable to a diverse student audience through flexible and hybrid learning.
- Provide support and education around incorporating universal design for learning as well as culturally responsive teaching.
- Provide more intentional work-integrated learning opportunities (EL) for faculty, staff, and students. Learning should not be something reserved only for students. (i.e., also focus on faculty learning/growth by providing professional development opportunities).
- Review concepts of micro-credentialing.
- Review concept of space around our campuses and ensure they are meeting unique students’ needs, supporting their academic learning.

## **Relationships**

### **Rapid actions**

- Establish meaningful relationships with greater communities that reflect the diversity of our student body.
- Support the connection of students between Faculties.
- Focus on ensuring that all students feel a sense of connection to the institution and that they are supported in a way that is meaningful to them.
- Centralize programming to allow for diverse disciplines to come together for networking and community building, especially graduate students – i.e. create a Career Week.

### **Long-term approaches**

- Strengthen connection/communications with alumni (e.g., mentorship, talks, workshops).
- Connect faculty and staff to greater community and businesses (to allow them to gain perspective and bring that back to classroom). An example would be AC opportunities abroad (e.g., food services travelling to China, staff/faculty travelling to Ethiopia and Uganda).
- Provide on-going faculty support for establishing meaningful learning communities within class time and in addition to courses.

## **Expectations**

### **Rapid actions**

- Develop and share widely a Dalhousie Promise to students that reinforces the work that we do and provides a commitment that we all strive towards.
- Examine and improve consistent supervisory experiences for graduate students and ensure consistency through standardized training.
- Include a module in the orientation for graduate students on appropriate faculty-student supervisory relationships and on structures for support and reporting when things are not working.
- Require all graduate student supervisors to attend a mandatory module on the expectations and responsibilities of graduate supervisors, including appropriate parameters of supervisory relationships and accommodation issues, every five years in order to maintain FGS accreditation (also identified in the Belong Report). And ensure proper support in the development.
- Promote variety of career paths and programming to support targeted student groups and tailor programming for specific student populations, especially: PhD students who see themselves separate from Masters; Masters students who see themselves separate from Undergrads; and Post-Docs who see themselves separate from PhDs.
- Improve clarity re: expectations regarding credit transfer.
- Strong communication to diverse communities about transition programs, diverse course offerings (online, evenings/weekends, etc.) and expectations.

## **Alignment**

### **Rapid actions**

- Create informative slides to be presented at the start of every class for the first week of the academic term, explaining the importance of the land acknowledgement and what that means for Dalhousie.
- Develop faculty education around accessibilities and accommodations. Use plain language and clear examples. Go beyond small self-selected workshops.
- Explore outcomes of dismissal policy on ALL students (e.g., international students and visas).

- Review process for referral to Refining program and other academic support programs (i.e., who is being referred, who isn't, why). Assess current refining program through the lens of EDI and recent curriculum best-practices.

### **Long-term approaches**

- Required training for faculty and staff around equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to be added to onboarding, as well as an ongoing commitment to professional development focused on EDI. Required faculty/staff workshops and training to educate on history, impacts, current structures, systemic barriers (mentioned also in the Belong Report).
- Increase experiential learning opportunities available to students and imbed in academic programs.
- Review dismissal policy with EDI/Critical Theory lens.

## **Improvement**

### **Rapid actions**

- Broaden advising to include international standards. (Currently, Career Services only focuses/advises for Canadian standards.)
- Switch to online forms vs. paper (while maintaining possibility of paper submission, if necessary) and evaluate and streamline processes.
- Environmental scan of current 'bridge' and outreach programs (e.g., TYP, University Prep, ISAP) and potential expansion of successful programs.
- Consideration of recruitment materials for those without access to high-speed Internet (or any Internet).
- Be transparent with students and provide them with updates on how their data/assessment will be used.

### **Long-term approaches**

- (Re)establish Prior Learning Assessment, alternative admissions evaluations (e.g., interview), etc.
- Increase racial diversity in recruitment team.
- Establish centralized Student Affairs supports for graduate students.
- Development of graduate student centre.

## **Leadership**

### **Rapid actions**

- Understand the changing student demographic at Dalhousie and what that means for the needs of our students.
- Define what success looks like as an institution.
- Increase accessibility and transparency of process for all students.



### **Long-term approaches**

- Revisit financial impacts and subsequent barriers it places on access to education for all students, including graduate students.

## **IX. Impacts: What Will Success Look Like?**

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Through this process, the self-study team engaged in a wide variety of research, consultations and data analysis around the questions “What does student success mean?” and “What does a quality student experience look like?”

