First Year University Student Persistence: What Helps and Hinders, In Their Own words

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First Year University Student Persistence: What Helps and Hinders, In Their Own words

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Abstract

The University of British Columbia has competitive and stringent admissions requirements. In theory, all students that ‘make it in’ should have the opportunity to succeed. What critical factors allow some students to thrive and a small percentage to nose dive? This qualitative study explored academic performance enhancers and barriers from the perspective of the first-year undergraduate Arts student. Through the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, twenty-three first-year Faculty of Arts students identified what they saw as having helped or hindered them in their first-year academic performance and experience and imagined a ‘wish list’ for what might have resulted in a more ideal First-Year experience in retrospect. The interview data analyzed through ECIT yielded 446 helping factors, 372 hindering incidents and 116 wish list items. Critical incidents were sorted into twelve categories that include both facilitative and hindering factors with all but two categories containing wish list items. The categories reflect the importance of what the students bring to their university experience, the effects of what the institution offers, and the key social influencers in their first-year at UBC. In their own words, the students offer insights into what factors impacted their academic perseverance and hint at possibilities for promoting first-year persistence in the Faculty of Arts and beyond.
Lay Summary

The transition to university can be a time of excitement, change, and stress while young adults also undergo many developmental shifts. The experience can be positive and also overwhelming resulting in emotional distress and academic failure. This exploratory study was aimed at learning more about how first-year students adjust, succeed, and persist in their studies. Twenty-three first year university students in the Faculty of Arts at the University of British Columbia had the opportunity to reflect on and express what they believed most helped them or hindered them from meeting their academic and adjustment goals in their first year. Twelve categories emerged that reflect the greatest areas of influence specific to these UBC students. The analysis and discussion of the results offer a glimpse into the first-year university experience at UBC and a framework for considering how UBC may best support students during this time of significant change and learning.
Preface

This qualitative research project design, data collection, analysis, and written manuscript is original work conceptualized, implemented, and written by the author and researcher Leah Marks. BREB approved research assistants transcribed the interviews and participated in an early review of the emerging data. The data collection and interview transcriptions were partially funded by the University of British Columbia Faculty of Arts through ‘The Persistence Project’ approved by Dr. Sunaina Assanand, Associate Dean – Student Success.

This research study was approved by the University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board on March 13, 2017 (H17-00421) under the title, “First year academic experience and performance, what helps, what hinders: in their own words”.
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For Chris and Lizzie.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Every year, approximately 5% of first-year students in the Faculty of Arts at the University of British Columbia (UBC) will fail and be required to withdraw; about 2.4% will make the dean’s list requiring a cumulative average of 85% or higher; the bulk of first-year students will achieve an average of around 65%. The UBC Vancouver campus reported a retention rate of 93% overall for first year, first time, full-time students in 2015 (PAIR, 2016). Of the 7% who leave, in the Faculty of Arts about 5% are required to leave because they have failed their first year. While the percentage of failing students is relatively low, the numbers do not fully appreciate the impact of academic failure on over 100 first-year students nor do the retention rates reflect the degree of academic stress students may feel (McGregor & Elliot, 2005; Najimi, Sharifirad, Amini, & Meftagh, 2013; Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2007; Robinson, 2016; Turner, Husman & Schallert, 2002). In addition, the factors that lead to student academic success and overall satisfaction with their first-year experience are not well understood from the perspective of the university student.

The foci of UBC’s strategic plan, *Shaping UBC’s next century*, (2018 - 2028) are inclusion, innovation, and collaboration with plans to “inspire and enable students through excellence in transformative teaching, mentoring, advising and the student experience”. Inclusion and collaboration necessitate that the students have a voice at the university with real power to improve their experience and education and to drive innovation. Offering the opportunity for students to reflect on their first-year experience is relevant given UBC’s president, Dr. Santa Ono’s position expressed early in his term that the university’s job is to care for student well-being and to be an “incubator” for their transformation (2015).
Speaking to first-year students and giving them the time to reflect on what helped or hindered their academic performance honoured Ono’s vision of caring and respects the student as expert regarding their experience. “The first-year experience is not a homogeneous experience but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on type of institution and student characteristics” (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006, p. VII). These first-year student perspectives from the UBC Faculty of Arts resulting from this qualitative study may assist the Faculty in making relevant decisions for continued planning for first-year student support and program development.

There are plenty of articles investigating and elucidating the various influences on student success and failure in higher education (Andrews & Drake, 2011; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Cassidy & Eachus, 2014; Evanbeck & Ross, 2011; Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Harvey et. al., 2006; Najimi et. al., 2013; Tinto 1975). Through the use of descriptive data and surveys, and fewer open-ended discussions coded to identify themes, researchers tell stories of student failure and success. They point to aspects specific to the student, institution and interactions between both that can result in or thwart students ‘persisting’ in their studies. Theories related to persistence include: an interaction of external and internal factors related to sociological aspects (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2012); social networks (Tinto 1975; 2012); organizational factors (including policy and practice); cultural factors (including domestic Indigenous student concerns (Hardes, 2006); and socio-economic and background factors (Finnie et. al., 2008; Tinto, 1998; 2012); Psychological factors (Bean & Eaton, 2001), and student academic readiness and skills (Erickson & Stone, 2012). In all these discussions of success, failure, attrition, retention, and persistence, it becomes clear that universities can influence attrition rates and the student experience overall (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012): but exactly how is uncertain. In
addition, attrition issues differ from higher education institution to institution and require a thorough investigation of context specific factors (Harvey et. al., 2006).

Problem

Despite many targeted first year programs aimed at supporting first-year student success, UBC’s Faculty of Arts is still failing over 100 first-year students while other Arts students soar academically -and we do not know enough about the differences in these students’ skills, experiences, or qualities. Programs and supports abound yet even with specialized cohort programs like the Coordinated Arts program (predicated upon evidence-based practice), a multitude of tutoring programs, specialized international student orientations, targeted student development opportunities, academic and emotional support services, and targeted “at-risk” initiatives, Arts students fail to meet their academic goals and many leave the university. University policy, practice, and program initiatives are often developed through staff and faculty decisions based on higher education literature from other Canadian and American universities rather than from UBC specific information or contexts. The UBC Faculty of Arts has committed to funding a year-long research project to hear from experts in first year academic experience; that is to hear from the Faculty of Arts students themselves.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the affective, social, psychological, developmental, and environmental factors that first-year students in the Faculty of Arts at UBC identified as having been critical to their academic performance and first year experience. The goal was to bring to the forefront what students perceived as helpful or hindering to their academic progress and overall experience in their first year. Through this deeper understanding of the factors that students believe influenced their academic successes or failures, the Faculty of
Arts may plan further targeted research and consider programming in ways that are relevant to and responsive to Arts students in particular. This qualitative research approach, based on post-positivist ideologies, has the potential for uncovering insights for both the student and researcher gained through a systematic yet open-ended approach. Student-participants had the opportunity to reflect on their experience with a researcher as active listener and information gatherer most concerned with capturing the student voice and lived experience.

**Research Question**

What do first year Faculty of Arts students at UBC who participate in this study identify as having been helpful and hindering to their academic performance and what do they wish for in relation to their first-year student academic experience? The ways in which the Faculty of Arts may use these student stories to foster first-year student academic performance and experience will be explored upon review of the findings.

**Definitions and explanation of terms**

There are several terms that will be used throughout this review of helping and hindering factors of first-year student academic ‘performance’ that require explanation: ‘persistence’, ‘success’, ‘retention’, ‘failure’, and ‘attrition’ are used interchangeably in the literature as negatively or positively correlated or even causally related. A lack of student ‘persistence’ influences academic ‘success’ and is said to lead to ‘failure’ which results in ‘attrition’ impacting university retention rates. Supporting student ‘success’ through building ‘persistence’ reduces ‘failure’ rates which reduces ‘attrition’ and increases ‘retention’ and managing student ‘retention’ is seen as imperative for fiscal management. Thus, the literature is replete with theories of what keeps students persisting in their studies.
**Persistence.** Persistence is described as the “voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement.” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), as “the opposite of dropout” in Vanthournout, Gibers, Coertjens, Dench, and Van Petegem (2012) and as a quality paramount to success in the form of “grit” by Duckworth (2016). It is named repeatedly in higher education literature as a necessary ingredient for student success and ‘retention’ (Kuh et. al., 2006; Tinto, 2006).

**Retention.** Refers to keeping students studying at the university: not losing them to mandatory withdrawal due to a failed year or voluntary withdrawal due to dissatisfaction or a lack of support. Although retention is seen by the university as an important initiative to avoid financial loss, this study is concerned primarily with retention as a priority for fostering student well-being.

**Attrition.** Attrition is defined as “the action or process of gradually wearing down through sustained attack or pressure…Wearing away by friction” (in Soanes & Stevenson, Eds., 2006, p.85). When first-year students decide (or are required) to leave it is often following a process of extreme effort and pressure. Considered in this way, attrition is clearly a process and a result due to significant pressures and frictions.

**Experience/Incident/Factor.** Used interchangeably to indicate an event, circumstance, feeling, thought, or action that a person identifies as having transpired.

‘**Critical’ incident.** A ‘critical’ incident’ (CI) is any event, feeling, thought, or action that creates a change or maintenance of desire to keep forging ahead, or any that depletes drive and/or holds the student back in some way from their purpose and goals.

**Facilitates.** Influences plans, feelings, or outcomes in a positive way - something that helps students meet their academic goals or feel good.
**Hinders.** Influences plans, feelings, or outcomes in a negative way - something that holds students back.

**Failure and success.** According to Margaret Clifford (1984), “failure has many meanings and takes many shapes”. She defines failure as “an event in which a goal exceeds its match performance” (108). Defined in this way, failure is neutral, with both facilitative and debilitating potential depending on the meaning one attributes to a failure event. This researcher determines ‘success’ and ‘failure’ as a constructed experience rather than an academic standing. However, students and the university will often frame ‘success’ in relation to academic standing. ‘Failure’ from the Faculty of Arts refers to achieving a total grade average of under 45%. Student success as a standing refers to a student who may continue in their studies. Success from a wellness perspective is a student who thrives. Student perspectives of success and failure will likely vary. Not passing a mid-term can be seen as an almost insurmountable problem for some students. Failure can be a precursor to feelings of shame and can be such an intense experience that it can shake the foundation of an individual’s identity (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). Interestingly, failure talk is largely avoided in university conversations and is often euphemized as ‘attrition’ in much of the literature (Grebennikov, 2012; Willcoxson et. al., 2011). Failure is understood by this researcher as a potential catalyst for success and growth (Pryor & Bright, 2012), and even a success on its own at times.

The following pages offer a literature review summarizing what some higher education research and theorists suggest are the critical aspects that impact university and college student academic persistence organized in sections reviewing helpful and hindering factors within and outside the student. A rationale for conducting a pragmatic qualitative research study will be provided as will an extensive explanation of the proposed method.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Understanding what contributes to university student academic performance and retention has been of significant concern for over a century and extensively explored through various quantitative studies and using a variety of theoretical frameworks (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Kuh et. al., 2006; Manathunga, 2013; Tinto, 2006). The high degree of interest in student attrition rates is not surprising given the significant financial and emotional costs of students discontinuing studies because of failing or disinterest. Of interest to this researcher is the emotional impact of failing or discontinuing studies for students (Meilman, Pattis, & Kraus-Zeilmann, 1994; Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). Paradigms regarding who is responsible for student attrition have shifted over the last 50 years from individual student deficits to flaws in the university systems, services, and pedagogical offerings and presentation (Kuh et. al., 2006; Manathunga, 2013; Tinto, 2006; Thayer, 2000). Harvey, Drew, and Smith (2006) reviewed literature in the United Kingdom which identified “six main factors… influencing 2151 students” who left their programs; “dissatisfaction with the quality of the student experience, institutional provision, inability to cope with the demands of the programme, unhappiness with the social environment, financial problems, and inappropriate choices” (Yorke, 2000 in Harvey et. al., 2006, p. 38). First year at university is understood as difficult for a variety of reasons and known as a foundational year for setting a trajectory for success and student retention depending on how a student navigates through this time academically, emotionally, and socially (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Tinto, 2006).

In one survey, first-year students identified the following as their main concerns upon entering UBC; “doing well-maintaining good grades; social environment- making friends; being homesick; managing course load while being able to maintain a balance between academic and
non-academic responsibilities; and questioning their overall ability to succeed” (*New to UBC survey*, 2009, p. 33). Because first year can be such a challenging adjustment, universities make efforts to provide specialized programs and experiences to ease the first-year students transitioning from high school to university. They build these programs based on what the research identifies as critical to student success and well-being. Students’ academic success, well-being, and subsequent retention is likely a complex interaction between internal and external elements (*Kuh* et. al., 2006; *Manathunga*, 2013; *Hayer*, 2000; *Tinto*, 2006). The following section outlines some of the research on the helping and hindering factors for academic performance both within and outside the student.

**Fostering ‘student success’: Internal Factors**

**Student attitudes and perception.** Student self-perception and compassion may have an impact on academic performance. Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat’s (2005) research explored undergraduate self-compassion in relation to affect, academic achievement goals, and coping with a personal failure. The two studies in this publication considered the power of self-compassion to mediate negative feelings of failure. They examined self-compassion, fear of failure, perceived competence, intrinsic motivation, and GPA variables for directionality. They found that Self-Compassion was linked to “adaptive motivation patterns” in their first study (p. 272). Their second study supported their assumption that self-compassion fosters “emotional resiliency in the face of failure” (p. 276). Neff et. al., (2005) explain that emotion-focused coping can modify an individual’s appraisal or perception of an event or circumstance, which may shift a person’s ‘affective reaction’ (p. 278). “Self-compassion facilitates adaptive emotion focused coping strategies in dealing with perceived academic failure situations by allowing individuals to clearly face and accept their feelings about the failure” (Neff et. al., 2005, p.278). Assisting
students in accepting themselves despite perceived or actual failure may be protective and help them avoid the negative spiral that can happen when a young adult used to succeeding fails to meet their own standards, fails an assignment, or even a course (s) in their first year. Students bring concerns about failing and coping with failure to academic advisors frequently. When given the opportunity to reflect on what hindered their performance in first year might some students identify having difficulty recovering from a failed mid-term or achieving grades lower than they were accustomed to in high school?

Clifford (1984) posits that failure can be a neutral event that results when goals have been set beyond a subsequent performance. She reveals that failure experiences are largely mediated by the ‘observer’ and ‘performer’ judgments of failure. Through her review of empirical studies of anti-failure themes and a challenge to educators to rethink their fear of failure for students, she provides a theory of failure that points to student agency for refining failure experiences such that they can be mobilized by, and experience success through, their failure. This work is premised on her earlier article (Clifford, 1979) whereby she reviews and challenges studies that posit that failure is ‘bad’ and suggests that focusing only on the debilitative aspects of failure is both limiting and inaccurate. She says that there are facilitative aspects of failure that are missed when one is protected from failure or when one has a narrow and negative view of failure. Finally, Clifford posits that failure as an experience is actually neutral and that it is the meaning placed on the experience that determines the impact it will have on an individual.

As mentioned earlier, students’ perceptions and positive ways of dealing with academic disappointments can facilitate momentum and success in their studies. Conversely, ruminating on a failed midterm paper or exam without protective self-compassion could have demotivating effects resulting in reduced academic performance. According to Husman and Schallert (2002),
perceived failure can result in feelings of shame and pain related to negative appraisal. Their interviews with university students unhappy with a mid-term test result revealed that failure and subsequent shame have a negative impact on goal setting and attainment because of the attributions that are placed on the failure. Believing that one failed due to a lack of ability or some other internal reason can result in reduced efforts. Turner, Hussman and Schallert (2002) argue that “attributions (on a perceived academic failure) become the basis for expectations about future outcomes” (81). Thus, not meeting a set goal (passing or a specific grade range) early in their first term could be considered a critical incident that affects a first-year student’s overall academic performance. This seems to further Clifford’s (1984) position that how one frames their failure influences the impact on the individual. Positive reframing seems an important protective factor.

Mindset is a powerful mediator and predictor for how a student will frame and move on from an experience of failure. Dweck’s research (2006) is important for considering ways that students can be helped to approach possibilities of failure with attitudes that are protective allowing them to move on from a failure or challenging experience without being devastated and demotivated. In controlled studies Dweck has found that individuals with a “fixed mindset” view failure (real or perceived) as an identity threat and attempt to protect self-esteem through; comparing themselves to lower achievers, blaming failures on external causes outside their control, making excuses for not meeting goals or making mistakes, and denying failure occurred. Not acknowledging a failure diminishes the potential value of failing. According to Dweck, “you can still be in the process of learning from your mistakes until you deny them” (p. 37). Conversely, an individual who has a “growth mindset” approaches failure as learning event; making comparisons to higher achievers for motivation, taking responsibility for the causes of
failure and using knowledge gained to plan for the future, and are motivated by not achieving something. Dweck suggests that students who have or have learned to have a growth mindset will use their failures to facilitate their future success and persist in their goals despite experiencing failure.

Persisting in the face of failure is not easy nor is it usually natural, it requires ‘grit’ and practice (Duckworth, 2016). Grit is a label Angela Duckworth has coined to describe a quality in a person with the resilience and the strength to persist to meet a goal despite challenges. Duckworth’s research, writing, and presentations on ‘grit’ have gained traction in the higher education literature and conversations. At a recent North American Advising Conference the word ‘Grit’ graced several workshop titles and these presentations were some of the most popular as advisors sought to learn how best to support students who shut down and begin to spiral following academic disappointments or challenges. Duckworth (2016) defines ‘Grit’ as, “passion and perseverance for very long-term goals” (p. 233). Getting a Bachelor’s degree is a long and arduous goal. There is a trend in recent retention research suggesting that students lacking in ‘Grit’ may make up a large percentage of the at-risk and failing population. This may seem to place the blame of academic failure on students. However, Duckworth’s arguments suggest the lack of existing resilience in students may be a result of contemporary parenting combined with primary and secondary educational systems that “bubble wrap” children protecting them from pain, failure, hard work, or misfortune. Being encouraged by parents and coaches to follow through on extra-curricular activities that are “hard” is one way Duckworth says grit is fostered. Perhaps universities that support students to persist with targeted developmentally appropriate interventions may assist their students in building greater grit and continuing in their studies.
Cassidy and Eachus (2000) review factors they hypothesized enhanced academic success for 130 students in a Research Methods course. Through their research using a correlational design they looked at four measures they believed to be correlated with academic success. Students completed measures of Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control, Study Skills, and a questionnaire targeting their knowledge of the course content of research methods and statistics. The authors concluded that for these university students, their belief in their abilities in the area of research methods was paramount. They linked low levels of self-efficacy and external locus of academic control and low academic confidence with “apathetic learning approaches” (p. 318). They reveal how teaching models and instructor behaviour in addition to students’ personal levels of Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control, and Study Skills significantly affected their attitudes and academic performance. Their study brings to bear the interplay between the students’ existing attitudes and self-appraisals on their learning and achievement and a university’s approach and offerings.

**Psychological Model.** Bean and Eaton (2001), more widely cited in higher education research, have identified a psychological model for retention in the 1980’s that relies on Coping Behavioral theory, Self-efficacy theory, and Attribution (locus of control) theory. They posit that students enter the university with basic qualities called “Entry Characteristics” that include their levels of psychological development based on their past behavior, existing self-efficacy, current locus of control, and coping strategies present at arrival. These entry characteristics influence how students engage in the university social and academic culture, extracurricular opportunities, and classroom. How they engage in the university upon arrival influences their motivation levels for study, academic and social integration, and feelings of positive self-efficacy, which in turn has the potential to reduce or increase stress. When students are encouraged to integrate into the
university there is an “institutional fit” that fosters loyalty and leads to an increase in retention and degree completion. When students do not arrive equipped with a strong ‘package’ of entry characteristics they are more likely to leave the university voluntarily or as a result of failing to meet the minimum standing required for eligibility to continue: Either way they are more likely to become an attrition statistic. But when the university offers an institutional environment that is positive and fosters the psychological maturity and health required to feel motivated and efficacious to engage and take advantage of the opportunities available, students at risk may develop a greater sense of ‘institutional fit’ and have a greater chance at staying and even succeeding in the university.

**Fostering ‘student success’: External factors**

According to Erickson & Stone (2012) there are two strategies higher education institutions can employ for softening the landing into university and improving first year retention. First, there is an interactionist model developed by Vincent Tinto in 1975 which emphasizes the student’s experience of feeling a sense of belonging and integration with the institution, peers and academics; and second, there is a ‘strategy based’ approach that highlights academic skill building. First year cohort learning communities and university preparation courses are seen as facilitating first year academic success and improving overall first year adjustment to university (Erickson & Stone, 2012; Tinto, 2006). Both approaches are identified in much of the retention literature as important for increasing student retention beyond the first year (Erickson & Stone, 2012; Evenbeck & Ross, 2011; Tinto, 2006).

A consideration of what is critical to university student persistence must include a review of the work and theories of Vincent Tinto. He has written and presented on theories of student retention (and success) since 1975 through to the present and is cited in most of the higher
education research reviewed. Early in his work he challenged the popular belief that when students failed in higher education it was the result of personal deficits in skills or because of psychological attributes: Tinto calls this perspective “blaming the victim” (2006, p. 2). He cites Spady (1970) as a pioneer in the area of determining who is accountable for student failure and retention. Together Spady and Tinto’s research and writings called for higher education institutions to consider the academic and social environments they were offering students - in particular the first-year student most prone to attrition. Tinto points to the “age of involvement” as one stage of retention programming and research for first-year students that resulted mostly in ‘freshman seminars’ that were offered through student services with the rare faculty member included. He describes these early retention efforts as “appended to rather than integrated within mainstream academic life” (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). He describes retention initiatives then and now, as in addition, and somewhat external to, existing university life despite a greater understanding in the field regarding the interplay of several critical factors understood as affecting student retention: Financial resources, cultural background, social connections, and institutional practice and offerings. More recently, Tinto has identified the classroom as the next frontier for increasing persistence through building learning communities and strengthening relationships with faculty. Placing retention efforts into the classroom is seen as critical as it may be the only place time-strapped and commuter students meet one another and the faculty.

In 2005, the University of British Columbia Faculty of Arts launched their first-year cohort program, The Coordinated Arts Program. This program is comprised of approximately 20% of the first-year student population in Arts. The program is based on many of the principles highlighted by Tinto and others over the past 40 years in regards to the benefits of the ‘learning community’ on first-year student success and retention. The CAP program combines subject
themes in five streams of study with faculty that have been chosen for their interest in the first-year student academic experience. Through their learning community framework and intentional access to faculty, the small cohort program has addressed many of the typical issues that are cited as problematic for first-year students (Andrews & Drake, 2011; Evenbeck & Ross, 2011). With smaller class sizes, responsive professors, thematically relevant courses offered, organized standard time table, dedicated space for quiet study, targeted academic at-risk initiative, and dedicated academic advisors the students in this program have greater access to social supports and immersion into courses clustered in relation to their academic interests.

**Expectations.** Persistence and academic performance may be impacted by student expectations. Grebennikov and Shah (2012) polled 2,085 undergraduate students who left before the end of their first year. Their survey found that the most common reason for withdrawal was that courses did not meet student expectations- in essence the realities of the university program was not what they signed up for. Najimi et. al., (2013) explored the factors that students said contributed to various levels of reduced academic performance for 280 medical students at Isfahan University in Iran. Their cross-sectional descriptive study utilized questionnaires they developed and validated which included closed questions with a Likert scale and a section for open-ended comments. They found that students primarily attributed their failures to personal circumstances and relational influences such as family responsibilities, experiencing difficulty with the curriculum, and the belief that there was a lack of promising employment. Thus, despite all medical students having to meet a rigorous admission standard, some were unable to overcome these kinds of barriers resulting in academic failure.

**Student relationships with peers.** Many students enter university immediately following high school when they are 17 or 18 years of age. It is well known that in North American society
peers are usually an adolescent’s greatest connection and support. When students attend a university on their own and even away from home they can experience acute loneliness that makes persisting in studies difficult. Students in the 2009 UBC survey indicated that their main concerns in first year are the social environment and making friends, homesickness, and doing well academically. Several higher education researchers (Hays & Oxley, 1987; Hirsh, 1980; Sarason & Sarason, 1991 cited in Paul & Brier, 2001) argue the importance of making friends for first-year student adjustment. Paul and Brier (2001) provide a novel perspective regarding friendships at university. They suggest that an overlooked stressor that may have an impact on academics and adjustment for some first-year students is the loss of past friendships when attending a university on their own away from high school friends. They liken the intensity of the experience to loss through death and posit that the university student may actually move through the stages of grief as they struggle to let go of their past relationships from high school and create new relationships at university. They argue that while ‘divestment’ from the past toward investment to future friends is a normal part of the university adjustment, it can be significantly painful and limiting. Paul and Brier stress that universities must plan for and support students suffering from ‘friendsickness’ through bereavement counselling and strategized peer supports.