Through this dialogue, we learned that the Dalhousie community is committed to serving its students and wants all students to succeed. What this looks like and how we go about achieving it will differ across the diverse areas of the community we are all a part of.

So the question then becomes, “What would success look like?” This question applies both to student perceptions of their experience and the broader objectives of this self-study theme of Student Experience and Student Success.

To begin with, a critical element of being successful is understanding that we cannot create a single definition of success. Student experience varies and depends on a wide variety of factors, including individual lived experiences and histories. In this report, we have highlighted how success is defined and measured differently, however, we need to work together as a community to promise an exceptional student experience at Dalhousie where everyone belongs and matters.

That said, what did come out strongly in this self-study process was a central message: Dalhousie needs to do better.

We need to be more aware and name the systemic barriers that are impacting many Dalhousie students. And we need to commit, as an institution, to address these barriers and recognize the intergenerational traumas associated with them.

Probably the most common theme that arose throughout all the discussions was the need to change the culture at Dalhousie. This stands out as an area where the findings of this study and Dalhousie’s efforts will have a major impact on student experiences and student success.

At the heart of this cultural change is a need to more fully centre students in our decision-making and to more fully consider how the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup>- century learner may differ from the 200+ years of tradition Dalhousie has been built on.

When this self-study project started, dramatic changes in the culture at Dalhousie to adapt to 21<sup>st</sup>- century learning may have seemed like a long-term endeavour. Then COVID-19 arrived and, in just one month, this remarkable institution and university community did what would likely have seemed impossible beforehand.

Consider some of the actions that became “normal” during the pandemic response:

- Moving the entire institution online.
- Changing how classes were offered and courses were delivered.
- Rethinking all university services.
- Asking students what they needed from us.
- Communicating frequently and extensively with transparency and care.
- Considering how barriers influence students and their success and, rather than blaming them for those barriers, making allowances for them.
- Tearing down silos and enabling individuals across the institution to work collaboratively.
- Having a shared experience has brought us together.
- Achieving a widespread recognition of the importance—and potential—of change.

As has become a common refrain around the impact of the pandemic, even once a vaccine is discovered and implemented, the world will be changed. This is a new reality. Although it is scary to consider an unknown future, it also provides an opportunity to continue to change.

This is the mindset that Dalhousie must adopt to drive forward in advancing the state of Student Experience and Student Success because this area of strategic growth relies heavily on widespread cultural changes and the ongoing evolution of the institution.

This is an opportunity to continue our forward-thinking approaches and put the students at the centre of our decision-making.

As Dr. Christian Blouin, faculty co-lead of this self-study said, *“We should never waste an emergency as it motivates efforts that we never had the opportunity to commit to before.”*

## X. References

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## XI. Appendices

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The remainder of this document contains all relevant appendices.

*This project charter has been pre-populated based on consultation done thus far. It will be further refined by each self-study team's co-leads.*

## SELF-STUDY PROJECT CHARTER

### STRATEGIC THEME: STUDENT EXPERIENCE & STUDENT SUCCESS

#### 1. Strategic Theme Purpose:

The Student Experience & Student Success Self-Study Team will look at what student success means and our role in ensuring it, as well as how the student experience at Dalhousie fosters long-term success as a global citizen and life-long learner.

#### 2. Self-Study Sponsor:

Dr. Ivan Joseph  
Vice-Provost, Student Affairs

#### 3. Resource People:

- Patricia Laws, Science
- Dalhousie Board of Governors
- Brad Wuetherick, Centre for Learning and Teaching
- Dr. Ingrid Waldron, Associate Professor, School of Nursing

#### 4. Team Co-Leads:

Dr. Christian Blouin, Assoc. Dean (Acad) Faculty of Computer Science  
Dr. Christian Blouin  
Associate Dean, Academic  
Faculty of Computer Science

Heather Doyle  
Senior Advisor on Retention and Director of Student Academic Success  
Bissett Student Success Centre

#### 5. Team Members:

Jenny Baechler, FASS and Management



Leanne Stevens, Psychology

Valerie Chappe, Medicine, Physiology & Biophysics

Susan Joudrey, Centre for Learning & Teaching

Mabel Ho – Graduate Studies

Tasha Lynn Baxter – Graduate Studies

Karen McCrank, Career Services, Student Affairs

Tyler Lightfoot, Dal Analytics

Jennifer Hann – Office of Continuing Education

Elaine MacInnis – Librarian, Faculty of Ag

Hayat Showail – student

Eniola (Eni) Bakare – student

Anas Tahir – student, DAGS

Support people:

Karan Gallant – School of Health and Performance

Karyn Hemsworth – Faculty of Engineering

Jen Davis – Student Affairs

Kate MacInnes – College of Continuing Education

Beth Cann – Registrar's Office

Susan Holmes, Continuing Education

Jocelyn Adams – Alumni

Nicole Douglas – RO

Jasmine Smart – Grad Studies

Tyler Hall – BSSC

Gillian Hatch – AC

Cheyenne Henry – Advisor

Keisha Turner – Advisor

Cecilia Khamete - Career

## **6. Key Questions to Consider:**

- What is our responsibility to our students?
- How can we best prepare our students for success?
- What is student success? What contributes to it?
- How do we blur the line between classrooms and co-curricular or extra-curricular experience?
- How do we best serve all learners?
- What is access to learning and how do we implement it?
- What does student experience encompass?
- How do outcomes (e.g. a career) relate to the experience?
- How do you maintain an individual perspective of success while catering to the majority?
- How do we measure success?

Other Key Questions:

- What is “bold” in relation to student success?
- By whose definition do we define success?
- How do we engage the entire university community in student success?
- How do we address barriers to success for historically marginalized students?
- How do we define “student”?

## **7. Self-Study Goals & Objectives:**

- Investigate and analyze emerging themes and trends as it relates to student success
- Provide recommendations on how to improve and enhance the student experience at Dalhousie University
- Consider how to provide a transformative student experience at Dalhousie
- Reveal systemic barriers that impact student success

## **8. Identify the stakeholders with which the Project will engage:**

*(See self-study guide for stakeholder examples)*

- Faculty
- Staff
- Students

For your consideration, stakeholders identified during the fall planning retreat are listed below:

- Students' families
- University leadership
- Professional/governing bodies
- Employers
- Communities
- Learning Circles
  - Employability (Skills & Training)
  - Experiential Learning, Service Learning, Work Integrated Learning (Learning by Doing)
  - Fostering Student Success

#### **9. How will engagement with stakeholders be undertaken?**

- Focus groups with key stakeholders (i.e. faculty, student groups (graduate students, Indigenous students, African NS students))
- Open meetings
- Connecting with:
  - Black Faculty and Staff Caucus
  - Queer Faculty and Staff Caucus
  - Indigenous Advisory Council

#### **10. What data will be used to support the outcomes/recommendations coming from this self-study project?**

- University surveys, including: International Student Barometer (ISB), Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC), National Student Survey on Engagement (NSSEE), Education Advisor Board (EAB) Campus Climate survey, National College Health Association (NCHA), Customer Relationship Index (CRI)
- Data analysis that was conducted as part of the Strategic Priority 1.1, including resulting reports
- Best practice research on student experience and success in Canada and around the globe

**11. How will you build on the work of the Learning Circles?**

A number of team members were involved with various learning circles and we will continue to seek input from the broader university community to ensure that various voices are heard.

**12. How will you bring equity, diversity, and inclusion into the work of your team?**

You cannot talk about student success without ensuring that you take an EDI lens. Success looks different for different students and this is important to acknowledge and recognize. Not only is it important to ensure that students feel that they are valued as a whole person, it is essential for the institution, faculty and staff to consider their work within the frame of EDI. This lens will be integrated into the very fabric of this self-study, the recommendations as well how we move forward. Using critical approaches to student success will be paramount to the success of this work.

**13. How will the perspective of equity-seeking groups be represented in the work of your team?**

Not only is the committee membership diverse in terms of positions, but also in relation to ethnicity. It is essential that the work of this committee is continually informed by equity-seeking groups. *“Nothing about us, without us”*.

**14. What infrastructure or other enabling factors need to be addressed in supporting this theme?**

- A recognition and naming of the systemic barriers within the institution
- An institutional mandate that recognizes that student success is the responsibility of all, not just a few.
- Budget to provide some compensation to students as well as lunch/food when meetings are held over the lunch hour.

**15. Milestones:**

*(Please add key dates specific to your self-study as the self-study progresses)*

Date	Milestone	Participants
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October 9, 2019	Self-study team lead kick-off meeting with Interim President	-Dr. Balsler -Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Planning & Analytics Team
October 16, 2019	2 Hour Retreat with senior leadership for discussion and input on self-study focus	-University Senior Leadership -Self-Study Team Co-Leads
Late October 2019	Self-study team lead meeting for next steps	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Project Manager
October 31, 2019	Finalize project charter (Board will provide input for Nov. 26)	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Project Manager
Early November 2019	Self-study kick off with teams	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Self-Study Team Members -Project Manager
November 25-30, 2019	Self-study team update to project manager	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Project Manager
Mid December 2019	End of year status update/celebration and draft report outlines	-Dr. Balsler -Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Self-Study Team Members -Project Manager
Early January 2020	Self-study team lead roundtable and Provost	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Project Manager
January 15, 2020	Check in meeting	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Project Manager