**Student relationships with school.** Faculty and staff at the university can have a critical impact on their academic persistence. Academic advisors in university settings are said to be at the “core” of educating and retaining students (Burt et. al., 2013; Smith, 2006; Tinto, 1993) and have the potential for, and responsibility to, foster transformative learning (Keeling & Associates, 2010). A qualitative study by Andrews and Drake (2011) positions academic advisors as the ideal university student services professional to help students succeed in meeting their academic goals. Through a case study approach, they highlight the impact of an
intervention on first-year students identified as “at risk” of failing with the purpose of describing and proposing advising practices that might affect student attrition. They identify a sense of belonging and connection as the most important determinant for keeping students. They argue that Academic Advisors are central to helping students get through their degrees: often they are the student’s first contact when struggling at university. They stress the role of the advisor as a key component for improving student experience. Their study employed “highly personalized” interventions with students deemed to be at risk of failure which included a one-hour meeting at the beginning of the term and midterm, a phone call and email after grades were posted if students were deemed in need of a contact, and a final meeting at the end of term. They found that with consistent and strategic advisor contacts they were able to impact at risk students’ attrition rates such that these students met the university wide retention rate for the general student population. Their findings establish that careful strategic interventions by academic advisors can have a significant impact on students, warranting an ongoing institutional commitment to support the work of advising offices through allocating appropriate and viable resources. Every January, the UBC Arts Academic Advising office offers help to hundreds of students at risk of failing based on term 1 grades. Historically, the response rate from students is less than 20% and fewer than this will pull up their grades in term 2 to allow them to pass their first year. How might the advising office and other targeted resources accomplish what Andrews & Drake (2011) suggest is possible. How can UBC support them to succeed in greater numbers as suggested is possible in the research? Is there another service, outreach format, or type of support students might wish for if asked?

George Kuh et. al., Founding Director and Co-principal Investigator at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes, summarized a multitude of articles to determine “what matters
to student success” (2006). In his extensive literature review, he links ‘high quality advising’ to student success and specifically mentions Tinto’s (2004) finding that advisors are particularly important to student retention for undecided and first-generation students. Kuh et. al. posits that, “the quality of academic advising is the single most powerful predictor of satisfaction with the campus environment” (National Survey of Student Engagement report, 2005 in Kuh et. al., 2006, p.60). Kuh et. al. also identifies research that found that students who rate their advisors as good to excellent are more connected to faculty, report greater overall satisfaction with their school, see the institution as supportive, and get more out of their university experience in a variety of areas. Kuh et. al. highlights Kramer and associate’s (2003) position that advising is most successful when amalgamated with academic support services that are responsive to the ‘developmental needs of diverse students’.

Responsivity is just a small piece of the persistence puzzle according to Keeling (2014). Keeling posits that a responsive ‘institution’ that approaches ‘the students’ as a cluster of consumers and service users does not establish an environment conducive to student learning and success. As Keeling suggests, individuals on their own at the university are not solely responsible for caring for the whole student, the institution as a community of individual people with the common purpose of promoting learning and wellness share in the responsibility of caring ethically for the whole student - how might a climate or culture of caring be accomplished by ‘the institution’ or felt by the individual student?

Mattering. A critical factor that may not be identified by students explicitly but may ‘show up’ in students’ comments and behaviour is the concept of “mattering”. Nancy Schlossberg’s Theory of Marginality and Mattering (1989) seems highly relevant to the university context. She argues that when an individual transitions to a new role or place they
experience a sense of ‘marginality’ or being on the periphery, not yet having established a sense of belonging and ‘mattering’ or being integral. She suggests that there may exist a permanent or a temporary condition of marginality. Temporary marginality occurs when a person has the opportunity to develop an ease and belongingness to a place or in a role over time. When people believe they matter they believe they are important and relevant. She notes that “Universities that focus on mattering urge students to become more involved, motivated to learn, and achieve their goals” (1989, no page #). Schlossberg suggests that when students feel they matter and are valued they have been supported on four dimensions; they have the attention of staff and faculty, they feel others care and see them as important, they believe that their accomplishments are noticed and celebrated, and they feel safe to be dependent. She outlines ways in which universities help students feel they matter: Through policies, practices, facilities, and programs that do not marginalize them but rather allow them to feel agentic and involved on a university campus that is for and about them.

**Socio-economic and cultural factors.** First generation students, Indigenous students, transfer students, financially unprivileged and international students are said to be more vulnerable to attrition. Thayer (2000), the Director of Undergraduate Student Retention at Colorado state university believes that focusing on creating optimal learning environments as per Tinto’s theories of persistence or focusing on students’ psychological characteristics upon entering (Bean and Eaton, 2001) detracts universities from considering the ways in which socio-economic and systemic barriers work to limit student success and undermine persistence. Tinto (2006) has argued that building relationships and faculty support in the classroom is still considered paramount in an institution’s efforts to foster student success and persistence but acknowledges that his early work, while of continued relevance, was limited in its scope. He
echoes Thayer and suggests that University retention efforts have historically retained certain students only. More recently, he calls for retention efforts that go beyond the development of student programs and instead calls attention to the importance of making degrees possible for low-income students by shifting how courses are offered and helping prepare these students academically. Thayer is concerned with the barriers faced by students lacking in financial supports and those who are the first in their families to attend post-secondary. Thayer suggests there are critical features of a responsive student support program for first generation and low-income students. These include; staff participating in admissions and registration process for at risk students, offering first year academic and social preparation courses, employing proactive advising through the first year, providing academic services that support them in their courses with extended service hours, building cohesion in students identified as ‘at risk’, and intentionally messaging success as a result of conscientious effort. He shows these suggestions are viable for addressing these hindering factors as evidenced by examples of ‘learning communities’ in four American universities that have been successful in implementing multi-unit collaborative programs crossing academic support services, course registration, residence life, and advising units.

Hardesty (2006) outlines the ways in which Indigenous university students in Canada, as a ‘minority’ at university are at significant risk of becoming non-completers due to a host of factors including economic inequities that leave them feeling outside the university mindset, culture, and expectations for ‘persistence’. She argues that Indigenous students are less likely to be persistent due to cultural attitudes about education grounded in a history that result in distrust of Euro-western educational institutions. She also explains that many indigenous traditions run counter to some university expectations creating friction and affecting student engagement and
success. She points to transitions from native communities, lacking supports in campus life, and socio-economic barriers as further influencing their persistence. Hardes’ arguments bring to mind Schlossberg’s concept of mattering. Indigenous students may feel marginal to their university and require supports that foster a sense that they belong and are valued by the institution. Hardes outlines several strategies that universities can employ to improve the university environment for Indigenous students. She suggests universities offer the following supports: 1. intentional mentoring programs. 2. Summer bridge programs. 3. Reflective practice enabling them to identify academic strengths and goal setting to target weaknesses in skills. 4. Tutoring and remedial courses specifically in math and writing skills. 5. Career conversations that link their academic efforts to real work and provide a sense of purpose. 6. Co-op work terms that enable them to apply their knowledge. 6. Acknowledgement of their efforts and accomplishments on a consistent basis. While her suggestions seem relevant to supporting many academically vulnerable students it is necessary that students who identify as Indigenous have the opportunity to offer their perspectives on what is most critical to their academic performance and first-year experience specifically at UBC situated on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.

The UBC strategic plan (2018) is committed to ‘transformative learning’. Mezirow (1997) defines transformative learning as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference [in an adult learner]” (p. 5). Mezirow suggests that the adult learner arrives to their education experience with an existing frame of reference consisting of their ‘habits of mind’ and ‘point of view’ about themselves and their learning (1997). It is necessary to deeply understand how UBC students perceive and may be helped to thrive in their learning and lives in order to provide relevant high quality and coordinated student support services. So far, Surveys have been the
primary way to explore UBC students’ beliefs about what helps or limits them. For example, the Undergraduate Experience Survey or the UBC student association’s Academic Experience Survey commissioned by the Alma Mater Society. Both surveys garner answers to predetermined structured questions. Student surveys and questionnaires may be limited by the existing literature on attrition and academic success (Palys & Atchison, 2014). There is a call for open-ended in-person interview approaches for a richer understanding of student experiences. Douglas, McClelland, Davies, and Sudbury (2009) suggest that the use of the Critical Incident Technique, when used in higher education, provides “a blank canvas for students to paint whatever picture they desire in terms of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction …informing the decision-making process or attempts to improve what is significant to students” (p. 314).

This research study employed the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (Butterfield et. al., 2009) to explore first-year students’ academic and first year experience in the Winter session running from September 2016 to April 2017. Through semi structured interviews, students were invited to reflect on their academic performance and identify what they believed were the critical facilitating and hindering elements of their academic journey in first-year university and to suggest ways in which their experience might have been made better.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Background and Research Question

Most studies in the field of higher education evaluation and student attrition are quantitative with the bulk of information collected through questionnaires surveying leavers retroactively. There is a call for more qualitative studies that allow for a deeper exploration of the students’ experiences (Douglas et. al., 2008; Finnie et. al., 2008). After a thorough review of several qualitative study designs, it was clear that Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) was the best methodological choice for this study aimed at accessing first-year student perspectives on what factors they believe most influenced their academic performance in the Faculty of Arts at UBC and for answering the following research question:

What do first year Faculty of Arts students at UBC who participate in this study identify as having been helpful and hindering to their academic performance and what do they wish for in relation to their first-year student academic experience? The ways in which the Faculty of Arts may use these student stories to foster first-year student academic performance and experience will be explored upon review of the findings.

Rationale

Jacqueline Douglas, Robert McClelland, and John Davies (2008) argue that the critical incident technique (CIT), a research method widely used for over 50 years in commercial enterprise, is a highly relevant approach for research aimed at improving university ‘services’ equating students to ‘customers’ and the university as ‘organization’. These authors have used CIT style surveys in three separate studies (2008; 2009; 2015) aimed at better understanding the factors that impact student satisfaction with their higher education experience. They provide a conceptual model of student satisfaction with their university experience arguing that
dissatisfaction within and outside the classroom will influence their academic success and ultimately their choice to stay at a university. Their model includes satisfiers, dissatisfiers, neutrals, and critical factors that affect overall satisfaction, which they suggest lead to greater or reduced loyalty to an institution, which in turn facilitates or thwarts student performance resulting in increased persistence or potential attrition. Their work provides a solid framework and rationale for this study as part of a larger research project aimed at increasing UBC student retention.

Vianden (2015) used in-person interviews in addition to online surveys to learn what ‘matters’ to university students and what impacts their persistence and attrition rates. This researcher suggests that despite a plethora of research studies and higher education initiatives aimed at improving retention rates, persistence rates in American higher education institutions have remained consistent. Vianden argues that few studies identify what institutions can do to improve student satisfaction, which it is argued, supports student persistence. This research is unique as it is a rare example of a qualitative study that employs face-to-face CIT interviews combined with survey data to access student perspectives. The researchers conducted two in-person interviews with 10 students: The first interview focused on the students’ recollections of dissatisfying events and the second was concerned with satisfying incidents. All interviews were standardized across participants through semi-structured questions asking about their recollections of satisfying or dissatisfying events, the aspects of these experiences (time, place, persons involved, context), and how the event impacted their thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and attitudes towards the university. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Forty-eight undergraduate students completed an online survey across three universities in the American Midwest. Vianden acknowledges that while online survey is an “acceptable” CIT
method, this format did not yield the “depth” of information gathered through the in-person interviews (p. 292). The researchers reported a total of 139 critical incidents identified by students related to their “perceived relationship with faculty, staff, and peers” at their university: 59 incidents related to faculty (31 satisfactory and 28 dissatisfactory); 56 in total with staff (31 satisfactory and 25 dissatisfactory- 19 of these were with “professionals ignorant of student needs”); 24 peer incidents (12 satisfactory and 12 dissatisfactory experiences). These findings reveal a fairly equal distribution between negative and positively remembered events. Vianden’s report includes student vignettes and quotes providing a rich description of the findings. In conclusion, this research emphasized the power of perception for influencing student satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Fostering meaningful relationships at the university between students and with faculty and staff is offered as the primary recommendation for improving student experiences of the university. A strength of Vianden’s study is the incorporation of an online survey to yield a larger sample size and while the interviews create depth to the findings, the small number of interviewed participants may weaken generalizability. However, over 100 incidents were collected in keeping with Douglas et. al.’s suggestion (citing Lockwood, 1994) that a CIT study should yield at least 100 critical incidents. Vianden’s study brings to light the preference to collect rich descriptions of critical incidents through semi-structured in-person interviews and the benefits of collecting critical incidents as a way to elucidate what students see as most important.

Finnie and Qiu (2008, in Finnie et. al., 2008) suggest that there is “no consensus on who drops out and why” in the empirical literature. They call for qualitative research that “probes the reasons for student behaviours” … “to advance our understanding of post-secondary ‘persistence’ in Canada” (203). While Vianden (2015) reports the retention rates in North America may not change significantly over time, perhaps the degree of distress students
experience at critical times in their degree may be better understood and the university response to them ameliorated.

**Research Design**

**Critical Incident Technique.** Originally, the Critical Incident Technique was used to analyse specific “reasons for failure in learning to fly” in the United States Aviation Psychology Program around the time of the Second World War (Flanagan, 1954). Observations of specific behaviours were collected and analysed to determine critical aspects of job success. Colonel John C. Flanagan, a psychologist with the program suggested that CIT could be “used to solve practical problems and develop broad psychological principles” (1954). While the observational approach has since been adapted, replaced by participant recollections of impressions and experiences, the functional pragmatic spirit of the CIT method continues. This method, once used to determine why some pilots learned to fly in the aviation program and others did not, seems a viable approach for learning about why some students soar academically, some barely survive, and others struggle significantly at UBC.

Since Flanagan’s research in the 50’s, a diverse array of fields have employed CIT. These include marketing and service quality research (Bitner, 1990 cited in Douglas, McClelland & Davies, 2008); organizational and industrial psychology (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Woolsey, 1986); and more recently in the “education sector” for gathering “rich useful data about the student experience” (Douglas, McClelland, Davies, & Sudbury, 2009, p. 305). These authors argue that CIT can be used as a qualitative research method in higher education to identify the organization’s impact on its ‘customers’ (students) in order to better respond to their needs for greater ‘service’ provision. Vianden (2015) found that CIT allowed for a thorough investigation of the “encounters, events, or incidents most memorable or important to
students” (p. 290). CIT as an approach seemed a good fit for this study concerned with investigating what UBC students remembered as most important to facilitating or hindering their first-year academics and overall experience.

Douglas, McClelland and Davies (2008) provide a conceptual model for the use of CIT in higher education to explore student satisfaction with their experience in and outside the classroom. Flanagan’s (1954) description of CIT as a “way to identify a significant factor that contributes to the success or failure of a human event” is their rationale for their use of his technique in their university research. While their data collection method involves questionnaires and written narratives and not in-person interviews, their open-ended questions do widen the possible answers students can provide potentially allowing for a deeper exploration and richer understanding of the student experience. Their model identifies key areas of student satisfaction/dissatisfaction in their university experience that lead to either loyalty or disloyalty. As mentioned earlier, this research is part of a larger project concerned with student retention at UBC in the Faculties of Arts and Science. Douglas et. al.’s., CIT research rationale and model seems highly relevant to this research project concerned with the factors students identify as critical to their academic performance and first year university experience in the Faculty of Arts at UBC.

UBC researchers describe the Critical Incident Technique as a valid and reliable flexible yet systematic research method (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) with guiding steps, procedures, and analysis that improve the rigour and applicability of the research. Five steps for CIT are listed and described in detail in (Butterfield et. al., 2005) and are as follows: “(1) ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied; (2) making plans and setting specifications [the inclusion ‘rules’ for all researchers to follow for data collection and analysis];
(3) collecting the data; (4) analyzing the data; and (5) interpreting the data and reporting the results” (2005, p.477). Butterfield et. al., (2009) expand the approach with nine credibility checks that have been included in the fifth step in order to increase the validity of the interpretations of reported participant perceptions and experiences related to ‘critical incidents’. The following sections outline the steps and checks in relation to this study that used the enhanced form of the Critical Incident Technique.

Enhanced Critical Incident Technique. Described by Butterfield et. al., (2009) ECIT is an extended form of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) that aims to further improve the reliability and validity of a study by incorporating a question, a summary, demographic, information, and exhaustiveness. This study followed this extended process. Participants were asked as a final question, ‘what they wish had been in place in relation to the ‘phenomenon of concern’; the summary component checked the ‘incidents’ participants outlined; and at the end of the interview, the interviewer summarized the critical incidents heard and the wish list and asked for confirmation of the accuracy and detail; demographic information was also collected during the interview; finally, ‘exhaustiveness’ (the point at which new categories stop emerging from the data- usually by 10 participants as indicated by recent unpublished work by these authors) was tested through transcribing shorter interview summaries once no further CIs were identified by half again the number of the sample. Enhanced CIT was determined the best choice for this project that aimed to identify the factors that students perceived impacted their academic performance for the purpose of determining ways future Faculty of Arts students’ first year experience might be improved. Collecting students’ wish list items was seen as a good way to find hitherto unidentified strategies for fostering student success. In addition, this enhanced
method allowed for the analysis of shorter summaries following exhaustiveness which was beneficial given time and resource constraints.

As previously established, CIT has been chosen by other higher education researchers interested in capturing the university student voice (Douglas, McClelland, Davies, & Sudbury, 2009), level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Douglas, Douglas, McClelland & Davies, 2015), and relationship quality with the institution (Vianden, 2015). ECIT, with its post-positivist cause and effect orientation was deemed the best approach for this social science study focused on the student specific context, viewpoints, and meaning making regarding their first-year experiences (Creswell, 2007).

**ECIT Steps and Research Procedures**

**Step 1. Ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied.** This study expanded on the technique and methods employed by Douglas et. al., (2008, 2015) and Vianden (2015) by incorporating in-person interviews with each participant reviewing facilitative and limiting factors at once rather than breaking satisfying and dissatisfying incidents into two separate interviews; and incorporated the ‘enhancements’ to the CIT method for the purpose of answering the following questions:

What do first year Faculty of Arts students at UBC who participate in this study identify as having been helpful and hindering to their academic performance and what do they wish for in relation to their first-year student academic experience? The ways in which the Faculty of Arts may use these student stories to foster first-year student academic performance and experience will be explored upon review of the findings.

**Sample.** This ECIT study invited the participation of First Year University of British Columbia undergraduate students registered in the Winter 2016 session in the Faculty of Arts.
Butterfield et. al (2005) explain that the sample of a CIT study is the number of Critical Incidents collected to ‘exhaustiveness’ rather than a particular number of participants. However, in order to collect an adequate number of critical incidents, it is best to plan on a minimum of 20 participants for a study (Amundson, personal communication, December 2016). Twenty-three first year Faculty of Arts students were interviewed who were registered in either first-year Arts standard timetable cohort programs or in a custom timetable. Student demographics are summarized below and the sample described fully in Chapter 4.

**Step 2. Making plans and setting specifications.** The second phase of ECIT as described in Butterfield et. al., (2009) includes a) defining the types of situations to be ‘observed’, b) determining the situation’s relevance to the general aim, c) to understand the extent of the effect the incident has on the general aim, and d) deciding on who will make the observations. As such, the following plans and specifications were set: an interview guide and protocol was developed with the aim of collecting first-year student experiences and perceptions of what most influenced their academics (see interview framework provided in Data collection section); training on ECIT and interview reviewing was provided for the Research Assistants; the decision was made to have one consistent interviewer for maintaining interview consistency; finally, the process for data collection and analysis was established to ensure a consistent and relevant approach. UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved the purpose and proposed process for recruiting participants, structuring interviews, and emailing follow up with participants.

As part of setting specifications, participant inclusion criteria and a recruitment process were established.
**Inclusion criteria.** UBC Faculty of Arts undergraduate students in their first year (having completed fewer than 27 credits prior to Winter 2017) were considered for inclusion with the intention to have student participants from a wide range of demographics and populations (e.g., international, domestic, Indigenous, male, female, living off campus/in residence… etc.).

**Exclusion criteria.** All students meeting the above criteria were considered for the study. Aside from the determined year level, no student population was considered to be excluded from the study.

**Recruitment process.** On March 21, 2017, a Faculty of Arts Dean’s office administrator sent a bulk email to all first-year students in the Faculty (see appendix A). As per the Research Ethics Board request, a letter of permission was written by the Faculty of Arts granting permission for this study to use the student information system to reach students and check demographic information (see appendix D). In addition, a recruitment Poster was posted in the Faculty of Arts Advising office and on bulletin boards outside the advising office and in the Student Union Building/Nest (see appendix B). In these advertisements, students were invited to indicate their interest by emailing the project-specific email; artsci.persist@ubc.ca. An excel sheet was created, student demographics were reviewed using the student information service centre to ensure representation of international and domestic students, and finally 25 students were chosen using an online randomizer. Although staff who work with students who identify as Indigenous were approached for support in recruiting students from this group, the Aboriginal Student Advising team (ASA) were not able to participate in the research at that time due to a lack of time to collaborate in the overall planning of the research process. They did, however, offer to support the research through consultation regarding the process and future reporting of the findings should students who identify as Aboriginal participate in the study.
Finally, an email reply was sent to each interested student either requesting their preferred time to be contacted with more information about the project and contact information, or to let them know the study had completed recruiting and thanking them for their interest (see appendix C).

*Invitation to participate.* Upon receipt of student contact information and preferred times to be reached, students were phoned at their set time and provided with more information about the study. The phone intake interview provided them with more information about the study through a structured invitation script. All students who eventually participated in the study were reached by phone and provided a detailed explanation of the study purpose, interview process, and proposed reporting and use of the data. The purpose of the First-Year Academic Experience Study was to hear first-year student stories to better understand what students find helpful or hindering for meeting their academic goals and to their overall experience and generally to give students a chance to talk to someone about their experiences, opinions, and ideas about the most important influences in their first year at university. They were invited to ask questions about the study and the voluntary aspect of the study was emphasised. In addition, they were assured that that their information would be reported generally as a part of the larger study and was not in any way linked to them or to their record. Their consent to participate was reviewed a second time in the face-to-face interview and it was stressed during the phone and in person interviews that the student could withdraw their participation at any time. If students indicated they wanted to arrange an interview, an interview date was set and they were provided with a confirmation email indicating the date, time, and location of the interview (see appendix C.2). Most students reached by phone chose to participate. If students chose not to participate, they were thanked for their time on the phone and wished well.
**Participant Demographics.** Twenty-three undergraduate Faculty of Arts students participated in interviews for the study. Nine participants identified as male and fourteen identified as female with all but one student registered as Bachelor of Arts students: One student was enrolled in the Bachelor of Music degree. Eighteen students were registered in 27 to 31 credits and five students were registered in 21 to 26 credits. Eleven students were enrolled in custom timetables and 12 students were registered in first-year cohort timetables: Five students in the Coordinated Arts Program, Three in Arts One, and three in the Bachelor of International Economics. Six students commuted daily to campus and seventeen students lived in UBC first-year residence. Twelve students were 18 years of age, seven were 19, one student was 20, and one student was 22 years old. Twenty-one students entered UBC directly from high school and two participants took a gap year or two before starting their post-secondary education. Four students were the first in their immediate families to enter into university and nineteen reported at least one parent had completed a university degree. Fifteen students had their first-year tuition paid for by parents or other family members, five reported having their tuition subsidized by scholarships from UBC, and four students reported tuition was being paid for by a combination of student loans, working part-time, and help from family. Sixteen students identified as domestic and Seven students as international - international students are not permanent residents or citizens of Canada. Fifteen students identified English as their first language and the remaining identified an Asian language as their first language learned. Students reported they identified with a wide range of cultural and racial backgrounds. The following list highlights how they self-identified when asked for their cultural identity; Chinese, 4; Euro-western, Jewish, 1; British 2; Hong Kongese, 1; Korean/Taiwan/Texan/Italy/Canadian, 1; Korean, 2; Singaporean, 1; Thai and Chinese, 1; Chinese, English, 1; Bangladeshi, 1; Latino, 1, Barbadian/Canadian, 1;
Japanese/French Canadian, 1; Indian, 1; Canadian, Indian, 1; Chinese/Qiang minority, 1; Filipino, Metis, Canadian, 1; Taiwanese, 1. Seven students were born in Canada, Eight in Asia, three in the United Kingdom, two in the United States, two in Hong Kong, and one was born in the Caribbean.

**Step 3. Data collection.** Interviews were held at the University of British Columbia through the month of April 2017.

**Scheduled interviews.** Butterfield et. al, (2009) note ECIT’s “capacity to explore differences or turning points…and its utility as a foundational exploratory tool in the early stages of research” (p. 266). While ECIT’s systematic approach was followed, the interviewer endeavoured to use the script in a natural and open way to maintain a relaxed and casual atmosphere in the interviews with the students. Sixty to 90-minute interviews were conducted at UBC in the Psychoeducational Research and Training Centre, Suite 1100 Scarfe Building, 2125 Main Mall. The interviews were video recorded and the student’s stories transcribed verbatim by the Research Assistant approved by the Research Ethics Board. The interviewer also took notes and collected demographic information using a standard form (see appendix F). Meetings took place between 9 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday as per the participant’s availability.

**Informed consent and participant briefing.** Prior to the interview commencing, consent and confidentiality were discussed and a consent to participate form signed (see appendix G), BREB approval was highlighted and the student’s option to withdraw from the study at any time was stressed.

**Interview content.** The interview structure was in line with framework outlined by Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, and Amundson (2009):

1. Collect contextual background and establish rapport
Initial questions and comments asked to establish the context of the interview:

“As we talked about on the phone, I am interested in learning more about first-year experiences for Arts students and what factors influence their being able to meet their academic goals and their overall experience at UBC. Where would you like to start this conversation about your first year?” ... Followed student story/lead and asked probing questions to get at helping and hindering items.

Segue to section concerned with collecting helpful and hindering factors influencing their academic progress and experience. “So, you mentioned XX, can you tell me more about how this was helpful/or how this was a barrier?”

2. Content

Questions were asked that prompted discussion related to helping and hindering incidents remembered by the student. “It sounds like XX was really important to your experience because ... Can you tell me more about how it was particularly facilitating/limiting?”

3. Explore a Wish list

4. In order to explore options for student support and improved academic conditions, wish list items were collected as per ECIT.

“So, we have talked a lot today about... I am wondering what you might have wished was in place or available to you to help you through XX? ... As a result of this study I am hoping to be able to make recommendations for ways to improve the academic and overall experience for arts students, what ideas or wishes do you have for what could have made your first-year experience better?”
Helpful and hindering aspects identified and wish list items were summarized at the end of the interview. “Would it be ok if I reflect back to you what we talked about today as most important to your first-year academic performance and overall experience? What I understood as most influencing you was...”

Additional areas of interest. In addition to the above areas of inquiry in ECIT, this study included final questions regarding the students’ current affect to enrich the information gathered;

“I am wondering what it was like for you to talk about your first-year experience/these past 8 months today?”

Students were also provided the opportunity to complete a questionnaire measuring “Grit” (Duckworth, 2016) for potential future studies.

“The quality of “Grit’ has been linked to success and persistence in rigorous academic environments - If you are willing, I have the questionnaire for you to complete and the results may be reviewed in a future study. Would you like to complete this questionnaire? ”

Honoraria. As soon as the interview concluded, participants were provided a $20.00 gift card for the UBC Bookstore to thank them for their time and participation.

Follow up. Following the interviews, participants were emailed a thank you message and asked about how and when they preferred to be contacted to review and confirm the critical incidents they identified and the established categories. Participant cross check emails are described in more detail in Chapter 4.

ECIT Data Analysis

Step 4. Data analysis. The fourth step in conducting ECIT involves data analysis. This step includes (a) determining the frame of reference and how the data will be used, (b)
formulating categories, and (c) determining the level of specificity or generality of the findings (Butterfield et. al., 2009).

**Determining the frame of reference.** This qualitative research study is part of a larger project exploring student persistence funded by the Faculty of Arts and Science. It is intended that the findings provided by this and other aspects of the research project will inform future program development and service approaches to help first year Arts student thrive in their academics and persist in the faculty while improving their emotional well-being. Findings may also be offered to outside units providing first-year student support and services.

**Determining the level of generality or specificity of the findings.** According to (Butterfield et. al., 2005) the CIT should result in a categorization system that reflects the critical incidents in a relevant way that is not too specific nor general so that the findings may be useful. In the case of this research, it was important to gain an increased understanding of the factors that UBC Arts students as helpful to or hindering their academic performance while maintaining participant confidentiality. Thus, the data is reported in a way that is not too specific to an individual experience nor too general to reduce the meaning of the ‘student experience’ - this is achieved through a careful consideration of the critical incidents to include in the organizing categories by checking data within the research team, confirming with the participants, and with experts in the CIT method as well as in post-secondary learning - all while considering the aim of the study.

**Formulating categories and including Critical Incidents.** Transcriptions of all the interviews were organized in binders in separate sections by participant numbers. Interviews were thoroughly reviewed keeping in mind the aim to inform student services, systems, and program development in order to improve the first-year students’ academic performance and
experience. Content categories were created based on themes and patterns relevant to the research aim and the critical incidents identified by students as helpful or hindering. The CIs were tracked on an excel sheet and appropriate categories identified as they emerged under a ‘helpful’ or ‘hindering’ subheading. Categories once established, were reviewed for a “minimum participation rate” of at least 25% (Borgen & Amundson, 1984 cited in Butterfield et. al., 2009). Participation rates and the process for establishing the final categories is elaborated on further in the next section.

**Step 5. Rigour: Interpreting the data and reporting the results.** Butterfield et. al., (2009) elaborate on Flanagan’s (1954) Critical Incident Technique using an ‘Enhanced’ approach to increase the reliability of research findings that report ‘perceptions’ of experience by participants rather than ‘direct observation’ through nine credibility checks. These nine checks are described below in relation to the analysis of the twenty-three Faculty of Arts student interviews.

**Recording the Interviews.** Each student interview was video recorded on CD’s at the University of British Columbia Psychoeducational Research & Training Centre as Butterfield et. al., (2005) recommends researchers work directly from the audiotapes or interview transcripts from recordings for the most accurate accounts of participant experiences and greater descriptive validity. These recordings were reviewed and transcribed by a Research Assistant hired specifically for her background in analysing rhetoric and psychology research, experience working with undergraduate Arts students, and her timely training in ‘basic interview skills’ through taking CNPS 362. The primary researcher and research assistant used the transcriptions directly from the interview recordings in their analysis and categorization of critical incidents.
**Interview fidelity.** According to Butterfield (2009) ensuring interview fidelity can “strengthen robustness of findings”. Ensuring the interviewer followed the established interview guide, did not lead participants, and followed the CIT research method was accomplished through conferring with the thesis supervisor who approved that the Research Assistant, trained in ECIT, would review every interview upon completion to offer feedback to the interviewer to consider in the data collection ongoing. In addition, as recommended in an unpublished article by Amundson, Borgen and Butterfield (2014); during the interview, the researcher summarized the helping, hindering, and wish list items with each participant for immediate feedback regarding the interviewer’s understanding of the participant’s main points. This was a useful way of providing an additional check that the interviewer was accurately perceiving and collecting the critical incidents in each interview. This approach also confirmed that the summary system could capture the most important points in an interview providing merit to transcribing summaries only in later interviews once exhaustiveness had been reached.

**Independent extraction of critical incidents.** Critical incidents were extracted by the Master’s student researcher and separately by the above-mentioned REB approved and ECIT trained research assistant. As suggested by Butterfield et. al., (2005), “an individual other than the person who initially identified CIs and WL items” should review what they see as CIs and WL items: Thus, the transcripts were also analysed by a second REB approved research assistant attached to the larger Faculty of Arts persistence study. Although it is “customary to randomly choose 25% of the transcripts” to check, all 23 interviews were reviewed by this independent judge and although there were a few additional items suggested through this process, there was 100% agreement as to the identified incidents that should be included in further analysis.
Exhaustiveness. Butterfield et al., (2009) suggest that establishing ‘exhaustiveness’ - the point at which no new categories emerge from the interview data- can increase credibility of findings and signal when a ‘sufficient number of participants have been interviewed’. Although these researchers suggest that it is appropriate to stop collecting data at the point in the research that categories no longer emerge in the logged CI data, because over 20 students had volunteered for this study and seemed invested in having their first-year experience heard and recorded, interviews were conducted and data analysis continued for all 23 participants interviewed. See Table 1 for a detailed tracking of the number of categories created as interviews were analysed. No new categories emerged for Helping and Hindering incidents after the eleventh interview analysed thus exhaustiveness was reached by the 12th interview analysed. For Wish list items, exhaustiveness was reached by the ninth interview analysed.

Table 1

New Categories Tracking and Determining Exhaustiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview under analysis</th>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th># of new categories emerged (Helping/Hindering/Wish list)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9/10/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4/7/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1/2/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3/1/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1/1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1/0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0/0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0/0/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0/1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0/0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1/1/0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participation rates and establishing credibility of categories. The inclusion of specific categories depended on their yielding participations rates equal to or above 25% as per the guidelines offered by Borgen and Amundson (1984). Participation rates were arrived at by determining the number of participants who described an incident in the category and dividing that number by 23 - the total number of participants (Butterfield et. al., 2009). Categories were merged if rates fell below this number. For example, the two categories that emerged at 11 interviews analysed; ‘Collegia’ in helping and ‘Environment’ in hindering, were both merged as they did not yield the participation rate required for inclusion. Collegia into ‘Living Arrangements’ and ‘Environment’ into the SRL category of ‘Behaviour and Strategic action’.

These categories and factors within them are discussed in more detail in the findings. In addition, students’ CIs related to students’ use of ‘Academic support’ and ‘Resources’ or comments on ‘processes’ were named by fewer than 25% of students thus were collapsed into a category called ‘The University’ which included UBC policy, processes, and services. In addition to
considering participation rates, categories were arrived at through two separate consultations outside the project and a consultation with a research expert linked to this project: First, three undergraduate students not attached to the study but employed in the academic advising office and expert in being undergraduate Arts students reviewed excel sheets of non-identifiable lists of CIs organized in categories decided upon by the researcher and research assistants. The student advisors provided their opinions on the relevance of the categories and placement of the CIs. Their suggestions were considered and some CIs were moved into other categories and some categories renamed or collapsed. For example, a category named ‘preparedness pre-university’ was absorbed into the ‘personal context’ category which included unexpected circumstances, mental and physical health, and other personal concerns. These personal aspects and pre-knowledge or academic preparedness are understood as features of “what a student brings” to their university life (Butler, 2018 - this is elaborated on further in the findings chapter). The ‘social belonging’ category was collapsed with extra-curricular involvement to be included as ‘Student engagement & sense of belonging on campus’. The ‘peer connection’ category was kept separate from the more general social belonging on campus and was renamed ‘Influence of peers’. This category was comprised of the facilitative and hindering influences that peers had on the participants in their first year. Finally, ‘Faculty influence/Classroom atmosphere’ was separated into two categories; ‘instruction’ and ‘classroom/program’. Following this helpful review by current undergraduate students, an Academic Advisor with over 25 years of academic advising experience in the Faculty of Arts at UBC reviewed the CIs and categories and provided suggestions for moving CIs and further collapsing categories - her recommendations were carefully considered as categories were further collapsed. Categories separating motivation, emotion, and learning were merged under categories reflecting the broad dimensions of Self-
regulated learning: ‘Motivation/Emotion’ became one category and ‘Learning issues’ placed under ‘Cognition/Metacognition’ to reflect the CIs where students think about and reflect on their learning; CIs in the ‘Environment’, ‘University’, and ‘Student Belonging’ categories were seen as more relevant to the ‘Behaviour/Strategic action’ category based on this advisor’s significant knowledge of the kinds of decisions students face in their academic and day-to-day lives at university. Her category check further confirmed the choice to merge ‘Environment’ into the ‘Behaviour/Strategic action’ category. Finally, the merged categories were reviewed by an expert on this research committee experienced in Qualitative research, specifically in CIT with Post-secondary students (Brindley, 1987). Her suggestions led to collapsing ‘Financial considerations’ into the ‘Personal context’ category, writing more descriptive category definitions (these are provided in the findings chapter), and reviewing some participant transcripts again to ensure relevance of the large number of CIs. Following another careful review of the transcriptions, CIs were deemed worthy of inclusion if students indicated the incident made a difference to them in facilitating or hindering their meeting or continuing to strive for their academic goals in their first year or their feeling of being facilitated or held back in some way in their navigating university life. Through these interviews it became clear to the researcher that incidents were critical to students in a cumulative way: ‘small c’ critical rather than ‘large C’ critical. In other words, small events in combination helped the students feel facilitated or held back at various times throughout their first year. An accumulation of small events or discouragements had an overall impact. This realization resulted in the choice to retain a large number of CIs in reporting the data to reflect and honour the 23 students’ perspectives on the many ways in which they felt helped or restricted in their first year. Specific examples of the included CIs are provided in the findings section. Following the above consultations new
participation rates were established and, along with considering the intended purpose of the research as recommended by Butterfield et. al., (2009), 12 categories were confirmed for subsequent credibility checks and analysis. Detailed descriptions of each category and Examples of student comments verbatim are included in the findings chapter as are participation rates for these 12 categories in helping and hindering incidents. They are reflected in Tables 2 and 3. Table 4 in the findings chapter provide the participation rates for the Wish list items.

**Placing incidents into categories by an independent judge.** As is recommended by Butterfield et. al., (2009) 25% of the Helping and Hindering CIs from each category were randomly chosen for review by independent judges for checking category relevance and agreement. Three Academic advisors sorted individual CIs on small pieces of paper into one of the twelve category envelopes. The researcher was present to answer advisor questions related to the definitions and noted the categories that required further explanation. The categories that were most often asked about were those related to Self-Regulated learning. Given the interconnectedness of ‘Behaviour/Strategic Action’, to ‘Emotion & Motivation’, and ‘Cognition/Metacognition’ it did not surprise the researcher that these categories may require greater explanation for CI placement. Provided with a more detailed explanation, advisors placed CIs into categories with equal to or above 80% agreement in 11 of 12 categories. At this cross check, helping incidents in the ‘Behaviour/Strategic Action’ category was placed with 50% agreement. The helping CIs in this area were filed under areas like ‘personal circumstances’ (“worked three jobs in a gap year to pay for school”) and Classroom/Program Structure (“chose enjoyable electives outside Arts One Standard Time Table”). However, following a discussion of the Behaviour/Strategic Action category as ‘capturing times students made choices and took control of their experience and learning’, the advisors understood the way in which CIs like these
fit into categories aligned with theories of Self-Regulated Learning. Rather than accepting the advisor agreement following this discussion, the researcher sought consultation with the thesis supervisor and then CI-to-category agreement was tested again with Dr. Deborah Butler, an expert in the field of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) at which point 91% category agreement was reached, well above Butterfield et. al.,’s recommended 80% agreement.

**Participant cross checking.** Once the 12 categories were confirmed, student participants were emailed summaries (as per their indicated preference) of their CIs within these categories along with definitions and descriptions of each category. Eighteen of twenty-three students replied to the check and all indicated the content was accurate with just one student requesting the research elaborate slightly on one of their points - this is discussed further in the findings section. Many students expressed gratitude for having the chance to share their experiences in the interviews and said the process had left them feeling more hopeful or intentional in their plan for their second year of studies. Most importantly, all students who responded to the check indicated accuracy. To elucidate, one student replied (verbatim), “this is a surprisingly good summary haha - good listening, I didn’t think I’d been eloquent enough to get. all this across! haha well done :)”. Note: The Happy Face emoji was the student’s.

**Experts in the field.** Several experts in the field of post-secondary academics were consulted throughout this research study and in the analysis of the data. Academic advisors and undergraduate students participated in the project from the development and implementation of the interviews to the category confirmation. Two experts in CIT (Faculty employed by UBC) were consulted regarding the research process and initial analysis. Finally, Dr. Deborah Butler, an expert/researcher in Self-regulated learning (SRL) and qualitative research was consulted to confirm the relevance of the CIs being categorized under the dimensions of SRL. With her
independent placing of CIs into the SRL categories and ‘external’ categories at least 80% agreement was achieved as was a greater understanding of the interconnected nature of student decision making and learning. As a result of her input, some CIs were considered relevant for more than one category. This is elaborated on further in the Findings chapter.

**Theoretical agreement.** Butterfield et. al.,’s (2009) instructive article on implementing the ECIT emphasises the importance of “articulating and reporting the assumptions underlying the study” and approaching the data and emerging categories all the while considering “relevant scholarly literature” and established theories in the field. This research project was developed assuming that a) the first-year at university is a poignant experience about which individual students develop an awareness and ability to reflect on; b) students will be willing to share their personal experiences with a researcher; c) the first-year university experience in the Faculty of Arts is an experience worthy of exploring with respect to what students identify as most pertinent for enhancing their overall experience and persisting in their studies; d) students’ attention and persistence will have been facilitated and hindered at certain points in their first year journey; e) learning about these experiences will be instructive for considering ways to best support students in future in this unique context; f) students may have ideas and be able to articulate ways that their experience might have been improved through a wish list, g) their wish lists may be illustrative for ways that the Faculty may improve aspects of the first-year experience.

The critical incidents collected and recorded were sorted into categories that aligned with the research and scholarly literature related to Post-secondary student learning, experience and persistence. This study provides a unique UBC Faculty of Arts specific perspective of student persistence and experience influenced by ‘internal factors’ and ‘external factors’ both well
documented in the literature. These influences will be described in detail in the Discussion chapter of this report.

**Ethical, practical, and diversity considerations.** There are several ethical issues that are inherent to a qualitative study (Haverkamp, 2005) and were considered in the development and implementation of this research project. Haverkamp’s (2005) concerns regarding the power differential that exists between researcher and participant (p. 146), two-fold in this study with the researcher an employed Faculty of Arts academic advisor. Students may have experienced their relationship with university advisors as one fraught with unequal power dynamics. As a way of maximizing an ethical approach, the researcher disclosed her employment as an advisor while reassuring students that their information and stories would be reported in an anonymous way that did not identify them specifically. In addition, their identifiable information was carefully safeguarded in encrypted files with just the researcher and BREB approved R.A privy to the student names connected to their participant number initially in the data analysis. Once transcriptions, category/CI checks and demographics were analysed and complete, these identifiable files were locked in storage with the principle investigator. Remaining data for reporting were completely unidentifiable.

**Psychological harm.** In the developing of this research methodology, it was recognized that the interview process could be upsetting for students as they recounted first-year academic struggles, successes, failures, and first year experience challenges. As a precaution, a UBC Wellness expert was consulted and it was suggested that the UBC *Mental Health and Well-being: Assisting students in distress. A Guide for faculty and staff* (Green folder) guidelines would be used should concerns be raised in the interview process. In addition, the aim to reduce the risk of harm was accomplished through an elaborate consent conversation and signing prior
to embarking on the interview content. At this point in the process, the fourth-year master’s level researcher and experienced advisor used practiced observation and analysis skills and training to ‘read’ the student’s emotional states. Not at any point in the interviewing of 23 first-year students did the interviewer worry about a student’s psychological wellness - the students who had volunteered for the study seemed excited to tell their stories and while there were emotional events that were disclosed, the students were forthcoming and matter-of-fact when asked about how they had cared for themselves and did not seem in need of additional referrals or psychological care. It is also worth mentioning here that student participants self-selected. Thus, students feeling more vulnerable or psychologically unwell may not have chosen to be a part of this study. The researcher is trained in ‘Suicide Safety’ with the Vancouver Crisis Center ‘ASIST’ program and UBC QPR programs as well as through Master’s course content, however, the interviewer did not feel the need for conducting a safety check during any of the interviews.

Logistical Issues. During the development stages of the research, it was recognized that having students participate in face-to-face interviews and a data checking following the interviews could be problematic in the summer session. Thus, the interviews were conducted during the exam period in April and content cross checking was offered by phone and email. Getting in touch with students was not at any point difficult - they were quick to respond to emails and phone calls and all but two students attended their scheduled interviews on time and as planned.

Impartiality to the process was considered and while a plan was created to include other researchers if a student volunteer had seen the researcher previously as an advisor, this was not necessary as none of the 23 students had ever met the researcher. As a result, the researcher was able to conduct all interviews providing continuity and maximizing a standardized practice.
To further maximize standard practice and reduce the likelihood the interviewer straying from the script or leading participants, the research assistant reviewed all recordings and transcribed them during the interview process over the two months of meetings.

*Unpredictability inherent in Qualitative research.* Haverkamp warns that with its exploratory, fluid, discovery-oriented, and open-ended style, qualitative study is susceptible to unexpected results and impacts on participants and other stakeholders (147). While the open-ended nature can foster a deeper and richer understanding of the participants’ experience of interest, it also has the potential to result in unexpected ethical or even safety concerns.

As a part of a larger research project funded by the Faculty of Arts and of Science supported by the Wellness Publication team, experienced and knowledgeable consultants helped to predict potential harms and were accessible to the primary researcher throughout the weeks leading up to and during the interviews. In addition, the researcher discussed concerns with the research assistant and was reflective, critical, and responsive to questions and issues that arose as the study progressed (147).

*Consideration of a conflict of interest.* As a researcher in the advising unit and as an academic advisor the researcher was careful about the dual and potentially conflicting role in this study. An imbalanced investment in either or both these perspectives could have impacted the study development, collection of data, the analysis, and the reported findings. Consultation with the advising unit and being open to feedback about the approach to the study provided important ethical and student wellness checks.

*Diversity issues.* Research suggests that individuals differ in their comfort in accessing psychological assistance and in their comfort with talking to others about upsetting and/or embarrassing events (Hirai et. al., 2015). Talking about academic performance, especially if at
risk of failing, can be shameful for some cultures over others (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). The discomfort related to talking with others about their experience and the need to save face could have resulted in students not choosing to participate and/or being significantly uncomfortable with the process. For these reasons, care was taken to respect the students’ levels of disclosure. Students were informed that their confidentiality in relation to personal identity would be protected by reporting the data through summaries of their stories as part of a larger narrative and reassured that the report would not include identifying information.

Positionality. As an academic advisor, I have met with many distressed students struggling academically. At times, I felt that I, as an extension of university policy, systems, and ideology, have hindered their academic progress and growth. I am situated in a paradigm of ‘helping’ professional at the university yet I am not sure students always feel helped. The Arts Academic Advising unit is a ‘support service’ that intends to help. This research was driven by the question, how can we better serve and support students? Many service units across campus are asking this question. In addition to consulting the written research about what helps “the university student”- it was felt imperative to turn to UBC experts in the first-year university student experience and support needs - the first-year student. As an advisor/researcher, I have my ideas of how to best serve our students and beliefs about gaps in service. It was paramount that I approached this research with an open mind, ready to hear the student perspective and prepared to be surprised. Each student’s experience and story heard as their own, free of bias and assumptions of their experience. While my advising background fueled my interest in conducting this study, and my counselling training informed my understanding of the importance of exploring the factors that significantly impact student academic success and subsequently their emotional well-being, reflexivity throughout the process of information gathering and analysis
was key. While it is unlikely that this researcher was completely void of subjectivity in hearing and coding their narratives, the intent was to be mindful of my bias through-out the data collection, analysis and reporting. The ECIT method with its nine credibility checks and emphasis on quantifying incidents assisted me in maintaining as subjective a stance as is possible given that pure subjectivity is unlikely to be achieved in research.

This research was approached with ideals highlighted in Haverkamp (2005): “to serve the greater good’ and even possibly to offer “immediate and direct benefits” (149) to those students who participated. While ‘intentions alone’ do not guarantee an ethic-issue-free study, consistent consultation and collaboration with experienced ethical researcher/practitioners guided this researcher’s practice. Student participants were invited at the end of the interview to comment on how the interview process was experienced by them. 100% of the interviewees reported a positive impact. Specifically, students said they felt “more hopeful”, “better prepared for next year, “relieved”, and even that the interview experience had been “cathartic”. More student reflection comments are included in the following chapter on Findings.
Chapter 4: Findings

All students interviewed were able to speak at length with minimal prompting about factors that they believed influenced their academic experience and performance in their first year. While academic performance was a part of the conversation, the emphasis was on their process of learning, adjusting to first year, and their experiences overall at UBC rather than their academic performance or grades. However, all participants were asked to indicate their perception of ‘how they were doing’ in general and many chose to refer to how they were managing academically. While many expressed that they “could have” or “should have” “done better” and/or shared failure experiences, none of the students believed they were at significant risk academically at the end of their second term when the interviews took place.

As mentioned in Chapter 3 in the Data Analysis summary, in order to best reflect the participants’ spoken experience and present the factors believed relevant to 23 first-year UBC Faculty of Arts students, it was determined that as many of the factors mentioned as possible should be included in reporting this interview data even though some could be deemed much less ‘critical’ than others. For example, a student’s strong desire to work hard at university to honour her father’s death prior to the school year is included as a critical incident as is another student’s sense of control, capability and persistence fueled by their weekly routine of making their bed. Both CIs are seen as being created equal, as both were expressed by the students as critical to their ‘success’ (ability to persevere despite challenges) in their first-year. Conceived in this way, a ‘critical incident’ (CI) is any event, feeling, thought, or action that creates a change or maintenance of desire to keep forging ahead, or any that depletes it and holds the student back in some way from their purpose and goals. A CI is simply anything that leads the student to believe “I can” and/or “I want to” versus “I can’t” and/or “I won’t”. The student interviews suggest that
in the case of these 23 students, incidents that were critical accumulated to a critical mass. An ‘incident’ may seem barely noticeable on its own but in combination with other disappointments or positive happenings, accumulated to be impactful as a whole - The whole of combined CIs is more ‘critical’ than each ‘incident’ alone: In fact, this point is made by one of the students interviewed:

First year is kind of difficult, and not just from an academic standpoint … what I’ve noticed is that they [students] struggle with all sorts of things, whether it be academic or social, their career, and it’s not just one thing that pushes them down. It becomes a combination of all these different aspects that discourage them from doing the best that they can (Student Participant).

Persistence seems subject to a ‘drip effect’, or a gradual “wearing down” or attrition as defined in Soanes and Stevenson (2006, p. 85). This concept will be explored further in the Discussion chapter following the findings.

In total, the twenty-three students interviewed reported a total of 446 facilitative factors, 372 hindering incidents and 132 wish list items. On average, students reported nineteen helping incidents and sixteen hindering incidents. The average number of wish list items mentioned was six per student. The most facilitative incidents mentioned by a student was thirty-three and the least was nine. The largest number of hindering factors mentioned by a student was forty-eight and the least was Eight. The most common number of helpful incidents reported by students was seventeen while the most common number of hindering incidents mentioned was fifteen. The average number of wish list items offered was six and the most common amounts were two, four and six items mentioned by four students each. The highest number of wish list items mentioned by a participant was thirteen and the fewest was one. Interestingly, the participant with the
highest number of wish list items mentioned the second highest number of hindering factors. Students mentioned the greatest number of wish list items in the University, Behaviour and Strategic Action, Extra-curricular, and Student Engagement categories. More about how wish list items relate to the student’s facilitating or hindering incidents are included in the section that follows with descriptions and details regarding each category.

The twelve categories that were finalized were deemed common to and useful for reporting both the facilitating and hindering factors as well as the wish list items. In the following section, Quotes/examples of helpful/facilitating (F) and Hindering (H) CIs and Wish list (W) items mentioned by the participants are provided to illustrate each category with minimal editing to maintain the integrity of the student’s own meaning in their own words. Summary tables are included at the beginning of this section to provide an overview and context for the written explanations. Table 2 provides participation rates and numbers of incidents reported and ratios for facilitative versus hindering incidents with the numbers of wish list items mentioned for each category in order of the highest overall participation rate. The category sequence in this table provides the framework for presenting the definitions and collected data for each bipolar category in this chapter. Tables 3 and 4 present the categories in order of frequency for the facilitating, and the hindering incidents separately. Table 5 summarizes the rates of reported wish list items in each category.