Mid January 2020	Self-study outlines discussed with incoming President and Provost by the team co-leads	-Dr. Saini -Dr. Balser -Self-Study Team Co-Leads
Mid March, 2020	Final report draft complete for review by Provost	-Self-Study Team Co-leads -Self-Study Team Members
March 31, 2020	Final report submitted	-Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Self-Study Team Members -Project Manager
April 30 2020	Meeting with the President and Provost on next steps in the planning process	- Dr. Saini -Dr. Balser -Self-Study Team Co-Leads -Planning & Analytics Team
<b>16. Deliverables:</b>	<p>A final report that informs incoming President Deep Saini about the topic, analyzes Dalhousie's current state, creates a vision for Dalhousie's future, and presents high-level recommendations for next steps for his consideration.</p> <p><i>(See self-study guide for guidance on proposed areas to address for the report)</i></p> <p><i>Other:</i></p>	
<b>Version Tracking:</b>	Version 1.00	09/26/19
	Version 2.0 & 3.0	09/27/19
	Version 4.0	10/02/19
	Version 5.0	10/07/19
	Version 6.0	10/09/19
<p><b>Note:</b> Support and details will be provided by the Office of Planning and Analytics. Full project templates will be provided to each self study team. Please contact <a href="mailto:opa@dal.ca">opa@dal.ca</a> with any questions.</p>		

### **Student Experience & Success Self-Study Subcommittees:**

#### **Undergraduate Students**

Chair: Dr. Leanne Stevens, Dept of Psychology and Neuroscience

#### **Members:**

Beth Cann – RO

Tyler Hall – Bissett Student Success Centre (advisor)

Susan Holms – Continuing Ed

Karen McCrank – Carer Services

Gillian Hatch – AC campus

Jocelyn Adams – Alumni and Donor relations (Science)

Hayat Showail - student

#### **Graduate and Professional Students:**

Chair: Valerie Chappe

#### **Members:**

Jenny Baechler – Management/FASS

Mabel Ho – Grad Studies/CLT

~~Jasmine Smart – Grad Studies~~

Tyler Lightfoot – Dal Analytics

Anas Tahir- DAGS

Jen Davis – Accessibility

Tasha-Lynn Baxter – Grad Studies

Kate MacInnes ([Kate.MacInnes@Dal.Ca](mailto:Kate.MacInnes@Dal.Ca))

[Rachel.Moylan@dal.ca](mailto:Rachel.Moylan@dal.ca)

#### **Barriers:**

Chair: Susan Joudrey

#### **Members:**

Eniola Bakare– student

Nicole Douglas – RO

Jennifer Hann – Continuing Ed

Cynthia Murphy – International Centre

**Lens:**





## SUPPORT

CUSC 2019 First-Year Student Survey & CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
Satisfaction with concern shown for student as an individual (“very satisfied” or “satisfied”)		
	Dal	Group 3
First-Year Students (CUSC 2019)	73%	70%
Graduating Students (CUSC 2018)	57%	51%

## ACADEMIC SERVICES

CUSC 2019 First-Year Student Survey		
Use of academic services		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Academic advising	51%	38%
Study skills and learning supports	18%	15%
Writing skills	26%	16%
Tutoring	14%	15%
Co-op offices and supports	10%	5%
Satisfaction with academic services		
Academic advising	89%	87%
Study skills and learning supports	96%	93%
Writing skills	85%	88%
Tutoring	87%	89%
Co-op offices and supports	92%	90%
CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
Use of academic services		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Academic advising	46%	37%
Study skills and learning supports	6%	4%
Writing skills	16%	7%
Tutoring	8%	5%
Co-op offices and supports	10%	12%
Satisfaction with academic services		
Academic advising	78%	79%
Study skills and learning supports	81%	89%
Writing skills	84%	87%
Tutoring	91%	86%
Co-op offices and supports	91%	75%

NSSE 2017 Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons		
How much does your institution emphasize the following?		
Providing support to help students succeed academically.		
First-Year Students		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>U15</i>
Very little	6%	5%
Some	27%	28%
Quite a bit	44%	47%
Very much	23%	20%

Senior-Year Students		
Very little	10%	8%
Some	38%	38%
Quite a bit	38%	42%
Very much	13%	12%