**Findings Summary Tables**

The salience of the categories is illustrated through the participation rate (PR)- which is derived by the number of participants who named a factor in a category out of the total number of participants- and by the number of incidents identified in a category. Most often - but not always, the rate of which categories were mentioned by participants was correlated with the
number of CIs in the category. For the purpose of providing greater detail and relevance thus better reflecting the unique facilitating or hindering experiences for two particular groups of students, one of the categories is subdivided in the charts and descriptive data that follows.

Table 2

**Categories and Overall Participation Rates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (listed in order of overall participation rate)</th>
<th>PR</th>
<th># of students /23</th>
<th>Total CIs</th>
<th>Ratio of (F) to (H) incidents</th>
<th># of WL items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Motivation, Emotion &amp; Mindset</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>72 to 49</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Behaviour &amp; Strategic Action</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>75 to 37</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Personal Circumstances</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13 to 54</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Classroom &amp; Program structure</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>33 to 38</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Peer Influence</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>50 to 17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Living Arrangement</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>27 to 34</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The University: Services, Policy, Process &amp; Practice</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>42 to 24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Metacognitive Awareness &amp; Reflection</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25 to 35</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Family Influence</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36 to 09</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Instruction</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47 to 19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Extracurricular Engagement &amp; Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15 to 44</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Orientation Programming</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11 to 13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Living arrangements: Subcategories

| On-campus Residence living (Note 88%, 15 of 17 students in Residence mention factors) | 65%  | 15               | 46        | 25 to 21                      | 12           |
| Commuter Students (Note: 100% of 6 commuters PR)               | 26%  | 6                | 15        | 2 to 13                       | 4            |
Table 3

*Helping Categories and Incidents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(446 Facilitating Factors mentioned listed in order of greatest frequency for comments regarding facilitating factors)</th>
<th>PR % of total students</th>
<th># of students /23</th>
<th>% of Helping Incidents</th>
<th># of Helping Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation, Emotion &amp; Mindset</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour &amp; Strategic Action</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Influence</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University: Services, Policy, Process &amp; Practice</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Influence</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom &amp; Program structure</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Awareness &amp; Reflection</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Engagement &amp; Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Circumstances</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation programming</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<td>2%</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements: Subcategories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in Residence</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuting to Campus</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

_Hindering Categories and Incidents_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindering Category</th>
<th>% of total students</th>
<th># of students of 23</th>
<th>% of Hindering Incidents</th>
<th># of Hindering Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Circumstances</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation, Emotion &amp; Mindset</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom &amp; Program structure</td>
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<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Engagement &amp; Sense of Belonging</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behaviour &amp; Strategic Action</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Awareness &amp; Reflection</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
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<td>5%</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>The University: Services, Policy, Process &amp; Practice</td>
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<td>6%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Influence</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<td>5%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation Programming</td>
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<td>3%</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Influence</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements: Subcategories</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in Residence</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuting to Campus</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Wish list Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wish list (131 wish list items mentioned in order of greatest frequency)</th>
<th>% of total students</th>
<th># of students</th>
<th>% of Wish list items</th>
<th># of Wish list items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The University: Services, Policy, Process &amp; Practice</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour &amp; Strategic Action</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Engagement &amp; Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation, Emotion &amp; Mindset</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation Programming</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom &amp; Program Structure</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Influence</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Awareness &amp; Reflection</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Circumstances</td>
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<td>Family Influence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living Arrangements: Subcategories</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in Residence</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commuting to Campus</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Category Descriptions and Statement of Results

**Motivation, emotion and mindset.** This category includes factors related to mindset and attitudes that impact and reflect motivation and mood. Student statements regarding purpose, attention to grades, and attitudes toward various opportunities and academic challenges and life realities, including, motivational challenges, feeling energized or a lack of purpose, procrastinating, approach to studies, chosen goals and ability to focus are present in this category as are statements reflecting their attitudes toward their personal strengths and weaknesses.

“Individuals’ willingness to invest & engage in activities” (motivation and will power), as well
as their “affective responses when engaged in or presented with a task” (Butler, 2017) are reflected in this category. Ways in which students strategized their behaviour to maintain positive moods and increase motivation to reach their academic and life goals are addressed in the next category ‘**Behaviour & Strategic Action**’.

Although there were two categories that elicited 100% student participation, this category had more incidents mentioned overall and so is presented first. With a participation rate of 100% and the highest total number of reported CIs at 121, this category is the strongest - 72 helpful CIs were mentioned versus 49 indicating that these students as a group found aspects related to their mindsets, attitudes, mood and motivation as more helpful than hindering. Helpful CIs in this category were mentioned by 100% of the participants, 91% of participants provided hindering CIs, and just over a quarter (26%) had WL items to offer.

**Examples of student comments.**

(F) “I think my goal for first year before I came here was not only do well in school which is a given, but to really have a memorable experience and unforgettable experience, and I really did have an amazing experience here, despite all the troubles I’ve been through, you can really see looking back how I’ve grown even more mature after those experiences. So, I’m proud of myself. I’m pretty sure when I go back to wherever my parents are, they’ll be seeing a different side of me as well, like a more mature side of me”.

(F) “…so, I’m getting there, I’m getting motivation, I’m always telling myself, yes [name] you had a good day. You did wake up early, you did go to the gym, you didn’t waste your day, you did something. So just having a really positive mindset and trying to catch up with everything, I can do better with my finals, that’s like the last chance”.

(F) “…To be quite honest with you, it was that mentality that changed, that really led me to do well in my second term, and create a positive learning environment for me, because from that day, I just focused on what matters to me, the learning process rather than the actual grades themselves”.

(H) “I definitely thought about why I wasn’t motivated to read before class, I think mostly it’s because I’m occupied with something else that I like to do, like just being with friends which is good but not all the time”. 
(H) “I have no idea what I want to do, I’m just going to put that out there. I have no idea what I’m interested in in general... I have very little concept of what interests me in terms of a career. It’d be good to be able to understand my interests a little bit better. I’ve gone over the list of majors so many times, and every time I look over it I think you know, none of these are appealing to me”.

(W) “I wish I could change how I studied in first term, once I receive a bad grade, it makes me not want to study, and it’s going to get worse. Yeah that’s like a bad cycle for the classes, because I tried hard to study for midterms, but the grade is not that good, so it kind of de-motivated me sometimes”.

**Behaviour and strategic action.** This category reflects the actions students take to cope with and take control of the realities in their learning life. “Interpreting tasks, setting goals, planning, enacting strategies, monitoring, and adjusting” (Butler, 2017) are behaviours that students reflected on as influencing their academic performance and experience. This section includes help-seeking behaviour and academic resource use, choice making related to their program and scheduling, decisions for coping like reducing course load, choices to engage in university life, conscious management of their environment (such as choice of study habits and locations) and their development of routines and rituals aimed at maximizing their academic success, wellness, and personal satisfaction. (Note: Program/schedule change/or environment comments were included here only when students identified these factors as a conscious choice they made/or did not make but wished they had).

This section also yielded 100% participation with all 23 students mentioning something about what they did or decisions they made that either facilitated or hindered them. The second highest number of CIs were reported in this category (112) with a ratio of 75 facilitative to 37 hindering factors mentioned. 87% of participants mentioned helpful factors and 70% mentioned hindering factors. In general, it seems students were better able to identify ways in which their behaviour and strategies helped them meet their academic and living goals rather than hindered them. However, it is important to note that while there were 35 fewer hindering CIs than helpful
CIIs, students were quite regretful about ways they behaved over the year that sabotaged their success and they demonstrated much wishful thinking about ways they wished they had done things differently. The second highest number of WL items was offered in this category with 25 items. The quote excerpts that follow illustrate how students took ownership of their circumstances and responsibility for their past and future success.

**Examples of student comments.**

(F) “This is going to sound a little bit weird but I do my laundry every week on Sundays. It’s just a small thing that I do, I wash my sheets, I wash all my laundry, I sort of pick up things off the floor and clean up my desk a little bit and it just makes my life feel a little bit more structured and doing that sort of small thing, like taking care of myself, makes me feel capable as an adult of achieving what I’m interested in doing”.

(F) “I mean I have an agenda too, so I would just write things down, and I’d try and I mean there was one time too I learned my lesson first term, there was this one essay that I just put off and I only had three days to write it, and it was a long essay, and the night before I probably stayed up until 3 or something finishing it, and that too made me think, okay I’m never doing that again. Like I know some people can pull all-nighters but I can’t. …I need sleep. So, I was like I’m never doing that again, so for my other essays this term then I made sure I planned ahead and I did it. And it was helpful once I got stuff down, then the rest came”.

(H) “this is a me problem... I probably should have gone to counselling for all my social anxiety issues, because I never really have... but the issue for me is because I have social anxiety, I can’t go to counselling and ask, ‘hi can you help me?’ because I’m afraid to do that!”.

(H) “I never had gone to an exam thinking I might actually fail this exam, because in high school I mean I was always super prepared for everything and I was one of the students that’d be really on top of things. I definitely feel stressed... I do procrastinate quite a bit (at UBC) so I know that’s a thing that I have to work on”.

(W) “I think I should’ve kept the meal plan I had before. It’s just I had a hard time budgeting this year as well, and I think that has to do with a lack of self-control, but yeah. I wish I had spent more time budgeting”.

**Personal circumstances.** This category acknowledges the effect that psycho-social and systemic realities, personal experience of adjustment and preparation for University, and unexpected or changed circumstances can have for students as they navigate through their first
year. This category clusters student comments regarding how personal circumstances and factors related to physical and mental health, readiness and expectations for university, adjustment concerns, financial and socio-cultural and political privilege and challenges impacted their academics, general well-being, and overall first-year experience.

This category yielded the second highest participation rate of 96%, overall. All but one student made mention of at least one personal circumstance that impacted them in their first year. It is important to note that the rate of helping CIs is 39% compared to 96% for hindering CIs. Many more students (22 versus 9) mentioned ways in which something ‘personal’ in their first-year negatively influenced how they felt or progressed. Evidently the student participants either had more negatively impactful personal events occur in their first year, or it is more difficult to see the ways in which positive personal circumstances facilitates one’s university success and overall experience. No WL items were sorted into this category.

Examples of student comments.

(F) “I’m Singaporean, so my ethnicity is Chinese, so the fact that I come here and there’s so many Chinese people, so this doesn’t seem too foreign. It’s a good thing in the sense that it helped me adapt really fast...I naturally just feel a little bit more comfortable... I didn’t have much trouble transitioning also because of food, I get to eat a lot of Asian food here.”

(F) “I come from a Korean background, and in South Korea, doing well in school or performing exceptionally well in an academic sense, it’s very important”.

(H) “I always listen to my mom [as a child and in high school] ... ‘take this, piano it’s for girls’, so I take piano -like that. I don’t have much choice. And suddenly my parents let me go [to University], and they are like ‘just do whatever you want, like study whatever you want’... and now I’m like just lost ... I’m so lost, I don’t know”.

(H) “There have been times where it’s been rough...in my first semester it was kind of a big transition with academic workload, with finals and midterms having a lot more weight because they constitute essentially 70-80% of my mark, and I don’t want to say it’s different from high school because we did have exams worth quite a bit, but it just felt like the pressure was a lot more intense. So that really got to me in the first semester”
“(H) “I would say a part of why I decided to end the relationship was because well I mean there were other reasons, but he would kind of guilt me sometimes if I was studying, so he’d call me and I’d be like sorry I really have to study, and he’d be like oh you never have time for me and that kind of thing”.

“(H) “I got sick like three times throughout the year, and it was bad”.

**Classroom/program structure.** In this category, participant comments centred on how the classroom environment or first-year program was critical to their learning, interest to engage with course material, and to their overall experience as a university learner. First-year cohort programs include the Coordinated Arts Program (CAP) and Arts One program. This section also includes comments made about first year in smaller Arts programs like the Bachelor of International Economics, and Bachelor of Media Studies as well as first year Fine Arts programs. Each of these first-year programs offer smaller class sizes than large lectures and a standard timetable. Incidents included here are those that reflect the students’ experiences of these classrooms and as a student in their program or Faculty as well as comments regarding not being in these programs.

Classroom/program structure was mentioned by 91% of the students interviewed making it the category with the third highest participation rate - it is necessary to note however, that it shares this place with two other categories mentioned below. 33 helpful incidents were mentioned versus 38 hindering incidents for a total of 71 CIs. Seventy percent of the participants reported ways in which their classroom/program experience was facilitative and 78% mentioned how they had experienced feeling held back or unhappy in some way because of an experience in the classroom or because of the nature of their program or faculty. Most of the helpful incidents mentioned were in relation to students’ experience in the smaller cohort programs such as the Coordinated Arts Program, Arts One, or the Bachelor of International Economics programs. Seven WL items were offered by participants.
Examples of student comments.

(F) “Yeah, well I would say probably the two things that made my first year – that really stood out for me and made it special (first) was I was in the CAP program... that was really nice, because for CAP I found it really made the transition from high school where it’s more kind of personal to – and you kind of see the same people every day...I thought the professors were really great as well. And my Arts Studies professor -my English professor, we had a class with her that was about 20 people, and that was one of my favorite classes because it was so intimate and stuff, and I really liked that.”

(F) “Arts One definitely helped me transition pretty rapidly I’d say...Because of the writing, so it’s a lot of writing...what I’m writing now is definitely more university standard, I do see a really big difference. ...And it also really taught me time management because it’s a lot of work. And the program is basically a lot of small groups, so I get to have a lot of comments from the peers and your professor, and it’s really awesome; I like it a lot”.

(F) “BMS is an interdisciplinary program which is good because didn’t know what I wanted to do, it was nice to have smaller cohort program in face of such a large school... nice to have same people in all classes, study together, it’s hard to make friends in huge classes, huge lecture halls are overwhelming... registering in Arts is so broad you know? How can you choose?”

(F) “I don’t think I felt quite as intimidated as I thought I should’ve. And one of the main reasons why is being part of the BIE program, we have such a small number of students in our classrooms, there’s only around 100 of us in the program. Having that cohort program was very beneficial for me, because I instantly made so many different friends and I got along with whole new groups of people in my program, and it just made me feel comfortable. It made me feel welcomed. And having those small class sizes, I got to know my professors very well, which also helps you get used to the system here at UBC.”

(H) “in a bigger classroom environment people tend to be more disconnected...How do we actually initiate a conversation?”.

(H) “I think it’s just really hard to break through and form friendships through classes especially when classes are so short, it’s not like high school where you’re all crammed into this one public space for a long time”.

(W) “Would’ve been nice if first year classes were smaller, I’m also hoping that as I move past first year, I’ll have less large lectures and more small classes”.

Peer influence. Student comments regarding the facilitative or hindering influence of peers was included in this category. Unlike ‘student belonging’ (often described as an overall
general feeling or sense), peer influence incidences were those where other students specifically helped or hindered a student in their striving toward academic goals or experience of learning.

Peer influence shares the third highest rate of participation (91%) with the prior category discussed and the one that follows. Sixty-seven total CIs were mentioned with significantly greater facilitative factors mentioned (50) than hindering factors (17) and a small number of WL items with four participants offering 1 WL item each. These students perceived their peers as helping them more than holding them back. Eighty-seven percent of the participants offered facilitative factors versus a PR of 39% for hindering factors.

**Examples of student comments.**

(F) “...what I learned from my friend is they’re really good at time management. They study, they get good grades, and they also work, they also do whatever they want, they also go out and stuff”.

(F) “like once I missed a whole week ...because I was sick, and I just asked my friend and they like took pictures and sent it [their notes] to me... I get a lot of support from my friends”.

(F) “It just feels nice to know that there are people in the same boat, that they’re all here for one purpose of education, and just knowing that there are the people who are also homesick you know, it just feels less sad”.

(F) “...my friends, they’re just really supportive and I think we all understand that we have to work really hard because it’s university and I think having them there and having them also be ambitious and also want to work hard, that definitely motivated me to keep going even if I experience failures.”

(H) “sometimes other students not caring makes you start not to care... the idea of not having to go to class it’s sort of out there and it draws you in a little bit, especially when people say 'oh there’s no point, the prof is just going to do this’ So that would be a bit of a barrier, to doing well academically, is just this sense of it’s not worth it to go to class, it’s this sort of student chatter that’s happening”.

(H) “- my other first year friends that I hang out around, they kind of messed up too and I’m also the type to follow other people... it’s not my friend’s fault, actually it’s my own fault that I follow them”.

(W) “Wish I didn’t let peer pressure take time away from studying: should have been more my own person and not feel the pressure (to go out)”

Living arrangements. Critical Incidents in this section are those related to the student’s residence experience in their first year. Some students lived on the UBC campus in first-year residence. Others commuted from homes outside the university. In addition to reporting the participation rates and CIs in ‘living arrangements’ overall, this category was subdivided in the tables to elucidate the ways in which CIs are expressed in the hindering versus helping categories to better illustrate the frequencies with which either living situation impacted their academics and overall experience.

Overall this category had a participation rate of 91%. With 61 total CIs: 27 helpful to 34 hindering CIs and 16 WL items. There was a PR of 61% identifying helping CIs and a PR of 65% for hindering CIs. While this PR and CI ratio and number of WL items seems unremarkable, when the category is subdivided into residence living versus commuting, a different picture emerges of how a student’s living arrangements impacts their first-year experience and academic performance.

Of the 23 students interviewed, 17 students reported living in residence on campus and 6 said they commuted to campus. The commuting distances varied with one student commuting for as little as 10 minutes from Kitsilano and another up to 2 hours each way from Surrey. Of the 17 students in residence, 15 mentioned hindering or helping factors - while this is an overall PR of 52%, if using 17 as the denominator, the PR is 88% for students in residence and 100% for the 6 students commuting as all 6 commuter students spoke about how commuting impacted their first-year experience. All of the commuter students (a PR of 100%) mentioned ways in which their commute limited them and diminished their university success and experience versus just over half of students in residence (52% of 17 students) reporting hindering factors. Two of 6
commuting students mentioned a helpful CI versus more than half of the students in residence mentioning ways their experience and academics were facilitated by being in residence. There were 2 helpful to 13 hindering CIs mentioned by the commuters. Students in residence mentioned an almost equal number of positive to negative influences living in residence (25:21). The quotes below elucidate the specific ways in which students in each group were facilitated or hindered depending on where they lived.

**Examples of student comments.**

(F) “I would say living in residence was also super important just because I do have friends who commute, and I can totally see the difference because say for example with making friends, and by making friends I’d be able to have someone to talk to or talk about classes and help with homework and stuff, but when, say a group of people and I are thinking “oh hey let’s stay up late tonight and study all night, pull an all-nighter or something for this huge test we have tomorrow, and like order pizza and just hang out”, or whatever, and then I would have – a friend who doesn’t live here wouldn’t be able to stay, and I’d be like, that’d be so sad because they’re missing out on this really unique experience of first year, just hanging out”.

(F) “The people that I’ve met in residence - the people I’m closest to (at UBC), are people on my floor”.

(H) “Commuting is definitely a barrier. In the first few weeks of school, I sort of got accustomed to it but always towards the end of the terms, I really feel how much of a barrier it is. It pretty much takes an hour and 30 minutes to get here from home, and an hour and 30 minutes back. I spend 3 hours of my day on transit, so sometimes I think to myself when I really have a lot of things I need to do, it’s such a waste to be spending 3 hours of my day commuting when I could be studying, and sometimes it really drains me, and there have been a couple times where I’ve been so overloaded with work I decided it was more beneficial for me to stay home and skip classes and not waste time commuting and just work on my projects that are worth more than my attendance marks”.

(H) “A lot of the “ideal” first year experience is only possible if you live on campus or stay till 10, 11 pm... UBC advertises itself as way too idealistic, with big numbers about funding, rankings, alumni stories, but not everyone is like that [image of the typical on-campus student]”.

(H) “I’m in Vanier, in Ross house. At first, I really wasn’t very used to the basement, because I’m in the basement. It’s the ground floor, but it’s really the basement, because there isn’t much sunlight, and I come from a place with a lot of sunlight. It’s just like
being cooped up in a prison cell I’d say. ... it’s pretty lonely there, it’s dark and it’s pretty scary sometimes”.

(W) “I wish there were more services for commuter students, there’s too much focus on residence, it feels like UBC ignores commuter students, takes us for granted because we live in Vancouver anyway”.

The University: services, policy, process and practice. This category emerged as students commented on the influence that the course selection processes and options, the university’s policies, academic resources and campus support services, and the overall campus environment had on them.

Eighty-seven percent of the participants mentioned a total of 66 CIs in this category: 42 facilitative to 24 hindering factors. The participation rate for mentioning helpful CIs was 78% versus 39% hindering CIs. Interestingly, the students mentioned the highest number of wish list items (35) in this category. They had many ideas and wishes for improving the overall student experience and how to better facilitate student academic success. Many of their hopes and ideas are summarized in the recommendations offered in Chapter 5.

Examples of student comments.

(F) Off the top of my head I can think of one example [of things that were helpful], I actually visited the Arts Academic offices once and that was when I was trying to decide, trying to figure out what I needed....So the Advisor there was extremely helpful, and showed me how to look up the information on the required courses on the online website, and it kind of gave me an idea of what I needed to take and showed me how to find the information of the courses I need to take, how to plan effectively, so that was very helpful.

(F) “For me it was using the writing center [the most helpful resource] ... a lot of Arts students don’t get a lot of the free tutoring benefits from AMS. Like most of those are biology, physics, chemistry, which isn’t related to a lot of the Arts people.... I used the writing center for other courses as well, so it was very useful”.

(F) “I think one of the things that I really like about UBC and this campus is everyone is so welcoming, and everyone wants to make you feel as if you actually matter in this university. And the evidence of that is the way that I’ve talked to some of the people here at UBC. They really helped me out. Professors, friends, peers, advisors, the people that I’ve been working with on a daily basis, I can’t think of a single person that has told me
that you don’t matter or you don’t belong here or impacted me in a negative way. Everyone that I’ve talked to makes my experience here at UBC much better... I actually had the opportunity to go to the Norman Mackenzie House where Dr. Ono, the president of UBC resides, and I was talking to him, and he said to me, one of the things that I really want to make sure that we better emphasize here at UBC is to make sure that every single person matters on campus. And that idea really made me feel comfortable and really made me feel that I have absolutely no regrets in choosing UBC as my university”.

(H) “the kind of people that don’t come (to get help) are the kind of people that are struggling. So, I feel like it (meeting with an advisor) would have to be mandatory in some way because the people who do come (to support workshops or meetings) are the people that are usually fine, that is what I’ve found”.

(H) “the kind of people that don’t come [to get help] are the kind of people that are struggling. So, I feel like it [meeting with an advisor] would have to be mandatory in some way because the people who do come [to support workshops or meetings] are the people that are usually fine ...whereas people who are struggling in class don’t go to anything because it’s optional”.

(H) “the problem is there wasn’t really anyone that I was able to speak to for an extended period of time, and when I called UBC, I’d say “I need to take this class” or I’m interested in this department, and [they’d say] “Oh that’s not my department,” and send you to another department, it’s kind of endless. So, I feel like it’d be nice if there were just two or three people that were part of UBC staff who could assist students who are interested in transferring and who know how to transfer in UBC”... “Another thing that was really frustrating was that over the summer, UBC most departments are available by phone from 9-4, and they work from 10-4 or 10-5 sometimes, which made it very difficult to get in contact with people at UBC”.

(W) “I think one way to make it better is if there was some way for us to get to know all the courses that were offered, or a good quantity of them. This is getting really imaginative, but if we had some kind of quiz or questionnaire that asked us what our interests were and compiled a whole bunch of courses that might be kind of related to those ideas, to make a list for us to choose from”.

Meta-cognition: awareness and reflections. Included in this category are students’ reflections and comments related to their knowledge and awareness of personal learning styles and skills, their ideas about how to learn, and understandings of options available to them for learning. Important to note here is that a student’s metacognitive awareness can lead to meta cognitive control: actions to address an awareness of learning needs. Examples of interviewees’ Meta cognitive control are contained in the ‘Behaviour стратегический Action’ category.
Eighty-seven percent of the participants mentioned a total of 60 CIs that related to their way of learning or how having learned something about their learning helped them (PR 52%) or how difficulties with learning or knowing how to improve their studying held them back in some way (PR 70%). Students were slightly more likely to identify limiting aspects of their cognition/metacognition than helpful CIs. There were 35 hindering versus 25 facilitating CIs mentioned in this area. Only 3 WL items were identified in this category.

Examples of student comments.

(F) “...there was this one time where I had to submit a history paper that was quite significant. And it was getting kind of near the due date and I still hadn’t started on it so I was in a time crunch, and I think for a little bit, I was thinking about how stressed I was, and I didn’t want to start on it, procrastination you know, but then I think what helped me in that instance was I guess it’s kind of like a ritual thing, where I just tried to break down what I needed to do, what the steps were, and wrote it down and then once I did that, I realized it was kind of manageable because I knew what I had to do, and then I just worked from there. I think that really helped... why I was so stressed about it was just thinking about it as a whole task, very daunting, but once you start analyzing what exactly it is that you have to do, it becomes more manageable because you realize it’s not as daunting as you thought it was”.

(F) “I decided it’s better to do something that I enjoy, and I’ll get higher grades in it for law school...”

(F) “I said to myself, how can I use this? How is this applicable? What else can I know about this? And that drive is essentially one of the main reasons I felt like I was able to do well on an exam, even though there were certain things that I wasn’t 100% sure about. And when it comes to the actual exam... I would have a lot of anxiety going in. Nowadays, when I go in an exam, I just say to myself, “you know what you studied, just write it and see what happens. Try your best, do as much as you can, ...take off the stress from your mind... That’s been a really big part of the change- of success I’ve had in university for sure”.

(F) “I realized that if you just focus on the content material, and focus on actually learning about what you’re doing, the grades just come. So, I went from a 53 on my first midterm in ECON 101 to a 98 on my second midterm in ECON 102.... because I learned that the grades will come as long as I focus on the learning”.

(H) “I think it’s common for all first years to hit some kind of wall during their academic year. For me it was when I took a course that I didn’t really know what it was about... I
didn’t know how to structure the writing because it was different from what I was used to… So, I had trouble writing this new piece and I hit a wall, got a pretty bad grade”.

(H) “So, I think I have a pretty short attention span, so that’s probably it”.

(W) “Wish I was more confident to ask questions”

**Family influence.** This category highlights how family members are perceived by first-year students as supporting or hindering them in their academic goal striving and overall quality of university life.

This category yielded an overall participant rate of 83%. Interestingly however, the participation rates for mentioning helping and hindering CIs are quite varied with the helping PR at 74% versus 30% for hindering. Students found family were significantly more helpful than not and mentioned far more facilitating CIs (36) than hindering CIs (9). There were no WL items mentioned in this category.

**Examples of student comments.**

(F) “My family is a huge support. They support me in a living as well as what I want to do, so they’re an important support network”

(F) “I ...want to do well for them [parents], because they are a reason why I’m here, they are paying for it... they’ll be happy for me for my grades and sometimes they’ll ask how I’m doing, but they’re never like confining me to my room to study the whole day or that kind of thing”

(F) “I haven’t given a lot of credit to my family because I grew up very close to my siblings ... I grew up in an atmosphere where my parents told me that the most important thing in your life is your character and not the way you do things or the way you perform in school. And I think that their encouragement and the way they opened up to me was also a significant part in the way I was able to change my mentality”.

(F) “on weekends I would either go home because I’d be scheduled for work or I would just spend time with my family, and I definitely feel that if I wasn’t able to go home as much, I probably would be a bit more stressed because I do find that spending time with my family helps me relieve stress and just relax a lot more. So that was helpful”.

(F) “I definitely think about how lucky I am, how fortunate I am to have a supportive family, because I know that some people don’t have that, some people are for whatever
reason don’t have a family to rely on, things like that. And so, thinking about that, there’s just so much support that my family has to give, for example financial support is a big one, I don’t have to pay for rent or my food, that kind of stuff. It’s just that kind of support really helps me. “.

(H) “first semester... things happened with my family, I had a hard time focusing on things I was less interested in”.

(H) “my dad is kind of, he’s kind of pushy sometimes. He’s not ever really pushy about my grades because I do that fine, but he’s more like what he wants me to do...he really wants me to minor in economics, major in English. So, I don’t know, I’m not too sure yet what I want to do, but I don’t want to minor in Economics. I kind of haven’t had that conversation with him yet”.

Instruction. In this category, incidents related to the student’s experience of their instruction within and outside classrooms are included. Faculty members and Teaching Assistants (TA) are mentioned in this section as it became clear that many students were not aware if their instructor was a ‘full professor’ or Graduate student. In addition, these two instructor types were merged to reflect that both Professors and Teaching Assistants were named by students as positively or negatively influencing the students’ academic performance and experience. Unlike the ‘Classroom/Program’ category, the comments in this category are related to the kinds of interactions students had with professors, their perceived access to instructors and TA’s, and how students experienced their style of teaching or assessment/evaluation or support of student performance/knowledge.

Seventy-eight percent of participants mentioned ways in which instruction influenced their experience. By far, students seemed to see instruction as facilitating them rather than limiting with a ratio of 47 helpful incidents to 19 hindering incidents for a total of 66 CIs overall. Helpful incidents were mentioned by 70% of the participants versus 52% who said they felt limited by instruction in some way. Just under a quarter of the participants (22%) had ideas for making their experience with instruction better.
Examples of student comments.

(F) “I guess one of the biggest difficulties I’ve had was I took ECON 101. And I remember going into my first midterm and when I got my result back, I was quite shocked... 'And I talked to my prof about this as well and he told me ‘you just got to look at the long run. You can’t just look at the short run and say to yourself don’t be discouraged over one single midterm. I mean it’s worth a lot, fair enough, but in an Economics major, you’re going to be taking a whole lot of different courses throughout the road’, and so from that day, I think I changed the way I studied”.

(F) “At UBC, it’s been better than high school, I can spend time with my professor and grill him after class and get as much as I can out of him, and again, with marking and the way he reads, and it’s sort of more insightful than a high school teacher can give me, the feedback has been invaluable... XX is a really good professor, and it’s been really amazing to have someone so experienced...All my professors have been excellent”.

(F) “I enjoyed my creative writing class the most -I’d never really gotten into it, until university because my professor was super, just supportive and she would always emphasize self-care to make sure that you put yourself first sort of before academics because then you could really thrive in school. She was super very Zen and it was awesome. That helped a lot too because even though I’m still kind of learning to manage balancing sleep and work and all of that, it did help me to kind of realize that okay to sleep to perform better and everything...I do need to sleep and be able to have time for myself kind of”.

(H) “I didn’t know what we were being graded on, felt frustrated because grading didn’t seem fair or equal across students”

(H) “One thing about, TA’s. If you’re not lucky... some TAs or even profs can be quite discouraging, especially during discussion courses because we have to present our ideas. We have to argue against other people’s ideas, but if the TA just completely cuts you off, then you feel really discouraged because there is no right or wrong answer, you’re just bringing an idea and try to hear other people’s ideas as well. But if the TA just cuts you off, or the prof -what’s the point of having these kinds of discussions”.

(H) “[Professor’s] office hours were by appointment only, so it’s not set office hours, and I feel like that was more intimidating too, to be like we’ll set up a time, then I’m like I really have to ask the proper questions if I’m going to spend some of your time, whereas the other ones (professors) who have like, ‘oh I’m going to be here every Wednesday’, it’s more casual I guess and you feel less pressure. So, I can just show up and leave if I want, but if it’s an appointment then it’s more stressful”.

(W) “More interactive learning, less lecturing and power points”
Extracurricular engagement and sense of belonging. This category includes critical incidents related to the student’s sense of being engaged and involved in extracurricular activities on campus or their perceived opportunities to be. Student comments regarding their overall sense of ‘belonging’ at UBC is also sorted into this category.

This category yielded the second smallest participation rate with fewer than half the student participants (48%) mentioning incidents related to their extracurricular experience with a total of 59 CIs. The ratio of facilitative CIs to hindering CIs is important to note given that students mentioned 15 facilitative factors as compared to 44 hindering factors. Forty-eight percent of students interviewed said they had been facilitated by their experience with events or extracurricular events on campus versus 74% of students feeling in some way limited by their engagement (or lack of involvement). Interestingly, this category yielded the third highest number of wish list items, 21 in total with the third highest WL participation rate at 61%.

Examples of student comments.

(F) “I did kind of go wild with clubs and getting really involved in school.... I really enjoyed just doing everything and it was so cool and I got to meet so many people... it definitely made me in a way feel more motivated because I really surrounded myself with people that wanted to work hard, and wanted to achieve things maybe not in the same field as me but just in general very motivated people and that was inspiring, because I guess what I found really cool in university is just that everyone is on another level, especially UBC I’ve met so many people who are so talented and I thought that was really cool”.

(F) “The club is the only place I’ve managed to make really solid friendships in university so far, it’s very hard to do in classes and stuff. They’ve been the biggest source of the social support that I get on campus, so I think they’re a very important factor”.

(H) “Making connections has been extremely challenging. Mom’s essentially my only support so that’s another sort of issue that I’ve had. I’ve been extremely lonely here at UBC.”

(H) “The problem is, there are a lot of events but they’ll be in one of two categories: I a lot of people will come with their friends so you don’t meet anyone new, you just get free food, listen to some music, and go back to your room. The other type is, ...only a few
people show up. So, it’s hard to meet people because either people show up with their friends or they don’t show up”.

(W) “Something that I think could’ve been fun is if there was more of a meet up for people who are looking for friends. Maybe where there are groups of people with different interests where you go to one group with an interest that you like and you talk with them and see if they’re people you connect with and then maybe next week you go to a group with a different interest and you meet with people there…I think that specifically advertising that it’s for people who are feeling alone, I think that could be helpful… I think it could be a campus wide thing, like a meet up at the Nest or something”.

Orientation programming. The critical incidents and wish list items included in this category are those which students indicated UBC orientation offerings as critical to their first-year experience in some way. UBC offers all students, including Faculty of Arts students’ orientation programming: “Jump Start” (JS) a fee for service, resident-based two-week program for new International students (or domestic students raised abroad) offered the week prior to the beginning of the first term classes and “Imagine day” (ID) a one-day orientation event for all students the day after Labour Day.

The lowest participation rate, 39% and the smallest total number of CIs, 21, were reported in this category. There were almost equal numbers of facilitative and hindering incidents with 11 facilitative aspects of orientation mentioned by just over a quarter of participants (26%) to 13 hindering incidents reported by over a third (39%) of students interviewed. While students had not mentioned a great number of negative or positive factors, the valence of their comments bares mentioning as does the breakdown of student participants who felt their experience with orientation was significant in some way. Of the 7 students who participated in Jump Start, 4 students made strong and lengthy comments about how being a part of JS was critical to their university experience, that they made long lasting friendships easily in JS, their JS learning community was informative, and they learned about essential resources and
academic skills through the JS curriculum - except for in the case of one student, who did not.

Less than a fifth (17%) of the students mentioned WL items.

**Examples of student comments.**

(F) “I think that [JS] was really, really valuable because it helped me make a lot of friends within my program and also in other different Faculties, and I think without JS I definitely would not have felt as comfortable starting school ... I have several close friends from my JS learning community, we’re always together”.

(F) “On Imagine Day, a prof gave us good advice: “eat the toad. Just suck it up. Then do what you want later” and told us “get a big calendar and put everything you need to do on it”.

(H) My BIE (small cohort program) group is half international and half domestic students and only the international students participated in Jump Start (and got connected), so I think integrating, mixing with the domestic students has been difficult. I always think about, ‘why they didn’t get the same orientation experience as us’ because it feels like we hardly know them...I feel kind of sad because I don’t know all of them in the class and it feels like they’re separated from the community that I know”.

(W) I think if JS was expanded to include domestic students as well, not just international students”.

(W) “Have a second Imagine day in November (for telling students about resources again and getting them to connect)”

(W) “UBC should have an entire week dedicated to just first-year orientation”.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The aim of this exploratory qualitative study was twofold. First, to explore what first year Faculty of Arts students at UBC who participated in this study identified as having been helpful and/or hindering to their academic performance and what they might wish for in relation to improving their academic performance and overall experience. Second, to discover how the Faculty of Arts might use these student stories and extracted CIs and wish list items to foster first-year student academic performance and experience. In this chapter, the findings of this research will be discussed in relation to the existing post-secondary persistence research and theory. In addition, the ways in which the findings may be contextualized for informing UBC student support and development in the Faculty of Arts and beyond will be offered through recommendations that follow the discussion of the categories. The limitations of the research, proposed ideas for future research, and implications specific to counselling psychology follow the recommendations. Finally, implications specific to the field of post-secondary counselling psychology are addressed before concluding.

As highlighted in the literature review, the student persistence research points to both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors as influencing university students’ academic performance and experience before and after arrival: “Persistence decisions are affected by both pre-entry characteristics and post-entry experiences” (Finnie & Qiu, 2008, p. 184). As established, twelve categories emerged through student comments about their learning and living experiences before or during their first year at University. The findings in this study reflect the definition of attrition, the opposite of ‘persistence’, can be influenced by a “gradual wearing down by attack or pressure” (in Soanes & Stevenson, Eds., 2006, p.85) - in other words, an accumulation of events or incidents add up to discourage or sabotage a student’s capacity to forge forward and stay
motivated to persist. Alternatively, a combination of protective factors or facilitative incidents seem to bolster the students’ capacity to stay the course and persistence.

The findings also align with the literature in that students ‘internal’ and ‘external’ experiences emerged as influencing their persistence. However, in discussing these findings, these two broad classifications are considered with the twelve categories discussed in three sections: Personal Context, Social Supports, and Institutional factors. This shift is the result of a review of the literature and consultation with Dr. Deborah Butler, a UBC researcher, educator, writer and expert in the area of Self-Regulated Learning who suggests that “internal things shift through experience and the ways in which they express themselves and when they come to the fore depends on the context” (personal correspondence, 2018). In this sense, student characteristics, background, unique strengths and weakness, and strategies and rituals are seen less as ‘internal’ but rather as a part of what students bring to their university experience as individuals. As such, a ‘Personal Context’ section rather than ‘internal’ factors section organizes the information related to ‘what a student brings’ to their university experience. ‘External’ factors have been organized into sections discussing ‘Social Supports’ and ‘Institutional’ factors. Within the Personal Context section, the student interview content that some researchers label as ‘psychological’ characteristics (Bean & Eaton, 2001; 2001), student academic readiness and skills (Erickson & Stone, 2012) and student attitudes and perceptions related to self-compassion (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005) are organized through the categories that emerged and align with the dimensions of a socio-constructivist model of Self-Regulated Learning (Butler et. al., 2017). The Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) lens acknowledges that individual learners navigate their unique personal contexts as they are learning and living. University students bring to their academic learning experience; life experiences and circumstances, individual strengths and
challenges and varying degrees of meta-cognition, levels of knowledge, and personal beliefs and attitudes about academics and their learning specifically (Butler et. al., 2017). An SRL lens contextualizes post-secondary learners as influenced by and strategizing through a dynamic interplay of factors both within and outside their control.

**Personal Context**

Much of the content in this discussion section aligns with the literature pertaining to ‘internal’ factors that impact persistence including psychological factors (Bean and Eaton, 2001; Butler, 2017; Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2006; Dweck et. al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and demographic and socio-economic and cultural factors (Hardes, 2006; Finnie, et. al., 2008; 2015; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 1987; 2006; 2012).

As the categories were emerging and post-secondary learning research was consulted, the literature pointed to organizing some of the data and categorizing the incidents related to personal background and situational factors as ‘Personal Circumstances’ and students’ expressed experiences related to their motivation, emotions and mindset, strategic decision making and behaviour and reflections on their learning into the dimensions of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL). This alignment resulted in the categories of Motivation, Emotions & Mindset; Behaviour & Strategic Action; and Metacognitive Awareness & knowledge. Zimmerman (2008) in Butler (2016) defined Self-regulation as the “ability to control thoughts and actions to achieve personal goals and respond to environmental demands” (p. 2).

By analyzing the data through a Self-Regulated Learning framework broken into the separate three dimensions, it was possible to determine the frequency with which related factors arose. However, this breakdown does not imply that the process of approaching academics and learning or being aware of this learning is separate and distinct nor occurring in a particular
sequence - these aspects of SRL intersect and interact before, during, and after an activity or goal-oriented behaviour. There is significant overlap and constant cognitive and behavioural interplay through these dimensions as one learns and lives (Nilson, 2013). For example, even within one quote a student might comment on affect (feeling anxious) then on their behaviour (procrastinating) followed by how they acted on a realization (blocked face book notifications - acted strategically); as a result felt more motivated (because they took control - had agency and efficacy) and then were determined which got them through a difficult task which lead to their feeling capable academically and able to recognize that they learned the material better when they were not distracted and when they broke the assignment into ‘chunks’ (Meta-cognition). As the categories emerged they were distinctly related to these three dimensions and thus are discussed separately within this SRL section in the order of the total number of CIs.

**Motivation, emotions and mindset.** This category yielded the highest number of CIs overall. While almost half of the students mentioned something about ‘motivation’ as impactful, creating a ‘motivation’ category alone was not seen as the best way to reflect the ways in which students spoke about experiencing challenges or being helped through motivation because motivation was often intertwined with statements about attitudes, emotions, and their mindset told through personal stories of their interactions with others inside and outside the university.

The interconnected ways in which these students talked about their motivations, mindsets, and emotions to persevere reflect the persistence research pertaining to ‘Grit’ (Duckworth, 2016), Mindset (Dweck, 2006; 2014), psychological underpinnings of retention including self-efficacy (summarized in Bean & Eaton, 2001; McKenzie & Scheweitzer, 2001), Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), motivation through calling or purpose
Pintrich (2004) provides several examples that illustrate how ‘motivational self-regulatory strategies are linked to affect, behaviour, and interactions within and outside the university. He suggests that post-secondary students maintain (or diminish) motivation through self-talk. Positive self-talk can help them feel efficacious (I can do it!) as per the theories of Bandara (1997) cited in Pintrich. Students may also increase motivation by aiming for a certain grade average or by promising themselves external rewards such as pleasant activities upon completion and socializing with friends. Students are said to also make ‘boring’ repetitive tasks more interesting (through various creative means) or more important (connecting the task to career goals) in order to help them sustain attention and focus to persist.

Several student comments related to procrastination were also sorted into this category. Interestingly, procrastination is suggested by Pintrich (2004) to result at times from an attempt to protect the self by being able to attribute a low result to having too little time to do well. Procrastination is an avoidant coping mechanism for dealing with negative emotions such as shame and anxiety. Pintrich further describes how students will also attempt to control negative emotions such as through reassuring phrases (it’s ok, you’ll do better next time’). This self-compassionate approach to academic stress and disappointment is shown to increase emotion-focused coping strategies and to reduce avoidance-oriented strategies in undergraduate students (Neff et. al., 2005). Being kind to oneself in the face of perceived failure was also found by these researchers to maintain intrinsic motivation and promote active coping and planning.

Students in this study were able to pinpoint exact moments and experiences when they experienced increases or dips in motivation and had to shift their perspectives in order to
maintain attention to academics. Several illustrative quotes are provided in the Findings chapter. Through their descriptions of events and experiences, these students demonstrated a remarkable capacity to reflect on their thoughts, and attitudes, and determine what motivated or demotivated them; and then apply pressure or self-compassion to shift their mindset to elevate their mood, maintain effort or persist in tasks. Dweck (2006) summarizes the many ways in which having a growth mindset positively influences mood, and motivation for learning and capacity to persevere.

Students also identified their motivational power of learning for learning’s sake over aspiring only for high grades. They talked about noticing how their enjoyment of academics and grades improved as they focused away from ‘stressing’ about grades and focused on an “internal drive” or passion for the subject. Some of the emotional and attitudinal strategies students demonstrated included students’ expressing and feeling gratitude, working to maintain a positive outlook or ‘accept’ things as they were; the idea that they were responsible for their success through the degree of effort they expended - “it’s up to me”, and the belief that they had the ability to succeed and that it was worth the effort.

The most common hindering CIs that emerged in this category were those related to motivation lags for various reasons and low mood related to anxiety, lack of motivation and engagement in academics, disappointment in their own ability to be disciplined and succeed academically, and feeling ‘lost’ and lacking purpose. Sense of purpose was repeatedly identified as a CI. Students spoke at length about the varying degrees of purpose and the level of comfort that was related to a sense of direction. Interestingly, students admitted to comparing themselves to others ‘who had it worse’ which had a positive impact on their motivation as a strategy to persevere when not sure of their direction. Woitowicz and Domene (2013) surveyed university
students in British Columbia and Washington State and found a link between a career calling and increased intrinsic motivation for academic tasks and a greater sense of control over their academics. They found that ‘calling’ could be influenced by both internal and external reasons and could increase their commitment to a study direction and pursuing post-secondary study as an important purpose. Being worth the effort or having a purpose or long-term goal was mentioned often by students interviewed in this study as a powerful influencer as were external goals for maintaining motivation such as the financial cost of tuition, a program or academic opportunity requiring a certain grade, and a career closely related to the student’s area of study.

Students were a third more likely to identify thoughts, emotions and motivations that helped them succeed rather than hindered them. Potentially, these students who self-selected to be a part of the study during exam season were ‘gritty’ (Duckworth, 2016) with strong positive mindsets (Dweck, 2006) which predisposed them to experience and identify more helpful ways of thinking or more facilitative moods in their first-year journey. Many of these students illustrated a ‘growth mindset’ in that they believed that their academic experience and success could be influenced by their efforts and attitudes rather than on a fixed ability (Dweck, 2006). Nilson (2013) indicates that Dweck has proposed that students educated and skilled in SRL are less likely to have a fixed mindset (p. 7).

The wish list items in this category related directly to the hindering CIs as students wished to have been more disciplined, to have a clear purpose for studying, and to have had more passion or confidence to sustain their studies and engage in the university: Bean & Eaton, (2001) provide a model for explicating the ways in which students’ attitudes, self-appraisals, and subsequent motivational levels interact with their experience with university that result in actions that then impact how they feel and belong in a reciprocal and cyclical way over time increasing...
or depleting the likelihood of their persisting in their studies. Simply, “attitudes lead to intentions that lead to actions” (p.78).

**Behaviour and strategic action.** In this area, 100% of the participants identified ways in which their chosen strategies for approaching academic goals and specific behaviours and actions impacted their life and perceived academic success in helpful or unhelpful ways. Butler et al., (2017) explain that when students are self-regulating their behaviour they are “deliberately managing engagement through obstacles and challenges to achieve personal goals in a particular setting” (p. 18). The degree to which students in this study were conscious of and able to identify key behavioural choices they made that they believed helped them succeed or hindered their progress or experience in some way was impressive.

There were almost double the number of facilitative CIs than hindering in this category - and it was the second highest facilitative category versus the fifth highest hindering category - it seems these students were more aware of or better able to identify behaviours and choices that were facilitative rather than hindering. Another explanation is that these students, none of whom identified being worried about their overall academic standing, were in fact successful students who had developed the ability to strategize to make more ‘helpful’ behavioural choices than act on impulses to make less helpful choices.

The kinds of facilitative choices they made and subsequent actions centred largely on establishing routines and rituals, and strategically planning tasks and monitoring and adjusting their actions throughout. Some examples include: cleaning their dorm rooms, running, going to the gym, approaching a professor during office hours, choosing particular courses for pleasure, and choosing particular study environments, study buddies and social groups, and time management strategies.
Interestingly, many of the choices students made were related to maintaining or increasing motivation or feelings of self-efficacy, improving well-being, increasing engagement (either in academics or with others), and addressing or adapting to a disappointment or uncomfortable event. Deliberately and consciously making decisions about engaging in activities and acting on certain impulses requires a degree of reflection, self-awareness and control (Butler et al., 2017, p. 3). These students demonstrated a significant degree of self-awareness into the kinds of behaviours and routines that most facilitated or hindered them.

While there were 35 fewer hindering CIs than helpful CIs, interestingly, the second highest number of WL items was offered in this category - possibly, regret for personal choices made is very strong thus yielding much wishful thinking. Students did mention feeling quite regretful about ways they behaved over the year that sabotaged their success and ways they ‘should’ have done things differently. Student hindering comments included; socializing too much, watching too much Netflix, gaming, skipping classes, generally procrastinating or not making enough of an effort in their studies, to connect with peers, or to access professors. All these choices were perceived by these students as directly impacting their moods, motivations, or academic performance - again demonstrating a sense of responsibility for their outcomes and an internal locus of control and growth mindset for many of these students interviewed.

In this category many of the behavioural CIs identified were related to the ways in which these university students structured their daily living and approaches to academics to set themselves up to succeed or feel better in some way to succeed academically (such as limiting distractions or getting help). Seeking help as a behavioural strategy was significant in this category. Students made decisions to meet with professors and acted on options to access other
forms of support which is in keeping with Pintrich’s (2004) assertion that help-seeking is an aspect of SRL related to Strategic Action and Behavioural regulation.

According to Pintrich (2004), students who are successful know when, why, and from whom to seek help” (p. 398). However, it is often the case that university students do not seek help despite being aware of being in need of support. To illustrate, a quote by a student interviewed in this study is included in the findings section for this category. This student’s experience aligns with findings by Robinson et. al., (2016) in their study that explored the degree to which students at a university in western Canada required and utilized counselling services. They found that the “majority of students who screened for clinical distress are unlikely to access services despite elevated levels of distress” (p. 118). Fostering help-seeking behaviour and engaging the ‘disengaged’ is a common challenge faced by academic advising units at UBC and faculty who want their students to succeed but cannot seem to get students to their offices. Some students in this study reported going to see professors and TAs or accessing support services and others did not. What led some to seek help and others not? In the case of these students, students who chose not to ask for help also talked about feeling embarrassed and nervous about asking for help: asking for help seemed to indicate to them that they had failed in some way to be independent or to demonstrate they were capable.

Research that aligns with their reported experience in this category is that of Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and studies that suggest perceived failure results in feelings of regret and shame that may thwart help-seeking (Robinson, 2016; Turner, Husman & Schallert, 2002). Deci and Ryan (2000) contend that the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are fundamental psychological needs that when met result in increased self-regulation and motivation. It may be that some students feel shame when they perceive they are not capable
and independent and avoid asking for help to maintain their feeling of ‘handling it on their own’.
The ways in which students are interacted with when they are offered assistance must foster their feelings of autonomy and competence. They must see that asking for help is a form of competence and that successful independence is knowing when to depend on others. Students in this study who did access help seemed to have a sense of their growing maturity in knowing when and how to use available resources. An important point to make here is that help-seeking may also be tied to the degree to which a student feels marginalized or on the periphery of the university. A marginalized student may not engage to the same extent as a student who feels valued and a sense of belonging (Hardes, 2006; Schlossberg, 1989; Thayer, 2000) and yet this may be the student who is in the greatest need for additional support.