## SPECIAL SERVICES

CUSC 2019 First-Year Student Survey		
Use of special services		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Personal counselling	11%	9%
Career counselling	9%	8%
Services for students with disabilities	6%	4%
Services for international students	9%	6%
Services for Indigenous students	1%	2%
Satisfaction with special services		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Personal counselling	83%	82%
Career counselling	91%	87%
Services for students with disabilities	89%	90%
Services for international students	94%	89%
Services for Indigenous students	100%	92%
CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
Use of special services		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Personal counselling	15%	10%
Career counselling	16%	12%
Services for students with disabilities	7%	5%
Services for international students	9%	5%
Services for Indigenous students	<1%	<1%
Satisfaction with special services		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Personal counselling	59%	73%
Career counselling	71%	79%
Services for students with disabilities	81%	87%
Services for international students	85%	92%
Services for Indigenous students	100%	90%

NSSE 2017 Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons		
How much does your institution emphasize the following? Using learning support services (tutoring services, writing centre, etc.)		
First-Year Students		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>U15</i>
Very little	9%	9%
Some	25%	29%
Quite a bit	42%	41%
Very much	24%	21%

Senior-Year Students		
Very little	13%	15%
Some	37%	39%
Quite a bit	35%	35%
Very much	15%	11%

NSSE 2017 Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons		
How much does your institution emphasize providing support for your overall well-being?		
First-Year Students		
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>U15</i>
Very little	10%	10%
Some	30%	29%
Quite a bit	41%	40%
Very much	19%	20%
Senior-Year Students		
Very little	16%	15%
Some	37%	34%
Quite a bit	36%	37%
Very much	11%	14%



Students generally rate **academic advising**, interactions with academic advisors, **co-op** services, and **employment** services highly.



Students generally have concerns with **mental health** services and, to a lesser degree, **writing skills** services.

## COMMUNITY

CUSC 2019 First-Year Student Survey & CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
Feel like they belong at this university (“strongly agree” or “agree”)		
	Dal	Group 3
First-Year Students (CUSC 2019)	81%	80%
Graduating Students (CUSC 2018)	81%	75%

Maybe slide 34 here?

NSSE 2017 Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons		
Indicate the quality of your interactions with other students at your institution.		
First-Year Students		

		Dal	U15
1	Poor	2%	2%
2		2%	3%
3		6%	6%
4		12%	13%
5		25%	27%
6		25%	27%
7	Excellent	25%	23%
—	Not applicable	2%	1%
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>			
		1%	1%
1	Poor	2%	2%
2		5%	5%
3		10%	11%
4		26%	27%
5		30%	29%
6		26%	24%
7	Excellent	1%	1%

<b>NSSE 2017 Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons</b>			
<b>How much does your institution emphasize providing opportunities to be involved socially?</b>			
<b>First-Year Students</b>			
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>U15</i>	
Very little	9%	10%	
Some	32%	30%	
Quite a bit	41%	41%	
Very much	18%	19%	
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>			
Very little	11%	12%	
Some	36%	35%	
Quite a bit	40%	39%	
Very much	12%	15%	

<b>NSSE 2017 Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons</b>			
<b>How much does your institution emphasize encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)?</b>			
<b>First-Year Students</b>			
	<i>Dal</i>	<i>U15</i>	
Very little	16%	18%	
Some	36%	34%	
Quite a bit	32%	33%	
Very much	16%	16%	
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>			
Very little	22%	24%	
Some	39%	37%	
Quite a bit	27%	28%	
Very much	12%	11%	

# Strengths



Students feel a **greater sense of community** overall than comparison group.