**Metacognition: awareness and knowledge.** Another way of thinking of Strategic action discussed above, is as a form of meta-cognitive control - Butler (Personal communication, 2018). Exhibiting metacognitive control during learning tasks such as listening, maintaining focus, monitoring progress, making decisions, and refining approaches along the way are necessary for taking control of learning and succeeding consistently in learning tasks (Butler et. al., 2017).

Metacognitive awareness and knowledge was mentioned by 20 of the student participants overall.

These Students identified CIs that suggested they were thinking about and reflecting on their thinking and learning. Comments related to their knowledge and awareness of personal learning styles and skills, their ideas about how they learn, and understandings of options available to them for learning are included in this category.

Helpful CIs in this category were named by half the participants while hindering CIs were mentioned by almost two thirds of the students interviewed. Perhaps it is easier to think
about what is not working than to be cognisant of what one is doing ‘right’. Metacognition involves a conscious control and awareness of one’s cognitive processes, or more simply “self-feedback on one’s learning” (Nilson, 2013).

Metacognitive awareness was evidenced in the student’s reflections about ways in which their learning strengths (or weaknesses) facilitated their academic goals or got in the way. Students demonstrated insights about what they needed to maximize their learning success or task completion. For example, a student was aware of stress hindering their progress in a task and commented on how they figured out how to reduce their stress by breaking down a task into smaller parts; another student was aware that they had to apply their learning to something concrete or meaningful in their life to help them remember; a couple students reflected on their approach to focus on learning content and the process rather than dwelling on the outcome (the grade). Another student was aware that they learned best by talking out loud to themselves or a study partner. Another knew that they needed less concentration efforts to complete math homework rather than reading articles that required more effort.

This category yielded significantly fewer CIs overall then the other SRL related categories. This may point to the prominence that personal affect, motivation, and action had on these students’ first-year experience. Alternatively, knowing how one learns best is likely more complicated than noticing one’s behaviour or feelings. Students often cannot pinpoint why they do better or worse academically nor accurately predict how they will do in an exam based on their preparation (Lewine & Sommers, 2016). According to these authors accurate self-appraisal for learning tasks may be subject to cognitive distortions and self-preservation tendencies resulting in unrealistic optimism regarding one’s own academic performance. Further complicating matters is the limited ability many students have to self-evaluate and monitor their
study skills. Being self-aware is fundamental to knowing oneself as a learner and is a learned skill. Students who have strong meta-cognitive skills are those who are reflective and able to apply their awareness of themselves as learners. This requires motivation, practice and for many students, specific instruction (Zimmerman, 2002). Providing students with SRL ‘instruction’ suggested by Zimmerman (2002) is already an option at UBC through tutoring offered by Access and Diversity, the office at UBC that aims to make learning and living at UBC accessible for all, particularly for those experiencing barriers. Dr. Deborah Butler was instrumental in developing their tutoring training and coaching approach using an SRL framework.

**Self-regulated learning framework: contextualizing the findings.** The model of SRL draws from psychological theories and research in motivation, cognition, and learning (Pintrich, 2004), assumes the learning contexts and capacities are dynamic and contextual (Zimmerman, 1989) relying both on the role of the educator and on the “student’s personally initiated strategies designed to improve learning outcomes” (p. 2). Decades of research has shown that students who are ‘expert’ in Self-Regulated Learning spend time studying; monitor and modify their approaches; and find the act of their learning and studying motivating in-and-of-itself. This describes many of the students who volunteered to be interviewed for this study, even in volunteering they demonstrate their willingness and capacity to engage with the institution and reflect.

A major finding and contribution of this study is the degree to which the student participant’s descriptions of helping and hindering CIs aligned with the research on ‘internal’ factors and ‘external’ factors of persistence but through the lens of SRL that integrates and acknowledges the interplay of factors within, and without the student that are intertwined, dynamic, and in context. The many examples provided by these students demonstrated that they
were able to utilize aspects of SRL to better understand themselves, meet academic goals, push themselves to engage academically and socially; with peers, instructors and with the institution. Given the majority of these students reported doing well academically and appeared mostly happy with the outcomes of their first year, we can assume that these are successful students, and, as the research shows, successful students are self-regulating (Butler et. al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). Their example points to how all students may be best helped to be successful and persevere through their lived realities.

The SRL framework, based largely on social cognitive theory (Zimmerman, 1989), offers a lens through which to consider how students approach post-secondary adjustment, learning tasks, and challenges while also offering a framework for conceptualizing how post-secondary institutions may foster SRL in their students thus maximizing the students’ ability and feeling of efficacy to navigate both through their life and relational circumstances and strategically approach academic responsibilities depending on their personal contexts.

**Personal circumstances.** This category collects student perspectives on how personal circumstances and factors related to readiness and expectations for university, experience with first-year adjustment, financial and socio-cultural circumstances and challenges, changes in circumstances, and physical or mental health concerns impacted the participants’ academics, general well-being, and overall first-year experience. While employment factors are named in some studies as ‘environmental’ (Metzner, 1989), first-generation, international, and cultural factors as ‘student characteristics’ Kuh et. al. (2006), and unforeseen, or a change in circumstances (Brindley, 1987) as ‘external’ to the student, this study organizes these factors as personal and specific to the student - as aspects of ‘what students bring’ and have to personally navigate through, their university experience. (Butler, 2018; Tinto, 1987).
Twenty-two of twenty-three students named hindering CIs related to personal circumstances compared to only nine students mentioning helping incidents in this category. It seems that it was easier for these students to recognize what personal realities, life circumstances and events negatively impacted them while being aware of what aspects of their lives were facilitative was more challenging. While a discussion of ‘privilege’ (advantages available to some and not others depending on demographics) is beyond the scope of this paper, it must be raised that a potential explanation for the small number of students in this study mentioning so few helpful aspects of their personal circumstances could be due to their being less aware of them. That is, they are just not yet aware of the degree to which their socio-economic status, university graduated parents, culture, race, age/stage, physical ability, and daily protective factors facilitate their university experience.

However, some students did mention helping factors such as financial support from family, having come from a similar home culture that smoothed transition to Vancouver, having come from a similar high school learning environment, having realistic expectations about university through family, having strong English language skills, being a little older due to taking a gap year, and being determined to work hard in memory of a parent. One student noted how being a student whose parents attended and completed university degrees was facilitative and that it would be a barrier to other students without university graduate parents. Her insight aligns with research that suggests that parental education is more impactful on student post-secondary access and success than family income (Finnie, Mueller & Sweetman, 2016).

Some students interviewed mentioned that being familiar with Canada or coming from a ‘similar’ or Asian culture or climate as an international student helped (familiar food, language, social preferences, and weather were mentioned mostly). The helping CIs were mentioned as
aspects that these students believed assisted them in their transition to university and subsequently their ability to do well academically and adjust well overall. The comments related to cultural facilitative aspects are also possibly indicative of the research that links post-secondary access and success to cultural background (Finnie et al., 2016; Hardes, 2006).

Hindering incidents in order of frequency included difficulties with academic adjustment, stress related to regulating behaviour and daily needs independently, balancing school with employment responsibilities, financial stress, coping with relationship stressors, pre-existing mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression, physical illness and difficulties with sleep.

**Academic and emotional adjustment.** Not knowing what to expect, being under prepared due to a lack of experience, self-management, and being overwhelmed by the emotional and academic pressures of university were the most commonly named CIs sorted in this category. The literature shows that an individual’s readiness for university and subsequent adjustment is influenced by many factors pre and post arrival (Finnie & Qiu, 2008; Robotham & Julian, 2006; Thayer, 2000, Tinto, 2012). Students in this study reported feeling stressed about their adjustment to academic rigour, being independent and self-disciplined without external controls, and managing their unstructured time having had little experience with self-management in the past. Many students noted that they were so used to parents structuring their time and applying pressure and controls that they were completely ‘lost’ for the first term as they tried to figure it all out on their own. Interestingly, considering these students within the context of their place in time, it is understandable that this group might find adjusting to first-year university even more challenging than their predecessor’s decades ago.
All the students interviewed for this study born in or around 1998 and belong to what some researchers call “generation Z” (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). According to these authors, individuals born between 1995 to 2010 fall within this generation. They suggest that individuals born at certain points of history will have similar perspectives and ways of being in the world. This group of interviewed students falls very closely to the “Millennials” period ending in 1995. The Millennials these researchers argue, were raised in a period where the prominent parenting trends in North America encourage significant parent involvement and decision-making for their children and ‘Gen Z’s’ in a period when parents are largely seen as mentors and advisors for even small concerns. Carlson (2014) found, in her study exploring emerging adults in college use of parental advice that this age group rely significantly on their parents. This literature aligns with the majority of students in this study who claimed their adjustment had much to do with having to make decisions independently without the immediate help of their parents. This important student perspective will be considered in greater detail in the Social Supports section of this paper. As for adjustment, it stands to reason that the majority of these first-year students, accustomed to a great deal of parental input, would struggle upon entry to university and living away from home.

In addition to a loss of proximal parental contact and support, first-year students as emerging adults are, as a function of their age and stage, more susceptible to distress. Conley, Kirsch, Dickson and Bryant (2014) posit that, “the immediate transition (into first-year University) is characterized by steep declines in psychological well-being, cognitive-affective strengths, and social well-being as well as increases in psychological distress and cognitive-affective vulnerabilities” (p. 195). This perspective is consistent with other researchers who note
the compounding challenges to adjustment and well-being as a result of the interaction of life stage and the context of leaving home to live at university.

Commuter students, while not adjusting to living outside the home, may face different but equally challenging issues affecting their transition from high school to university as was the case in this study sample. Khalis, Mikami, and Hudec (2017) found that the stress associated with university adjustment was mediated by developing friendships with university peers for their sample of International and Indigenous first-year students. Finally, the very existence and call for targeted first-year programming across universities globally and through several decades of research (Erickson & Stone, 2012; Evenbeck & Ross, 2011; Tinto, 1975; 2006) indicates that the adjustment challenges experienced by this group of first-year students is common, to be expected, to be normalized, and to be carefully planned for and supported. “Institutions with high graduation rates had more programs that eased new students’ entry and adjustment to college, including bridge programs, learning communities, study groups, block registering of students, tutoring, and other programs to help students adjust to college. In addition, creating clear pathways to show students what to expect and what success looks and feels like helps students bring meaning to their educational experiences and helps acculturate them to the institution” (Kuh et. al. et. al., 2005b in Kuh et. al., 2006, p. 58).

The seven international students in this study did not report that adjusting as an international student was significantly difficult in comparison to the other domestic students’ reports of adjustment. This is inconsistent with many studies that find “international students report poorer adjustment to college life than do ‘American’ students’” (Frazier & Syed, 2015) and that they experience more difficulties integrating into the campus socially (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Students interviewed from outside Canada did not specifically name cultural adjustment
as challenging while they did name other aspects of the adjustment as difficult. A potential explanation is that these students may not have recognized their experienced challenges as a function of a cultural adjustment.

**Pre-entry expectations.** It bears mentioning that one student mentioned that his expectations of the institution did not match what he expected based on the University recruitment information made available in the UK. This student was significantly disappointed in the realities of life at UBC and was not sure they would be continuing to graduation at UBC - although UBC was ‘growing on’ them. Tinto (2012) warns that if “pre-entry expectations are very different from their experience following their entry students may decide to leave” (p.17). Retention is promoted when the expectation they bring to the institution is in line with what they are likely to experience (Tinto, 2012).

**Coping with relationship stressors.** Three students mentioned that their romantic relationships at UBC had affected their decisions to engage with events and academics at some point in their first-year. This fits with research that suggests that students who maintain a long-distance dating relationship or dissolve one once at university may have more difficulty adjusting to the university than single students and are more likely to report feeling lonely on campus and less likely to engage in campus social events as well as academically (Waterman, Wesche, Leavitt, Jones, & Lefkowitz, 2017).

**Pre-existing mental health concerns and situational distress.** Three students in this study disclosed during the interview that they had entered UBC with pre-existing mental health concerns that continued to challenge them in their adjustment to university, coping with academic responsibilities, and in building and maintaining peer relationships. Seven others reported academic stressors at many times through their first-year. It was expected that some
students may report experiencing mental health challenges given what is currently known about mental health concerns on university campuses (Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley & Audin, 2006; Robinson et. al., 2016). Studies suggest that psychological distress is on the rise at universities and that the university population is at greater risk for mental health concerns than same aged peers not attending university (Robinson et. al., 2016) or pre-university (Cooke et. al., 2006). The numbers of students who reported academic distress as compared to the numbers experiencing anxiety and depression also align with the Robinson et. al., (2016) study that found the highest percentage of students in their study with 400 survey respondents had indicated academic concerns (63.1%) with close to half that percentage reporting anxiety or depression. Cooke et. al., (2006) found that anxiety was far more prevalent than is depression in their sample of 4,699 students at a UK university. They also found that the first year of university is a time of particular heightened levels of anxiety, consistent with the student reports in this study.

In line with the research cited earlier regarding adjustment and university, distress at this phase of life may be heightened as a function of life stage: Add to that academic rigour, a shifting social landscape, and challenges specific to economic, cultural, or ability related disadvantages and students may be overwhelmed to the point of giving up on academic goals or more tragically on life (Meligman, 1994; Robotham & Julian, 2006). Providing first-year students with easy access to counselling and other academic and high quality emotional supports is imperative to “promote positive adjustment -and prevent difficulties across this challenging transition point” (Conley et. al., 2014, p. 206) thus building a healthy a foundation for their university career.

*Physical illness.* Three students mentioned that being ill during academic year impacted their academics. An unforeseen circumstance for students such as falling ill for a short duration
is anticipated by most universities as one of the most common reasons students will have the need for academic concession, that is, permission to submit work late or write an exam at an alternative time (Zimmermann & Kamenetsky, 2015). Given the degree of stress and adjustment concerns for first-year students discussed above, one might assume that there are more instances of concession requests or missed work due to illness by first-year students. Interestingly, a large quantitative study at the University of Toronto found that the fewest concession requests were made by first-year students. They did not provide possible reasons for the higher rate of requests late in students’ degree progress, however, given the comments made by the students interviewed in this study it is possible that students in first-year did not know that concession was an option, were too embarrassed or ‘shy’ to ask for it, or just pushed through and completed the work despite being ill. Of the three students in this study who reported being ill in first-year, only one reported asking her professor for an extension and none of the students knew they could request academic concession for documented illness at the Academic Advising office. This points to an opportunity to better inform first-year students of the options that exist for them should unforeseen circumstances impact academics.

**Balancing school with employment responsibilities.** Fewer than half of the students who worked suggested their jobs negatively impacted their academics or experience in first-year. This is in contrast to McKenzie and Scheweitzer (2001) that found part-time employment responsibilities negatively impacted first-year university student grades - potentially due to time constraints. Interestingly the relationship between employment and grades for full-time employed students taking courses part time did not yield the same result in their study. The authors suggest that part-time students working full-time may have developed better time management as a result of their full-time work or have elevated motivation for studies as a part-
time student. Employed students in this study were all full-time students and had part-time jobs, some because of financial constraint and others because they liked their work. Most said their work motivated them to stay organized or was their personal choice to maintain. Most did not report academic concerns as a result of working. This could be either because they did not associate academic challenges or time constraints to their work or because the benefits of working (financial, social, or emotional) outweighed the negative impact for them. Another consideration may be the location of their work. Many students interviewed worked close to or on campus. Another factor may be the fact that for many, working was a choice they made rather than a financial necessity.

*Financial stress*. Despite these positive reports of balancing school and work, financial stress cannot be underestimated. Research indicates that students from higher income backgrounds will be better positioned not only to afford post-secondary studies but also to take advantage of opportunities to maximize their academic success and engagement in their institution (Finnie et. al., 2016; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2006; 2012). While financial CIs were explicitly mentioned by only two students and sorted into this category, more than this number were impacted by secondary concerns resulting from low income. Not being able to afford living in residence and having to commute to campus, being required to work part-time while studying, and being unsure of how to manage money for basic needs were all mentioned as significantly stressful and a barrier to their well-being and academic performance.

Not being able to afford residence housing was mentioned by 6 commuter students as a significant barrier to their having the ‘ideal’ first year experience and to their academic performance. Hindering CIs related to commuting to campus were sorted into and discussed in the ‘Living Arrangements” section however, being a commuter student is certainly a personal
circumstance that impacted student wellness, academic performance and persistence in this study that aligns with the findings of Bean and Metzer (1989), Kuh et. al. (2006), Thayer (2000), and Tinto (2012) all of whom identify increased academic and overall stress and decreased satisfaction for students who commute rather than live on campus. More about commuter students is discussed in the Living Arrangements section.

One student story is illustrative of how financial stress can impact academics and the university experience overall. A student participant reported a series of events that led to their using the food bank on campus for several weeks - they said the main focus became how to get food. They disengaged academically while hungry, having trouble sleeping, and feeling despondent. Over the term, their grades dropped significantly due to the stress and hunger, as did the motivation to persist at UBC. It is well established that students with limited access to money either because they are from low income families or families that are choosing not to support them financially are at greater risk of attrition (Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2006, 2012). As demonstrated by this student example, the emotional and physical costs of financial stress was significant. It bears mentioning that while this student expressed regret and some embarrassment that they did not do well academically because of their financial circumstances, following a reflection on this situation in the interview the student began to focus less on the impact of the academic results lowered and more on what the student was able to accomplish despite significant strife. Through the conversation, they began to recognize the strength and perseverance they had shown to stay at UBC, pass most courses, and even take part in the study. Given the chance to reflect on the situation and helped to see the how they had in fact been resourceful and strong, led the student to express feeling more hopeful and less self-critical, and
also to acknowledge, in retrospect, they wished they had pursued help sooner rather than feeling they had to ‘deal’ on their own.

When students are reflective and develop an awareness of how their personal circumstances are impacting their well-being and/or goal striving and achievement, they can be intentional about how they want to approach challenges or use resources. Dr. Cheryl Washburn, Director of Counselling Services at UBC co-authored a guide for promoting post-secondary student mental health systemically by “supporting the creation of a campus community that is deeply conducive to transformative learning and mental health” (2013). One of the ‘key components for student mental health strategy development’ these authors suggest, is to offer ways to support student ‘self-management competencies and coping skills’ through offering “structured opportunities for reflection” (p. 18). In all of the above examples of personal circumstances that hindered students, the resulting stress is what the students mentioned as impacting them most. Clearly, students will arrive with and experience on campus a variety of unforeseen stressors and challenges. Developing self-management and coping skills, stress tolerance, and creative problem solving through reflection is critical for mediating the everyday stresses and systemic barriers that exist for students (Washburn et. al., 2013). Reflection in one area of life can transcend to other areas. With opportunities to reflect on personal realities and chosen actions, students may shift their mindset or perspective (as did the student in the above example) which can influence motivation and goal-striving, academic performance, and well-being. Mezirow (1997) suggests that reflection is imperative for transformative learning to occur. According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning involves “effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). Mezirow explains that “transformations in frames of reference [the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences (p.5)] take place through critical
reflection” (p. 7). Mezirow posits that frames of reference “selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings” (p. 5) that impact goal setting, striving, and achievement (1997, p.6). Shifting frames of reference is crucial for transformative learning and developing self-awareness is necessary for shifting frames of reference and, ultimately, feelings and behaviour.

In contextualizing the findings in this section, it is important to mention that there were hindering factors that were expected, given the persistence literature, but were not reported. The literature suggests that student persistence is impacted by cultural and socio-economic background. However, none of the students mentioned culture as a hindrance nor the negative impact of non-university educated parents. None of these students mentioned being hindered by their non-university educated parents, and racial disadvantages. A potential explanation for these factors not figuring as prominently as expected the data is the type of student who elected to be a part of this study. The population in this study are largely ‘traditional’ students as described by Bean and Metzner (1985). They were all younger than twenty-four years of age, registered in a full course load, and mostly living in residence. Using the criterion proposed by these authors, the only ‘non-traditional’ factors experienced by this cohort was that of commuting to campus for a quarter of the participants: As is discussed in more detail in the ‘Living Arrangements’ section, this one ‘non-traditional’ characteristic dominated this groups’ first-year experience because of the significant impact commuting had on their time and ability to academically and socially integrate in their first-year. As this study demonstrates in the context of the Faculty of Arts at UBC, it is more likely to have a group of ‘traditional’ students engage in an opportunity to participate in research than it is non-traditional students: and, within that group of ‘traditional’ students, the majority had parents who were university graduated and were funding university
costs, were mostly directly out of high school, and were predominantly living in residence. These students exemplify the established interactionist theories of Tinto (1975; 1987), and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) challenge to Tinto’s perspectives with their model of the attrition process for ‘non-traditional’ students illustrating how student demographic characteristics have an effect on their university experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). In more contemporary research particular to Canada, Finnie, Mueller, Sweetman, and Usher eds. (2008) use Statistics Canada ‘Youth in Transition’ survey data to determine not only who persists in post-secondary studies but also who has access to entering post-secondary institutions in Canada. Their findings are mostly consistent with the theories presented over three decades ago by the authors named above and are of continued relevance to the persistence conversation and shed light on the long-standing and entrenched challenges to supporting a wide range of students in persisting in post-secondary studies. This study cohort also raises questions about access: not only in regards to those participating in this study but also in relation to post-secondary opportunities in general. It is well established that in Canada there exists a disparity in the number of Indigenous students accessing and completing PSE as compared to other cultural groups. For example, according to Finnie et. al., (2016) children of Chinese immigrants attend university at a rate of 90%. Conversely, there exists a significant underrepresentation of Indigenous student participation in Canadian PSE and barriers that exist to their persisting at university due to a multitude of complex issues beyond simply ‘family background’ (Gordon & White, 2014). Understanding exact rates in access and completion for this population even within one university such as UBC is also an inherently complex task (Tsukada, 2016). While a full examination of the factors that limit or promote access to university education is beyond the scope of this discussion, it bares noting that in this study 17 students identified as having an in-part or fully Asian cultural
background and one student identified as part Metis. Access to post-secondary education in Canada has been found to be impacted most by culture and family background (from the ‘very early years of life’) and not ‘financial’ barriers as such (Finnie et. al., 2016) and related to high school completion (Gordon & White, 2014). (Finnie et. al., 2016) stress the importance of an individual ‘seeing a place for themselves in the post-secondary system’ from an early age - as a result of benefitting from ‘cultural capital’. As these authors explain, cultural capital refers to the degree to which an individual has access to conversations in the home, experiences, and reading material and habits that set them on a path to higher education - they just expect it (p. 167). The university environment may not easily directly address the extent to which a student has access to cultural capital before arrival but can fairly quickly implement admission policies to make access more possible and create an environment conducive to students belonging and mattering once they arrive - this is discussed in greater detail later in the discussion regarding Institutional factors.

The students in this study reported various personal circumstances and demonstrated a multitude of personal characteristics, expectations, and preparations that either helped them or hindered them in some way through their first-year. As established in the previous section, students choose to respond to learning and life challenges through strategic action, being aware of and adjusting mindsets to deal with lagging motivations or to elevate mood, and through thinking carefully about their learning styles, strengths, and gaps. Reflecting on these events and challenges and accomplishments in the interview process led some students to shift their perspectives on their situations toward a more self-compassionate lens, to consider how they may plan for academic goals in the future, and to feel more hopeful and efficacious in general. The following example of one of the first-year students’ comments demonstrates how reflection, a
key component of SRL (and transformative learning), can influence a student’s momentary affect and perspective and potentially influence future planning.

When I talk about my life and reflect upon the things that I’ve done over the past year, I realize that things are better than I thought. So, talking things out really makes me feel hopeful and allows me to take a step back and say to myself you know what, you’ve done quite a bit. You got to be proud of yourself.” ... “[This interview process] was very helpful for me to reflect on this year. I spend a lot of time thinking about what I could’ve done better this year, and putting that into words helped. I feel more hopeful. I feel like just putting everything out there, I know what I should do now.

It is not to say that unforeseen circumstances or a large number of personal barriers all will be solved through reflection alone, nor that systemic issues should be overcome as the sole responsibility of the student, thus ‘blaming’ the student (Tinto, 2006) and denying the significant systemic and societal inequities in access to education that exist for students. Rather, viewing personal contexts or barriers through an SRL framework can foster a climate of potential, hope, and shared responsibility to ensure that personal struggles, systemic barriers, and inequities are explicitly acknowledged and normalized so that all students (not only those help-seeking) are offered accessible relevant support to identify and grow through their individual realities.

**Personal Context Summary.** The Personal Context section discussed the findings related to the persistence research concerned with student personal context (realities and circumstances) and ‘what students bring’ to their university experience organized through a Self-Regulated Learning lens. A Self-Regulated Learning lens encourages an approach to student learning that acknowledges the impact of personal contexts on learning as well as student personal strengths and limitations to navigate through them as they endeavour to understand and meet their academic goals. A student’s ability to plan, monitor, reflect on and evaluate their academic experience and success in relation to their past and shifting environments, financial
considerations, and available resources are seen as paramount to their capacity to persist despite setbacks and grow as university learners. (Butler et. al., 2016; Nilson, 2013; Zimmerman, 2002).

**Institutional Offerings**

Persistence research is replete with the many ways that a university living and learning environment and available services can positively or negatively influence a student’s academic performance and overall experience. This section of categories includes the helping or hindering incidents and wish list items that students identified related to what the university brings.