# Gaps

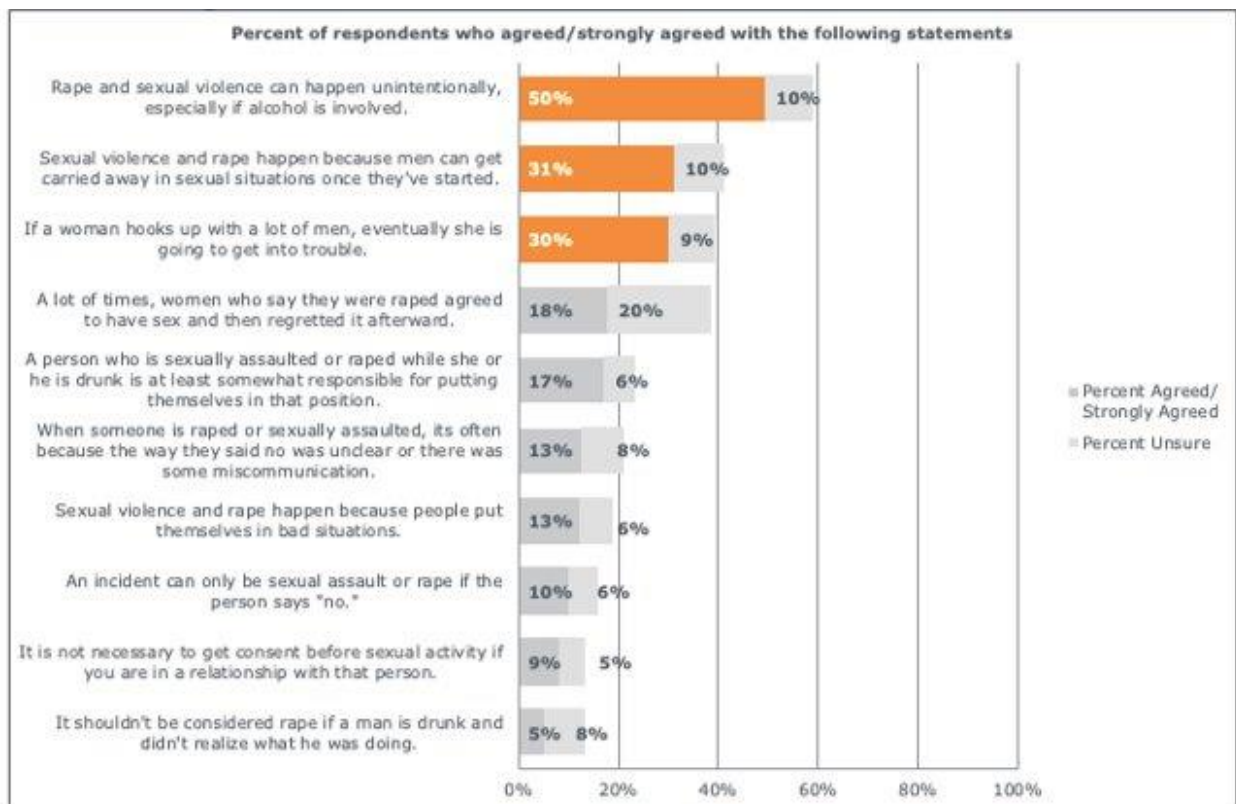


Some room for improvement in Dal's emphasis on **encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds**.

## SAFETY

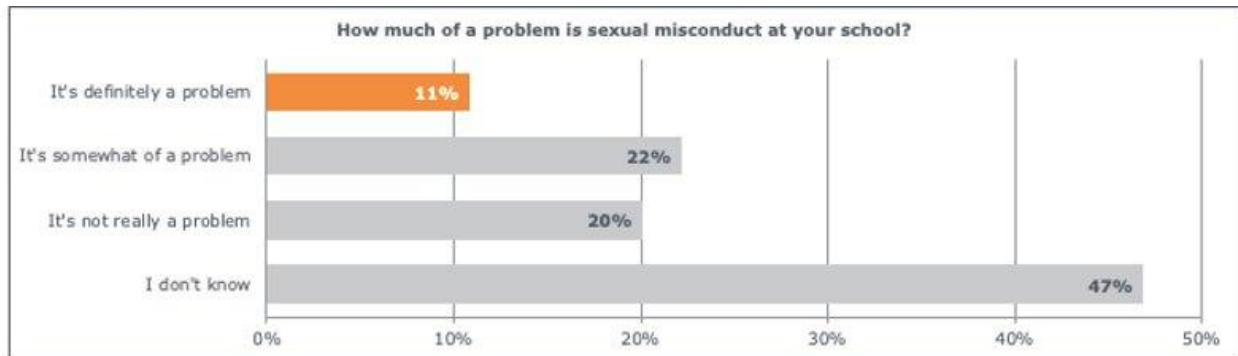
NCHA II-Spring 2019		
Students reporting feeling "very safe" in the following situations:		
	<i>Male-Identifying</i>	<i>Female-Identifying</i>
On-campus (day)	91%	86%
On-campus (night)	64%	25%
Community surrounding campus (day)	80%	66%
Community surrounding campus (night)	47%	16%

### EAB Campus Climate Survey, Spring 2016



- Half of respondents believe that rape and sexual violence can happen unintentionally, especially if alcohol is involved.
- Nearly one third of respondents believe that sexual assault and rape happen because men get carried away in sexual situations.
- Nearly one third of respondents believe that if a woman hooks up with a lot of men, eventually she is going to get into trouble.

### EAB Campus Climate Survey, Spring 2016



- 37% of female-identifying respondents indicated that sexual misconduct was somewhat or definitely a problem compared to 24% of male-identifying respondents.