**Classroom/program structure.** This category shares the third-place overall participation rate with Living Arrangements and Peer Influence. Critical Incident’s in this section were primarily related to participation in one of the smaller cohort programs or a student’s regret for not having chosen a cohort program. Most of the helping incidents reflected student experiences in these small cohort programs where students have standard time tables with a cluster of theme related courses, learn in significantly smaller classes, have professors chosen for their interest in working closely with first-year students, and a have a shared focus of study with no more than 100 students. Students primarily commented on their appreciation of these smaller classes and focused programs for promoting their connections to other students, instructors, and to course content they found most interesting. The hindering CIs mostly centred around students’ feeling overwhelmed or dissatisfied with large class sizes that combined students in all years because of the lack of opportunity to connect with professors in a meaningful way or make friendships with classmates. Fewer than expected students commented on feeling constricted by the standard timetable that prevents them from making course changes following their first term. Wish list items were mostly related to wishing they had chosen a cohort program or that first-year lectures had smaller class sizes with more chances to interact with classmates or professors.
Overwhelmingly, students identified how being a student in CAP or Arts One facilitated their academic experience and overall first-year experience. This was an expected result. Higher education research is replete with the ways in which smaller cohort learning environments facilitate the first-year experience (for example in Bean & Eaton, 2000; Kuh et. al., 2006; Tinto, 1999). In addition, both programs utilize peer to peer discourse and problem-solving as a key component of the learning process which is a necessary ingredient of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997).

The small cohort programs the students in this study spoke of also entail many of the elements that Tinto (1999) argued for. He stressed benefits of students taking courses that are linked to having students seeing each other several times over a week in shared classes as a distinct ‘learning community’ “connected by an organizing theme” (p.5). Each of the cohort programs named by the students in this study have the aspects Tinto (1999) suggested. Their programs centred around themes with a standard timetable that the students could register for required application as highly competitive Arts programs. Interestingly, students in either type of cohort program were more satisfied with their choice than most the students in custom time tables. Tinto (1999) suggests that “universities should make learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlie them a hallmark of the first-year experience...they should ensure that shared learning is the norm not the exception in first year experience” (p. 5). The benefits according to Tinto are largely related to the student’s developing social connections with peers and with faculty - students connect (and learn) better when they see each other more often and are working together on academic tasks. Learning communities provide social supports that are key for first year adjustment and retention into the following year (Tinto, 2012).
Bean and Eaton (2001) suggest that learning communities, ‘freshman interest groups’ “are a way to combine academic and social aspects of the institution in order to promote better academic performance and retention” (p. 80). Students connect through study and shared interests, and form peer groups that transcend the classroom but are built and maintained there. Bean and Eaton (2001) argue that learning communities promote retention through developing and supporting key psychological processes in the university student: Self-efficacy, approach coping behaviours, and internal locus of control through their interactions with professors, experienced academic success, and positive peer support. The CAP, Arts One, BIE, and BMS students all identified ways in which being a part of these classroom environments allowed them to make connections with peers, feel more comfortable with professors, and do well academically. Stanton et. al., (2016) argue that the classroom environment can be structured to enhance student well-being. They found that students identified social connection, flexibility, and learning for purpose as conditions that improved their feeling of well-being in class and frames the research findings, through Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-determination theory. Students felt good in class because they were having their core psychological needs met. Potentially the Arts students in this study were so positive about their cohort experience because their learning communities helped meet needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Only two students mentioned how the standard full year fixed timetable hindered them because they had to continue in courses beyond first term that they had not enjoyed or succeeded in. Possibly, this policy thwarts feelings of autonomy and agency.

**Living arrangements.** Seventeen students reported that they reside in first year housing at UBC and six students reported they commuted to campus daily Monday to Friday taking transit for a minimum of fifteen minutes one way for one student, and up to a maximum
commute for one student of over two hours each way. Students living in both environments noted that their academics and overall first-year experiences were impacted by barriers and facilitative aspects based on where they lived. Commuting students also noted incidents related to their access to or use of Collegia, the on-campus ‘home’ for commuting students. The participation rate of 91% overall with a PR of 61% identifying helping CIs and a PR of 65% for hindering CIs seems unremarkable however, when this category is subdivided into residence-living versus commuting, a different picture emerges of how a frequently students reported that living arrangements impacted their first-year experience and academic performance.

Students in residence mentioned an almost equal number of positive to negative influences for living arrangements (25:21). Conversely, only two of six commuting students mentioned a helpful CI compared to more than half of the students in residence mentioning ways their experience and academics was facilitated by being in residence. Of the twenty-five helpful CIs mentioned by campus resident students, twenty-four were related to making and sustaining friendships and peer support. Overwhelmingly the helpful factors related to residence life were about the connections with others: the hindering factors were more heterogeneous but a few students said a lack of making friends in residence was a disappointment that was difficult to overcome. Other hindering factors about residence life included room location (basement rooms were dark and ‘depressing’), better -or worse atmospheres at various residences (partying or too quiet), and not being able to cook healthy meals in first-year residences.

There were only two helpful to thirteen hindering CIs mentioned by the commuters. One student noted that commuting to campus with their mother strengthened their relationship and that Collegia was a good place to nap, eat lunches and study, the other mentioned that although they were glad to be able to join Collegia late in the term, which helped them feel more
comfortable on campus, they also said that their late registration resulted in their feeling like an outsider and not ever feeling they could ‘break into the cliques’ that had already been established earlier in the term when they were on the waitlist. As noted earlier, 100% of the commuters mentioned ways in which being a ‘commuter student’ hindered them significantly in their first-year. Interestingly, the student who mentioned the highest number of hindering factors overall across all categories was the student who had the longest commute daily of more than two hours each way. Many of the hindering factors they mentioned in the other categories were in some way related to their commuting to campus - such as not being able to attend social events in the evenings, difficulty making friends (like students do more easily in in residence), the loss of sleep due to commuting in the early morning, the frustration of three hour courses being broken up across three days or three hour options only offered until late in the day requiring later night commutes, and finally, the resulting stress they experienced cumulatively. One student reported an overall sense of not belonging nor mattering on campus (“UBC ignores commuters”). This student’s commuter life pervaded their full first-year university experience and the other commuter students, although their commutes were moderately to significantly shorter, also commented on their desire to connect more with other students and feeling like they were missing out on much of the quintessential ‘first year’ experience by travelling on and off campus daily.

Living in residence in first year is indeed seen as beneficial for students and as promoting persistence (Astin, 1999; Kuh et. al., 2006, Tinto, 2012). The significant benefits of living in residence are understood at UBC where all first-year students are guaranteed housing if they can afford the cost and want to live on campus from September to April. According to the UBC web page for new students, “living in residence is where the university journey begins. And at UBC,
it’s an extraordinary experience unlike any other. Living in residence makes it easy for students to meet new people, live in a study-oriented atmosphere, get help for academic and personal challenges, and be part of all that UBC and its surrounding neighbourhoods have to offer.... Year after year, students tell us that living in residence helped them become better learners and make long-lasting friendships”. Indeed, this claimed benefit of residence life was the most widely cited CI for first-year students interviewed living on campus.

The benefits of residence life and the challenges that commuter students highlighted in this sample align with the higher education literature. Considering the Faculty of Arts student experiences here, a claim by Astin (1984) resonates: “residents show greater gains than commuters in artistic interests, liberalism, and interpersonal self-esteem. Living in a dormitory is positively associated with several other forms of [campus] involvement... and substantially increases the student’s chances of persisting... and expressing satisfaction in their undergraduate experience” (p. 525). The author theorizes the university student experience through a ‘developmental theory’ focused on student involvement and investment in their university experience. Living on campus creates a greater investment in campus life that results in greater openness and interest in learning and inevitably persistence. Tinto (2012) summarizes findings by Pike (1999), Schroeder and Berry (1997) who found that students living in residence are more likely to be retained than commuter students. Several of the commuter students in this study reflect the greater struggle of maintaining their commitment to and sustaining energy for achieving their academic goals. They illustrate how feelings of intense loneliness and disconnection from the campus wear down their will and discipline. ‘Forgotten, isolated and ignored: the rise of the commuter student’ the title of an on-line article in World University

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1 Excerpt from http://vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/getting-started/prospective/).
Rankings (2018), exemplifies the experience of the commuter student participants in this study and shows that the plight of the UBC commuter is shared at universities world-wide. This article suggests that while universities attempt to address commuter issues, as does UBC with Collegia, “commuter students still feel ignored by their university and feel that their university does not do enough to integrate them into the student body”. The article also points to the fact that being a commuter student is usually not a choice but rather a necessity born of financial constraint. This was also the case with the students interviewed. The ways in which financial constraints impacted students is captured in the Personal Circumstances section, however it bears mentioning here as well that being a campus resident is a privileged position. Thayer (2000) discusses at length the ways in which students from lower income backgrounds are disadvantaged and invariably at greater risk of attrition. In addition to the hindering factors that arise due to economic constraint and stress, being a commuter student further compounds their challenges. Bean & Metzner (1985) presented an attrition model for ‘non-traditional’ students. According to these authors, commuters have less time and may be subject to family or employment pressures that limit their campus involvement outside classes and elevate their stress. It is interesting to note that more than thirty years after their article, students are still left feeling dissatisfied and like they are missing an integral part of first-year life if they are commuters. It seems that little has changed in the image of the quintessential first-year experience despite the significantly greater heterogeneous student population at UBC.

Clearly the six commuter students and seventeen residence students in this study reflect in their stories what the literature confirms - there are significantly more heavily impactful hindering experiences for commuters that wear on them cumulatively. And, the facilitating factors associated with living in residence are equally as powerful and protective with the
hindering factors in residence weighing far less than barriers for the commuters. In residence living offers protective benefits related to the relationships made and engagement opportunities offered.

**Extracurricular engagement and sense of belonging.** This category includes critical incidents related to the student’s sense of being engaged and involved in extracurricular activities on campus or ability to be. Students’ comments regarding their overall sense of ‘belonging’ at UBC is also sorted into this category. The category yielded the second smallest participation rate with fewer than half the student participants mentioning incidents related to their extracurricular experience or feeling of belonging. The ratio of facilitative CIs to hindering CIs is important to note given that students mentioned three times more hindering factors related to involvement than facilitative ones. Three quarters of the students felt in some way disappointment by their engagement experiences (or lack of involvement) and feeling of being a part of the university. Students offered many ideas for ways in which they would have been more inspired to have been involved including events advertised for students feeling alone and offering an ‘Arts extra involvement credit’ to improve Arts student participation in events and organizations.

Students who were hindered reported shared barriers related to balancing extracurricular activities with rigorous academic demands, limited, inaccessible timing of events and club meetings (especially for commuters), “cliquey student execs” seemingly involved for themselves rather than to serve the membership, involvement options not quite right for them (for example the Greek system or social activist clubs), and a lack of understanding of the various options open to them. Those who felt hindered by not being involved by choice mentioned significant regret due to not making the cut for clubs and teams requiring auditions, not finding ways to get involved due to fear or apathy or feeling generally overwhelmed by the size and ‘coldness’ of the
campus. Commuter students were particularly disappointed in their degree of engagement on campus and the lack of opportunities they believed were available to them within their time on campus. It is important to highlight that while there was not a high frequency of satisfaction with campus involvement or feelings of belonging, those students who had found ways to engage in opportunities that fit for them on campus were very positive and appreciative of the ways in which their extracurricular experiences helped them. These students reported a tremendous sense of connection to peers, the campus as a whole, and to their studies due to their ability to meet like-minded peers, some of whom were more experienced students who shared advice and support for the first-year club members. They spoke about the ways in which these involvement activities not only helped them ‘make friends’ but also helped keep them motivated academically.

While the valence of positive influence is not evident in the frequency of helping CIs reported in this category, the facilitative power of being engaged on campus demonstrated by these few students aligns with the persistence research that indicates overwhelmingly that a student’s sense of belonging and level of engagement on campus will impact overall student experience satisfaction and well-being that can enhance academic performance and interest thus promoting students’ ability to persevere and persist (Duque, 2014; Hausmann & Schofield, 2007; Kuh et. al., 2006; Stanton et. al., 2016; Thomas, 2011). Much of the retention through connection research builds from Tinto (1975) whose model of student retention assumed integration in the university socially and academically was of utmost importance for promoting retention - while social integration on campus continues to be seen in the literature as one of the significant factors for persistence, it is also understood that it interacts with other important personal contexts and institutional influences as well as student temperaments. Keeling (2014) contends that
universities committed to promoting student engagement can only do so if they approach students with an ‘ethic of care’ that demands the institution ‘pays attention’ to the student lived experience ‘with empathy’, accepts responsibility to respond with ‘capacity and competency’ and responds to students without expectation of ‘reciprocity’. In essence, in Keeling’s opinion, the university cannot truly foster engagement without these elements of ethical care.

First-year student involvement is seen “at the heart of student engagement and success” (Thomas, 2011) both in the research reviewed and to student life and well-being at UBC. Significant staff-run resources and programming are centred on engaging students in their first-year and beyond through volunteer opportunities, peer mentoring, campus events, as well as through student run initiatives by the Alma mater society (AMS), Greek system, ‘UBC Calendar’, and within faculties. There is a superfluity of engagement opportunities for students. Why then are there more incidents of disconnection and displeasure with engaging and belonging for the students interviewed? Astin (1984) defines ‘student involvement’ as the “quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 528). This way of thinking of involvement and engagement acknowledges that the action of getting involved resides in the student and the offerings are made available by the institution. What may stop a student from acting on opportunities that exist?

It is more widely understood presently that the heterogeneous student population has differing preferences and opportunities to integrate depending on personal circumstances and contexts as well as their sense of the ‘engagement opportunities’ being directed toward or appropriate to them (Hardes, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 1987, 2012). As student demographics shift and the campus community becomes more heterogeneous given the necessity to provide equitable access to higher education and consciously diversify the student population, student
engagement needs and opportunities change (Tinto, 1987). For example, a commuter student who is a working mother beginning her undergraduate degree may not have the luxury or desire to ‘engage’ in the campus community but may appreciate more feeling that they matter, belong, and are valued as an academic scholar. An Indigenous student with poignant family memories of abuse and exclusion in academic environments and their perceptions of the dominant norms and values at the institution may not feel the general call to engage applies to them (Hardes, 2006; Kuh et. al., 2006). A first-generation commuter student may even be subject to tensions and pressures from home to not engage on campus and to return home to help with family valued goals and tasks (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Stanton et. al., (2016), in their discussion of university student well-being point to Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-determination theory as a model for understanding post-secondary student needs, resulting perspectives and actions. As established, relatedness, autonomy, and competence are proposed as developmentally imperative for learning and optimizing self-actualization. Is it possible that the expectations and deep need for meaningful connection is so great for first-year students, that when their hopes are dashed and their connection experience is lacking in the smallest way, the associated affect is extreme and highly memorable? Perhaps the longing for stronger affiliation and more belonging is so great that the negatives far outweigh the positives. That is, the smallest disappointment in this area, for example a club being less fun and connecting than anticipated or a perceived rebuff from an executive member; the emotional response and attribution of the experience is highly significant. When the student is rebuffed or feels socially rejected the tendency may be to protect themselves and not risk another potentially disappointing or embarrassing engagement opportunity. So, despite the number of opportunities on campus, the less robust or less connected student may not reengage, further isolating
themselves. Many of the students interviewed who did find a way to successfully engage in meaningful extracurricular opportunities on campus shared how they had to push themselves, make a difficult choice to get out of their ‘comfort zone’, and take a risk. And, when they did, they noticed how their actions to engage and be involved on campus impacted their mood, sense of belonging, connections, and invariably on their academics. So, while the numbers of facilitative comments are relatively few, the strength of perceived impact is high.

Thomas (2011) stresses that managing engagement is an “institutional responsibility”. There is an opportunity at UBC to consider ways to engage the unengaged, the reticent, the introverted, the lonely, the ‘atypical’ first-year student. This may be possible only where the students most likely are - in the classroom - a “key site for enabling and promoting engagement” (Thomas, 2011, p. 49). Many of the students in this study wished for more natural chances to connect with peers in the classroom - this is the most likely place to find like-minded peers taking the same course - it is also the place where students will heed the professors’ advice to keep trying to get involved, try new things, perhaps through an instructor’s personal stories of thwarted university engagement experiences - times they had to put themselves out there. Many of the student leadership options look to students for their ‘leadership’ skills and drive for ‘excellence’ which attracts the already engaged and successful connectors on campus - leadership openings could also invite students for their empathy, their understanding of how hard it can be to connect on the first day, and for their calm thoughtfulness and particular academic interests. Finally, the Faculty of Arts has the opportunity to rebrand and strengthen the Arts student identity to address student concerns of there being an academic hierarchy at UBC that places Arts as lower than many faculties. Arts pride and recognition of the rigour of study in Arts
and the worth of the degree is imperative if Arts students are to be helped to feel a sense of worth and belonging.

**Orientation programming.** Orientation Programming was mentioned the least frequently of all categories but with the greatest vehemence. Almost all critical incidents in this section were related to making (or not making) connections with peers during these events or related to helping them (or not) with information about resources. Most of the facilitating factors were those related to the friendships made through their participation in an orientation program—particularly in the resident Jump Start program for first-year International and Indigenous students. Destination UBC, the Spring event for incoming Domestic students was named by one student as the place they met their best UBC friend. The hindering statements were related to two main concerns: students’ disappointment in not meeting friends to the extent they wished to through orientation or not being informed enough about the campus. Several students mentioned gaps in knowledge about the campus opportunities and services that they expected to learn through orientation.

Interestingly, the two students who reported the most and strongest disappointments (Hindering CIs) with their orientation experience were also the two students who mentioned the highest number of hindering incidents over all. One student linked lower than hoped for Term one grades to the loneliness they felt resulting partially from an unsuccessful orientation experience as well as due to commuting to campus (discussed above). This commuter student spoke strongly about being deeply disappointed in their lack of connection opportunities on Imagine day, especially since as commuter they had significantly fewer opportunities than those living ‘in res’ to connect to other first-year students while on campus. The one-day orientation event did not meet expectations for finding friends on the first day. Partially, the problem
stemmed they said, from the strong connections many students in the Imagine day group already had to one another through their participation in JS. The other disappointed student blamed a lack of information provided at orientation and a lack of connecting to similar or like-minded peers at JS as impacting their overall first-year experience. They believed that a learning community mismatch in Jump Start resulted in a missed opportunity to feel connected in this first pivotal week at university. This student said they never really found their people at UBC in the Faculty of Arts and reported having applied for transfer out of the Faculty for the next session.

The importance of effective orientation programming as an intervention for helping students transition into university and ultimately persist in their studies has been well documented (Bean & Eaton 2001; Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 2012). Most programs are held for a couple days or a week before classes begin although there is evidence to suggest that extended orientations such as a first-term long orientation seminar are the most effective for assisting students in adjusting to university and persisting in their studies (Murtaugh et. al., 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991 in Bean & Eaton, 2001). Student wish list items that there be a second imagine day and that first-year social programming continue through the year echo a recommendation made by Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle (1986) that students should be supported in their integration into the campus academic and social systems through-out their first year rather than at one event at the beginning of term “to extend and reinforce the impact of initial orientation experience” (p. 172).

The ways in which students in this study talked about their orientation experience speaks to the importance of orientation programming for establishing a student’s sense of connection to peers, the university, and their Faculty as well as to establish campus knowledge early. For many
students, the way they perceived their first week at university as a UBC student seemed to influence how they reported feeling connected, informed, successful and even satisfied at the end of their first year when the interviews took place. Six students mentioned that orientation had been helpful in some way and 9 students mentioned ways in which they felt in some way held back by their experience with the orientation program they attended - or did not attend. Students noted how the orientation programming provided important information about campus services and events - or how they were disappointed in the degree to which they were informed through the orientation. Tinto (2012) suggests that “Effective orientation is more than just information sharing. Though such sharing is necessary, experience tells us that effective orientation serves two other goals: the formation of social affiliations and the establishment of a context in the year that follows in which students will know whom to approach with their questions, and just as important, be willing to do so” (p. 157). The willingness of university students to seek out answers to questions or help can be problematic.

Several students in this study expressed the awareness that they needed some kind of formal support in their first year but had not sought it out. While the numbers did not allow for “help-seeking” to be established as its own category, the result of not asking for help was grave for some of the participants. They reported feeling alone, unimportant, overwhelmed, and confused at times. Some said they did not know where to go for help, hence the hindering CIs in this category, but many said that even though they knew they could go to a professor’s office hours, go see an academic advisor, make a counselling appointment, or even get career advising when feeling ‘lost’, they did not seek help.

Tinto’s description above points to the importance of informing students of where to get help and establish a willingness to seek it, however, there seems a gap between a student’s
awareness of resources and their use of them - certainly, advisors are often perplexed when a student arrives in the Spring ‘when it is too late’ to salvage a failing session. Perhaps student awareness is just a part of the necessary ingredient for resource use and despite the best efforts of orientation planners, even if students know where to find help they might not choose to. Might orientation programming address this attitude or idea about help-seeking in some way?

According to Bean and Eaton (2001) orientation programming will usually impact at least one of the psychological processes seen as fostering persistence namely, Approach/Avoidance Coping Strategies, Self-Efficacy, and Locus of Control. 2 These authors also stress the role that an orientation program has for connecting students to one another and university personnel while informing students but also emphasises the need to foster their willingness to access university offerings. “An orientation program similarly involves student interactions with staff or faculty members and other students. According to the model, programs are effective when they assist students in gaining positive self-efficacy, approaching rather than avoiding social and academic activities, developing an internal locus of control with regard to social and academic matters, and developing positive attitudes toward being at school” (p.78). Currently the UBC first-year JS program includes workshops and lecture style information provision focused on Mindset (Dweck, 2006; 2014) and Grit, (Duckworth, 2016) to foster the student’s awareness of ‘growth mindset’ and perseverance/grit as something they will need and are expected to cultivate at UBC. This aspect of the orientation not only informs students of these concepts, it also serves to normalize academic and personal struggle, overcoming challenge, and even failing as a potential part of the university experience.

2 These important psychological processes for fostering persistence are discussed earlier in the ‘personal context’ section of this chapter.
The University: services, policy, process and practice. This category yielded the fourth highest participation rate overall with the majority of students mentioning facilitating CIs and reporting more ways in which they were helped rather than hindered by their university. The University as an entity includes the university’s policies, processes, and procedures and the people who mitigate or uphold these. In general, participants in this study reported having been more positively impacted by the university. This was not an expected outcome. It was expected that students would be more critical of the university for challenges faced or their disappointments. But, as established in the Personal Context section of the report, these students demonstrated ownership and took responsibility for their experiences, decisions, and results to a far greater extent than was anticipated by this researcher. The students’ taking ownership of their situations may be part of the reason why this category did not yield a high number of hindering CIs but there are other potential explanations for this result. As a group, these students were mostly mid to high achieving academically: they may not have been experiencing the university the way a student feeling marginalized or encountering significant struggles may have (Schlossberg, 1989). A group of students failing their first year may have yielded a different ratio of facilitating to hindering CIs. Another possible explanation, is that systemic barriers and institutional privileging may have been difficult for the interviewed students to recognize or pinpoint in a concrete way. Finally, students may have been reticent to have been overly critical about their university for self-preservation or in light of being interviewed by a university staff member. However, it is notable that the most ideas for improvement and highest number of wish list items were identified in this category. This suggests that students could have been better facilitated and hindered less by “the university”. However, taking the results at face value, these
students experienced a greater number of facilitative than hindering incidences at the hands of the university.

Several students expressed pride and appreciation for having been admitted to UBC and some for the scholarship opportunities and awards provided and others for the diversity on campus. Many spoke of the natural beauty and location close to Vancouver as helpful for elevating their mood and finding interesting and ‘healthy’ activities to do when able to take a break from studying. They noted many beneficial resources and amenities they had made use of. Students noted the math centre, writing centre, academic advising, counselling centre, and enrollment services professionals as helping them in some critical way. Interestingly, almost all these exact resources were also named by students as in some way hindering them either due to long waits for service, lack of flexible service hours, ineffective service (being bounced around), and random luck with the quality of academic support “depending on who you get”. Based on student comments it seems students can be both helped and hindered by support services depending largely on the individual they see. A call for more flexible service hours was made as was more opportunities in-class and around campus to learn about support options available throughout the year in time sensitive ways. Students wished for more peer mentoring and academic supports in Arts and more hands on academic guidance. It seemed that when students named these kinds of academic supports they were not really sure of what exactly they felt was missing but just that they felt a need for greater academic help in some way.

While many students reported feeling a deep sense of connection and mattering to the institution some commented that they were hindered by UBC being ‘cold’, ‘too big’ and too rainy. Interestingly, the weather was raised quite often as impacting mood and motivation. The physical indoor spaces on campus were also mentioned as either helpful or hindering depending
on the perceived warmth, aesthetics, noise level, and draw for Arts students. The Meekison lounge in Buchannan D was mentioned by a couple students as needing to be ‘warmed up’ and another student wished for academic department specific lounges for first-year students to gather and meet.

UBC systems for registering highest achieving students first was mentioned as doubly hindering already disadvantaged students. A few of the students mentioned how they would appreciate UBC showing greater valuing and care for students struggling academically through mandatory advising meetings to ‘catch’ students early, easier ways to help guide ‘lost’ students with career exploration questionnaires online to direct them to course options in Arts, timetable options specific to -or seats held in courses for commuters and working students, more first-year specific resources earlier, and finally more help with course selection and registration in a more hands-on way.