## Strengths



Students generally feel safe.

## Gaps



Female-identifying students do not feel as safe as male-identifying students. Many students also have misconceptions about rape and sexual violence.

## BARRIERS

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report		
Please indicate the degree to which <u>lack of good academic advising</u> poses, or has posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.		
First-Year Students		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	65%	57%
A minor obstacle	27%	33%
A major obstacle	8%	10%

Senior-Year Students		
Not an obstacle	51%	47%
A minor obstacle	35%	37%
A major obstacle	14%	16%

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report		
Please indicate the degree to which <u>financial pressures or work obligations</u> pose, or have posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.		
First-Year Students		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	26%	30%
A minor obstacle	40%	44%
A major obstacle	34%	26%
Senior-Year Students		
Not an obstacle	23%	27%
A minor obstacle	42%	44%
A major obstacle	35%	29%

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report		
Please indicate the degree to which <u>personal or family problems</u> pose, or have posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.		
First-Year Students		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	46%	50%
A minor obstacle	37%	36%
A major obstacle	17%	15%
Senior-Year Students		
Not an obstacle	40%	43%
A minor obstacle	42%	39%
A major obstacle	18%	19%

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report		
Please indicate the degree to which <u>your academic performance at university</u> poses, or has posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.		
First-Year Students		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	39%	35%
A minor obstacle	41%	40%
A major obstacle	20%	26%
Senior-Year Students		
Not an obstacle	45%	41%
A minor obstacle	38%	38%
A major obstacle	17%	21%

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report		
Please indicate the degree to which <u>course availability/scheduling</u> poses, or has posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.		
First-Year Students		

	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	50%	42%
A minor obstacle	40%	44%
A major obstacle	11%	14%
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>		
Not an obstacle	32%	32%
A minor obstacle	49%	49%
A major obstacle	19%	19%

<b>NSSE 2017 Consortium Report</b>		
<b>Please indicate the degree to which <u>difficulties with academic regulations</u> pose, or have posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.</b>		
<b>First-Year Students</b>		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	73%	73%
A minor obstacle	23%	22%
A major obstacle	5%	6%
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>		
Not an obstacle	68%	69%
A minor obstacle	25%	25%
A major obstacle	7%	7%

<b>NSSE 2017 Consortium Report</b>		
<b>Please indicate the degree to which <u>language/cultural barriers</u> pose, or have posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.</b>		
<b>First-Year Students</b>		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	78%	81%
A minor obstacle	16%	15%
A major obstacle	6%	3%
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>		
Not an obstacle	83%	84%
A minor obstacle	12%	13%
A major obstacle	5%	3%

<b>NSSE 2017 Consortium Report</b>		
<b>Please indicate the degree to which <u>difficulties associated with a disability or chronic health problem</u> pose, or have posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.</b>		
<b>First-Year Students</b>		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	79%	86%
A minor obstacle	14%	10%
A major obstacle	7%	4%
<b>Senior-Year Students</b>		
Not an obstacle	79%	83%
A minor obstacle	14%	10%
A major obstacle	7%	6%



NSSE 2017 Consortium Report

Please indicate the degree to which primary care giving responsibilities for a dependent pose, or have posed, an obstacle to your academic progress.

First-Year Students

	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	88%	92%
A minor obstacle	9%	6%
A major obstacle	3%	2%

Senior-Year Students		
	Dal	G13 x ON
Not an obstacle	90%	91%
A minor obstacle	7%	6%
A major obstacle	3%	2%

NSSE 2017 Topical Module First-Year Experiences and Senior Transitions

During the current school year, how difficult has learning course material been for you?

First-Year Students

	Dal	Comparison Group
Not at all difficult	4%	6%
2	15%	16%
3	27%	30%
4	34%	33%
5	14%	12%
Very difficult	5%	4%

NSSE 2017 Topical Module First-Year Experiences and Senior Transitions

During the current school year, how difficult has managing your time been for you?

First-Year Students

	Dal	Comparison Group
Not at all difficult	3%	6%
2	11%	12%
3	20%	21%
4	28%	27%
5	22%	20%
Very difficult	15%	14%

NSSE 2017 Topical Module First-Year Experiences and Senior Transitions

During the current school year, how difficult has getting help with school work been for you?

First-Year Students

	Dal	Comparison Group
Not at all difficult	13%	16%
2	24%	25%
3	30%	28%
4	20%	19%
5	9%	8%
Very difficult	5%	4%

NSSE 2017 Topical Module First-Year Experiences and Senior Transitions

During the current school year, how difficult has interacting with faculty been for you?

First-Year Students		
	Dal	Comparison Group
Not at all difficult	15%	21%
2	26%	26%
3	26%	25%
4	17%	17%
5	11%	8%
Very difficult	5%	4%

## BARRIERS OVERALL

Relatively <b>high</b> percentage of respondents identified the following as minor or major obstacles:	Relatively <b>low</b> percentage of respondents identified the following as minor or major obstacles:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial pressures and work obligations</li> <li>Personal or family problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language/cultural barriers</li> <li>Chronic health issues</li> <li>Primary care giving responsibilities for a dependent</li> </ul>

## DEGREE COMPLETION

CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
Delays in completion of program		
	Dal	Group 3
Any delay	29%	34%
Required courses not available	12%	16%
Grades	10%	13%
Elective courses not available	5%	7%
Financial issues	6%	7%
Other	10%	9%

**Difference by university grades.** Students with an average university grade of A- or higher (22%) are less likely to have experienced a delay than those with a B- to B+ grade (39%) or C+ or lower (67%).

**Difference by age.** The youngest students, those 21 and under (20%), are generally much less likely than students in older age groups to have experienced a delay (ranging from 42% to 54% in older age groups).

## DEBT/FINANCES

CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
Total Debt		
	Dal	Group 3
No debt	57%	48%
Less than \$5,000	3%	4%
\$5,000 to \$9,999	3%	6%
\$10,000 to \$14,999	4%	5%
\$15,000 to \$19,999	4%	5%
\$20,000 or more	29%	33%

CUSC 2018 Graduating Student Survey		
	Dal	Group 3
Average total debt (among those with debt)	33,060	26,702

## OVERALL STUDENT CONCERNS

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report			
From the list below, please check up to 2 items you believe your university most needs to address to improve the student academic/learning experience <b>in the classroom.</b> (Top 4 answers shown below.)			
First Year		Senior Year	
Ensuring a better fit between course content, assignments and tests/exams	34%	Improving the quality of course instruction by professors	36%
Improving the quality of course instruction by professors	30%	Increasing the number or variety of course offerings in your major	33%
Improving the quality of classrooms or lecture halls	25%	Improving the quality of classrooms or lecture halls	28%
Reducing class sizes overall	24%	Ensuring a better fit between course content, assignments and tests/exams	24%

NSSE 2017 Consortium Report			
From the list below, please check up to 2 items you believe your university most needs to address to improve the student academic/learning experience <b>outside of the classroom.</b> (Top 4 answers shown below.)			
First Year		Senior Year	
Improving the quality/availability of study spaces	39%	Improving the quality/availability of study spaces	42%
Increasing contact with professors outside of class (e.g., office hours)	29%	Providing students with more opportunities to undertake research with faculty	34%
Providing students with more opportunities to undertake research with faculty	26%	Expanding and/or improving the quality of personal support services (e.g., counselling)	27%
Expanding and/or improving the quality of personal support services (e.g., counselling)	24%	Expanding and/or improving the quality of academic support services (e.g., study skills, library skills, writing/math skills, academic advising, career advising)	22%
Working to provide a better social environment for students	24%		

## STUDENT COMMENTS

### All comments from NSSE 2017 Student Comments

“Hopefully someone who can affect a change actually reads this.”

-First-year student, 2017

### Mental Health:

- Majority of support-related student comments were critical of **mental health** services.
- Students mentioned long waits for appointments, difficulty of same-day booking system, and feelings of being dismissed if not in crisis.

### Academic Advising:

- Comments about **academic advising** were mixed.
- Most critical comments were related to difficulty in getting an appointment.

### Community and Safety:

- Students who live in residence report finding it easy to make friends, while students who live off-campus commented on difficulty making friends.
- All comments regarding school spirit were negative.
- Some students wrote about experiencing racism, xenophobia, and suspicion towards minority ethnic groups and/or international students.
- Some students wrote about how they wished there were more open discussions about current issues and less of a focus on avoiding offending someone.

### Debt & Finances:

- “My quality of education would be greatly improved if Dalhousie put more effort into communicating and informing students. A major issue this year has been trying to get answers about financial issues and costs. Student accounts and the registrar’s office, on multiple occasions, have not been able to answer my questions about financial implications.”
- “Tuition is too expensive, which at one point made me work 3 jobs at once and work throughout my undergrad. This made my grades suffer and contributed to my depression.”
- “I believe the cost of education is a major stress. While we receive a fair amount of benefits, the price to study here makes the experience unappealing and deterring.”