This category is broad and, in a sense, encompasses aspects of the physical, social, support, and on-line environments that were too different from one another to cluster in a category or to yield a high enough participation rate to stand alone. A category called ‘Environment’ or ‘Resources’ was considered initially and then ‘The University’ was settled upon since many of the CIs were related to the students’ interaction with ‘the university’: services, online platforms, physical spaces, and processes. Upon further contemplation of the CIs and comments in the section, it becomes clear that the student’s interactions with the university in these ways are related to ways they maintained their personal or academic well-being or faced challenges to maintaining their wellness. For example, seeking help from advisors and academic support services like the Math and Writing centres, using the amenities such as the UBC pool and fitness centres, walking in Nitobe gardens, trying to create viable schedules online to avoid
early morning commutes, scouring abbreviated course listings to find descriptions to help them find courses of interest, questioning policies and systems that favour students already at an advantage to succeed or that fit a particular demographic were items reported as positively or negatively impactful.

The students’ comments about and use of the university in this way is reflected in the Higher Education research concerned with how post-secondary institutions do or do not foster student well-being and success. Washburn et. al. (2013) contend that “the broader organizational context has an impact on those within it... Institutional structure and policies contribute to its culture by reinforcing certain values, beliefs, and behaviours and discouraging others... policies and practices impact student mental health... and student learning”. UBC has made a strong commitment to promote student well-being on campus as have many Canadian universities. Initiatives are underway to support instructors to promote student well-being in class their teaching practices. Student mental health is being addressed through a stepped care model offering a wide range of care from self-directed approaches online to group and individual counselling and urgent crisis intervention. The students interviewed pointed to the way processes, practices, and policies impacted them and offered ideas for modifying them to promote equitable opportunities for success for a diverse student demographic.

Their wishes reflect the calls to action outlined in the Okanagan Charter, released in 2015, that challenges and encourages higher education environments internationally to adjust and promote policies, practices, and learning environments that foster health and learning. When universities foster health and learning with an eye to equity, social justice, and ethics of care (Keeling, 2014), persistence is more attainable, for all, rather than for some (Tinto, 1999). At

3 https://blogs.ubc.ca/teachingandwell-being/
UBC and at universities across Canada and internationally there is a growing culture shift that is changing the ‘character of educational settings’ (Tinto, 1999) and humanizing The Institution. Keeling (2014) provides the reminder that ‘the institution’ is fact ‘structured communities of people’ interacting and impacting one another. Thinking of ‘The University’ as an entity removes the responsibility that individuals have within the university setting and activities to see ‘The student’, not as a ‘mass of something’ clumped together but rather each as a whole and complex person. It is only when the student is seen in this way, argues Keeling, that a higher education organization can truly claim to be committed to fostering student success because they are concerned first with empathizing with students and student well-being (2014), not only through individual staff and faculty interactions with students but also as a collective whole in a cultural environment that values an ethic of care that emphasises being in relation. Another way to think of this way of being is in creating the ‘mattering’ climate Schlossberg (1989) called for in higher education decades ago (referred to earlier in the Instructor Influence section). In the findings chapter a participant’s quote demonstrates how President Ono made an impression on them- not only did President Ono say that he wanted all students to feel they mattered at UBC but he also actually facilitated the student’s feeling of mattering simply through their interaction with him. And that feeling of mattering spread to that student’s interactions with other people on campus: “everyone wants to make you feel as if you actually matter in this university... that idea really made me feel comfortable and really made me feel that I have absolutely no regrets in choosing UBC as my university”. This student’s pride in and commitment to the place where they matter is clear. Top down mattering is rippling through UBC as demonstrated in this example as well as through initiatives that partner wellness professionals and researchers with
faculty to help students matter more in the classroom. There remains the opportunity to offer training and incentives to front line staff to create climates of mattering.

**Social influences**

According to Dr. Neil Armitage, UBC Faculty Member and Learning Strategist with the Centre for Student Involvement and Careers, “student to student and student to faculty connections are strong predictors of student retention, satisfaction and performance. These connections are key to developing a sense of belonging to a program, department, Faculty and ultimately an academic institution” (Personal correspondence, 2017). The ways in which students felt helped or hindered by instructors, family, and peers and the fit with the literature regarding social supports and university persistence is explored in this section.

**Instructor Influence.** The comments in this category are related to the kinds of interactions students had with professors, their perceived access to instructors and teaching assistants (TA), and how students experienced their style of teaching or assessment/evaluation or their support of student learning. Instructors were seen as significantly more helpful than hindering with more than double the number of facilitative factors over hindering factors mentioned. At times it seemed students were not sure if their instructor was a full professor or a doctoral student or TA but for some comments they were clearly aware of their instructor being a TA or professor.

Students talked about their experiences with instruction as ‘academic’ - how instructors helped them learn or modify their approach to academics - or in relation to the support or engagement they felt from the TA or professor (or lack of). Comments about TA’s were few but impactful. Students were facilitated to access academic supports at the encouragement of a TA and were made comfortable with the Teaching assistants being close to their age. Other students
found their being close in age disarming and the power of teaching assistants inappropriate.

Some students felt that grading was unfair and that grades were largely dependent on the TA one
drew. Teaching assistants were also hindering for students when they did not show up for
tutorials.

The results section provides many illustrative examples of how students found their
interactions with professors helpful (or not). A few descriptive words bear repeating here. The
following adjectives are those that exemplify the way that students felt when they being helped
to succeed and their learning felt important to the professors or when they felt supported in
general: They described their professors as amazing, incredible, really nice, insightful, caring,
understanding, engaging, perspective shifting, excellent, key, super supportive, strict but open,
and one student thought professors at UBC were even world acclaimed! One student shared their
feeling that a professor had completely shifted their mindset so that they understood how to
approach academics and increased their grade from mid-term to final. Another shared their
opportunity to present at a student conference at McGill because of the encouragement and
inspiration of their professor - Professors can be life changers!

The adjectives that were used when students talked about times they felt in some way
held back by a professor included the following: discouraging, dry, impersonal, intimidating, not
engaging, and disappointing. The number of hindering incidents in this category do not reflect
the power that even one negative incident with a professor could have in shaping a students’
perspectives on themselves or the university - One student expressed that in large lectures with
some of their professors it was like “they didn’t exist as students” and the professor was
“speaking to the air”. Some professors were said to be lacking in interactivity and even resistant
to students’ questions in classes. While it could be that the hindering incidents in some instances
are more a function of the size of the lecture than the professor, there were professors teaching large lectures that were mentioned as being facilitative through their passion for teaching the subject and encouraging questions even with a power point lecture to large numbers of students.

Many of the students’ comments appear to reflect a deep need to connect with their professors and to their learning process and when they do not feel a connection they are deeply disappointed. Being a catalyst for feelings of inspiration or disappointment is not the only effect a professor may have. They can change the course of students’ path of study. Two students in this study reported they may shift their study plan due to their experience with a professor in a particular course. In one example, a student expressed deep disillusionment because of their relationship with a professor in their program. The interactions had been perceived by the student as so discouraging and heartless that they were considering leaving the program in which they would have been studying a lifelong passion. Of course, this is just one side of the story. However, it illustrates the impact -potentially life altering impact- a professor can have on a student mindset and subsequent decisions, especially in the first-year. It also illustrates the importance of connecting with students both in and outside the classroom to help them make sense of and process their learning and interactions to make choices that are in line with their areas of interest rather than based on an emotional reaction to a professor.

These examples and the students CIs in this category speak to recommendations being made by a number of researchers regarding shifting the focus away from the creation of external programming and ‘involvement’ initiatives to increasing student retention and learning by creating learning environments for university students where “staff and faculty act responsively and empathetically towards students” (Keeling, 2014, p. 142): that are engaging and foster well-being thus promoting learning (Stanton et. al., 2016) and academic tenacity (Dweck, Walton &
Cohen, 2014) and invariably increase persistence (Tinto, 2012). Schlossberg (1989) suggests that universities help students feel they matter through policies, practices, facilities, and programs that do not marginalize them but rather allow them to feel agentic, a sense of worth, and involved. The student description of ‘feeling like they don’t exist’ to the professor suggests they do not “believe in their personal worth” in the classroom. Building community and engagement in learning at universities, according Schlossberg (1989) requires that students feel they matter to the institution. When individuals are making a transition into a new environment they are most likely to feel on the margins and like they do not matter - Given Schlossberg’s (1989) argument, first-year students are already likely to be struggling to feel a sense of belonging and worth in the new university environment. It is of particular importance that instructors of first-year students create climates of mattering -as have many of the professors in these student examples.

Stanton et. al., (2016) argues that instructors can create conditions that enhance students’ student well-being and ultimately their learning. Their qualitative research findings suggest that social connection, flexibility, and learning for purpose are conditions that improve feelings of well-being in class. They offer Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-determination Theory as an explanation for the strength of these conditions in class. They argue that when students’ core psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met they are more open to learning and experience a greater sense of well-being. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that self-determination is imperative for fostering intrinsic motivation and that their findings are of “great significance for individuals who wish to motivate others in a way that engenders commitment, effort, and high-quality performance” (p. 76). Indeed, one can assume that UBC expects and
wants to foster commitment, effort, and high-quality performance in their students. Instructors are partners in creating conditions to help students to this end.

In Tinto (2012), each chapter provides recommendations for ways classrooms can support student persistence and learning. In particular Tinto argues that ‘early classroom successes’ set the course for later success through enhancing student self-efficacy - this is reflective of the competence and autonomy Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest is important for commitment to and results of high performance. Tinto also points to the importance of ‘relatedness’ in his descriptions of “pedagogies of engagement” (p. 77). It is especially at the “beginning of the student career...in those places where students and faculty meet that institutions should initially direct their actions” (p. 124). More time lecturing in big classes is the norm in the American research, he cites but he contends that “the classroom is the building block upon which student retention is built... reshaping the college classroom and student experience within the classroom” is key for fostering student learning and persistence (p.125). The student experiences and descriptions in this study exemplify the research regarding student engagement and well-being in the classroom. The students who mentioned instructors who were ‘passionate’, encouraged discussion, were ‘understanding’, ‘caring’, and ‘strict’, encouraging students through first-year conferences, and to shift their mindsets demonstrate the power of the engaged professor in engaging the student.

Currently, UBC has projects underway to support professors in their daunting task of engaging and teaching students in ways that promote well-being and learning through initiatives based partly on the ‘academic tenacity’ work of (Dweck, Walton & Cohen, 2014) as well as
through research funded through a Teaching and Learning Enhancement grant at UBC⁴. A reflection tool developed by the research team with UBC Well-being supports instructors in considering how their practices can and do support student well-being and learning. There is momentum at UBC that is shifting the culture of teaching and learning turning toward creating climates where student matter and are given the opportunity to develop feelings of efficacy, competence, relatedness, and connection, and autonomy. As the students in this study reflect, these kinds of environments created by engaging caring and passionate professors are indeed facilitative when present and hindering when not.

**Family Influence.** In this category, items were sorted related to students’ comments about how family members facilitated or hindered them in their academic goal striving and overall quality of university life in first year.

Nineteen of 23 students mentioned their family as influencing them in some way. There are significantly more helpful CIs in this category than hindering ones indicating that the students found their family members were significantly more helpful than not. Of particular interest is that there were no WL items mentioned in this category. Perhaps students had nothing about their family support they would change or it was difficult to consider how something so influential and long standing in their lives might be different - as well, as a part of the family system, it may have been too ‘close to home’ to discuss in a research interview.

Overwhelmingly, students were appreciative and grateful for the support of their family. While some extended family relationships and siblings were referenced, the primarily family support students spoke of was that of their parents.

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⁴ See http://blogs.ubc.ca/teachingandwell-being/files/2017/05/TLEF-Infographic_Round2_v2.pdf
Parents were said to provide financial support, emotional encouragement, decision-making guidance and general advice. Students indicated they were in contact with parents often despite living in residence and, two of students living at home said they felt comfortable at home with supportive parents. This reliance and close attachment to parents for these 18 and 19-year-olds was unexpected. However, when considered in the context of their place in history and the prevalent parenting styles (Seemiller & Grace, 2016) - discussed earlier- it is understandable. In addition, there was a large number of students who made mention of themselves and their parents being a part of a culture that expected to continue a close involvement in the young adult’s life. These student’s reliance and acceptance of parental input and support may have also been a function of their family cultural expectations.

The degree to which a large number of these students expressed gratitude for their parents’ support -beyond just financial support- was also somewhat surprising. And perhaps counter to the university environment that limits parental connections and focuses largely on the attending ‘adult’ student in official correspondence and events. Parents may even at times be discouraged from being ‘too involved’ - there are strict protocols in place to protect the student’s information that, although imperative, exist within a culture that allows for the student to navigate independently from his/her family. However, this may not be necessary or conducive to a healthy and strong transition into university for all students.

While the university may not explicitly acknowledge the important role parents continue to play in their emerging adults life at university, the evidence provided by the students in this study are supported in contemporary literature. According to Carlson (2014), research by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) indicates that “parental involvement in the college student experience is related to a host of academic outcomes such as college student aspirations,
enrollment, and retention” (p. 260). In Carlson’s research exploring the advice-giving communication and utilization between emerging adults and their parents, most of the participants seeking academic advice from parents implemented all or much the offered parental guidance. The author also explicated studies that found that “students who rely on their parents for social support are more motivated in their academic work and more satisfied with their overall college experience” (p. 257). Carlson also reveals that the parents’ knowledge, ‘wisdom’ and authority in the topic at hand influenced the degree to which the emerging adults utilized the advice or felt supported.

This raises the question of what happens for the students who do not have family members who can provide advice about academics or university life with ‘wisdom’ and authority. Given the significant valuing that the students interviewed expressed regarding their parents support beyond paying for tuition, it stands to reason that students without this support may be lacking in an important support system.

Hindering CIs included feeling a lack of connection from parents for three students who missed daily interactions due to difficulty connecting through time zones and awkward communication options; pressure from parents to make different choices about work and academics for two students, an enforced curfew that limited a student’s ability to attend campus evening events, and for another student - family worries weighed heavily impacting their concentration.

While there were only four of twenty-three students in this study that reported that neither of their parents completed university, a discussion of university persistence and family support is incomplete without a consideration of first-generation concerns. The very fact that there were only four first-generation students in the study raises questions about whether the small number
is reflective of less access to university for first-generations students, less engagement on
campus, or another potential barrier to participating that is not clearly identifiable. Of interest as
well is that three of the four did not mention CIs in this category at all.

The challenges for first-generation students, those students of whom are the first in their
family to attend university, is well established in the higher education research (Finnie et. al.,
2008; Kuh et. al., 2006; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2012). Finnie and Mueller (2008) reveal the
complex interactions involved that restrict the first-generation student even before they attend
university. Firstly, individuals with non-university graduated parents are less likely to access
post-secondary education - while lower family income was once thought the most significant
influence, Finnie and Mueller (2008) contend that contemporary research in Canada points to
‘cultural capital’ as the greatest limitation for first-generation students: When one lives with a
family that values and expects university as a pathway, and when children are in households that
are habituated to reading and conversing about ideas, they are more likely to consider university
as an option. And if they attend, are more likely to persist (Thayer, 2000).

For decades researchers have revealed that first generation students are found to have
lower levels of academic and social engagement and parents who may want to assist but just
don’t know how (Kuh et. al., 2006). Given the research by Carlson (2014) it is likely that the
first-year student being offered academic or university life guidance by parents who are not
university graduated may not heed the advice even if it has utility. They are unlikely to see their
parents as an authority. Worse still, parents may be actively disruptive due to their lack of
understanding of the higher education culture and rigour. This was evidenced in one of the
student comments in their insightful observation of a friend whose parents they thought were not
sympathetic to their peer because the parents had not been to university themselves.
In addition to being disadvantaged by invisible cultural forces through their life-time as well as through their present interactions with their parents, first generation students may also harbour an internal doubt that they belong in post-secondary (Finnie & Mueller, 2008) or lack the sense of self efficacy needed to persist, as conceptualized through the lens of social cognitive theory. Tinto (2012) explains that low income and first-generation students are in particular need of validation and support to believe that they are capable and to persist; “an individual’s interpretation of their performance alters their sense of self-efficacy, in turn, their future performance. ‘These self-evaluations are based in beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations’ (Bandura, 1995, p.2). These beliefs influence the choices people make and the courses of action they pursue in future (Pajares 1996)” (in Tinto, 2012, p. 27). Finding ways to support these students to reflect on and recognize their performance and apply their insights to future challenges is of particular importance and is possible. An opportunity exists to create explicit ways to help all parents help their emerging adults to navigate the first-year transition. Universities can begin to acknowledge the parenting approaches and climate many of the first-year, straight from high school students are arriving from to better support the students transition into the university while strengthening partnerships with family members of younger members of the institution. This partnership is particularly important for first generation students.

Peers Influence. This final category is presented not in an order from most to least endorsed but rather as the category that most permeated all other aspects of the students’ experiences in this study. As discovered through the analysis and discussion, establishing peer bonds is of the utmost importance to the majority of students interviewed as well as to first-year persistence as stressed in the literature. According to Kuh et. al. (2006) citing Astin, (1993),
“peers are the ‘single most potent source of influence’ affecting virtually every aspect of development” (p.42). Not being able to make friendships and the resulting loneliness and social isolation were named by a small number of students in this study. Their struggle to maintain attention to and commitment to their Arts studies was clearly communicated with both these students questioning their place in the faculty. This reflects research that contends that social isolation and lack of involvement with peers impacts persistence and retention (Tinto, 2012).

In this study, twenty-one of twenty-three students mentioned they had been influenced by peers in some way through their first-year in predominantly facilitative ways. Peer influence incidences were those where other students specifically helped or hindered in their striving toward academic goals or experience of learning or overall as they navigated through their first-year at university.

Peer influence shares the third highest rate of overall participation but is the second helping category tied with the Behaviour & Strategic action category. Positive peer relationships were mentioned as either key to their adjustment and happiness on campus: or a lack of being well connected to peers was mentioned as a very powerful regret resulting in loneliness and an overall lack of satisfaction at UBC. Only nine students mentioned ways in which peers influenced them negatively, mostly by reducing their motivation or commitment to study with their ‘bad habits’ or pressures to ‘party’. Some students raised negative in-class peer evaluations and uneven group project work in courses as a hindrance. They wished for more even grading depending on effort in the projects and also, in general preferred not to be graded in groups or by their peers. Another wish for a couple students was a greater sense of comradery and connection as ‘Arts’ students and a general call for ‘Arts’ pride and greater respect from outside Faculties.
As a group Arts students are the largest group of students on campus. Thus, making connections and establishing an ‘Arts’ identity is particularly important.

As demonstrated in the Findings examples and this discussion, peer connections permeate all aspects of the student experience as reflected through the established categories in this study: their motivation, emotions, and mindset, their decisions and behaviours, and even their metacognitive reflections include comparison or observations of peers, and even personal circumstances included peer relationship effects. The influence of institutional offerings was mediated by the degree to which they either facilitated or did not promote peer relationships - student’s judgements of orientation, residence life (or commuting), extra-curricular activities and the university environment, and even the instructor and classroom were largely contextualized through their success or failure to connect students to one another. This is in keeping with the vast literature that exists stressing the power of peers in the university experience, “A large part of the impact of college is determined by the extent and content of one’s interactions with major agents of socialization on campus, namely faculty members and students peers” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 620 in Kuh et. al. 2006, p. 42). The only category that was not in some way measured or experienced through peer bonding effects was that of ‘family influence’. But it bears noting that this category is also a relational category.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) was forwarded in earlier sections as a way to contextualize student reactions and experiences as emerging adults. Their need for relatedness, relevant to this section, figured most obviously for these twenty-three students - however needs for competency and autonomy are also evident through the choices they made and disappointments and successes shared, many in relation to their peers. According to Butler et. al. (2017), students are self-regulating learners within social contexts. SRL is not just
“individuals learning independently” but rather, students “engaging with others within the communities they must navigate” (p.12). The student comments illustrate the very social context of learning at UBC; the informal learning communities on residence floors, the choice to join learning communities in small cohort programs, the establishing of study partnerships, and experienced students reaching out to support new students are all examples of how students make choices to learn together in relationship.

Higher education literature has been cited throughout that emphasises the presence of peer bonds as crucial to university student well-being (Stanton et. al., 2016), adjustment into the university (Kuh et. al., 2006; Tinto, 2012), academic performance, learning, and persistence in the first-year and beyond. Almost a half century ago Tinto (1975) introduced the ‘interactionist model’ of student persistence and while this model has since been challenged and other models considered (Bean and Eaton, 2001; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Thayer, 2000) and expanded (Tinto, 1999) this original emphasis on how connected the student is in their university was very relevant to this cohort of research participants. As will be expanded in the Limitations section, and was pointed to in the Living Arrangements section, this was a group of ‘traditional’ students as described by Bean and Metzner (1985) where the social centre would be the university where they live and learn. However, even had the majority of this group been more ‘non-traditional’, with more students commuting, older than twenty-four, studying part-time, and potentially with jobs and families pulling on their time, they still will have had needs for relatedness. While many would meet these needs through outside relationships, this raises the issue of how the university can offer an environment conducive to connections for the student with little time and competing responsibilities, who is not able to participate in the typical events and environments meant to build community. The community can be built where these largely academically focused
students are in the classroom. And, through a university community that values and considers students through extended service hours and representing non-traditional students in media campaigns and in planning for events and extra-curricular offerings: in essence, making the invisible student on the margins visible, and creating a climate of mattering.

**Discussion Summary.** Category and critical incidents findings align with the existing research on first-year experience, persistence, and learning as well as on the facilitative and challenging influences in three distinct areas of influence: personal context, institutional offerings and, social influences. These twenty-three students demonstrated how they, as successful learners (both within and outside the classroom) were self-regulated learners. They knew how to “deliberately and adaptively mobilize their thoughts feelings, and actions in order to stay focused on goals and persist in the face of all sorts of learning and life challenges” (Butler, personal correspondence, 2018) while learning from, leveraging, and building peer and university support relationships. As a theoretical perspective, the SRL way of approaching and thinking about university student learning could assist UBC Faculty of Arts students in successfully coping with and planning in term of their individual contexts. Through promoting practices that promote SRL in various learning environments, students can be supported to develop greater abilities to reflect on and act intentionally through diverse personal circumstances and daily experience with agency, experiencing greater self-efficacy as they strive to meet their goals for competence, autonomy, and relatedness within the university and other life contexts.
Limitations, Recommendations, and Implications

This research study contributes to the persistence research by highlighting twelve areas of influence and various related factors that first-year Faculty of Arts student participants at UBC identified as most impactful to their first-year experience and academic performance. Some predicted limitations to this study are related to recruitment and sampling, the open semi-structured design, the implementation, individual and cultural values and attitudes, and the risk that an open-ended qualitative exploratory interview may negatively impact the participating student storytellers. While what occurred in the actual implementation of the research did not reflect some predicted concerns, there were related limitations of the study design and implementation that must be considered when reviewing and contextualizing the findings and recommendations.

Limitations

The definition of persistence. In the case of this report, persistence is defined as maintaining registration throughout the first-year and intending to, and being eligible to, continue into second-year studies at UBC. This is a narrow and highly particular definition specific to this research study. Another limitation of this study may be the varied and particular use of the word ‘persistence’ in the field and the alignment, or potential misalignment of these definitions with this researcher’s own conceptualization of ‘persistence’. It is not guaranteed that all researchers are speaking the same ‘persistence’ language. It is necessary then, when reading the literature and findings highlighted in this report that it is understood that persistence can be defined and operationalized differently for unique post-secondary persistence research questions (Finnie et. al., 2008).
Recruitment and sampling. In the proposal phase, recruitment was anticipated as potentially problematic given that many of the desired participants might be hesitant to share their academic stories with the “institution”. Thus, measures were taken to ensure student participation would be as confidential as possible and their participation was encouraged through incentives. As it was, there were many more students who volunteered than could be interviewed. Students were invited to participate through a mass email sent through the Faculty of Arts to all first year Arts students and through posters in the student gathering areas on campus such as The Nest and Learning Commons. While many students emailed their interest, not one of the students who chose to take the time to respond and volunteer to participate was at academic risk (achieving a term 1 average below 60%). While this research originally intended to gain insights on a wide range of student experiences - those achieving academically and those at risk of failing - only academically average and above average students responded. Thus, this study speaks to what students who are achieving average academic and above average academic success see as facilitative or hindering to that success. As such, this research is specific to undergraduate, Faculty of Arts first-year students who volunteered to participate in the qualitative study.

Generalizability. The small sample size and highly specific population interviewed impacts the degree of generalizability that can be assumed of the findings as does the nature of qualitative research of ECIT. While the students’ stories do provide detailed and relevant experiences that may inform university stakeholders, incoming students, and even parents about some helpful and hindering aspects of the first-year experience, it is necessary to interpret the data understanding that students from other Faculties, those not significantly reflected in the
participant demographic, and those studying at other universities may not share these first-year student experiences and observations.

Participants opted to volunteer and self-selected to share their experiences in this study. It is possible that the students who felt comfortable to share their stories were those who felt they were doing well academically, that resulted in a less than representative sample and a narrow band of average to above average academic performers with all but two entering directly from high school. The study also attracted a higher number of international students (30% of the total number of participants) than is representative of the ratio of international students in the first-year undergraduate population said to be 23% (University of British Columbia. 2016/17 Annual Report on Enrolment). In addition, three times more students living in residence than commuter students volunteered; just one student who identified as Indigenous participated; and only four students of the twenty-three reported they are first-generation university students in their families. Clearly, this sample of first-year students does not provide a significant voice for a diverse population of students: For example, this group of average to above average academically performing student volunteers do not provide the first-year perspective of students at significant academic risk or failing nor does this ‘traditional’ student sample speak for older, part-time, transfer students. For these aforementioned reasons, the findings must be cautiously applied to even first-year students within the Faculty of Arts at UBC.

**Individual cultural values and attitudes.** Given that ideas and talking about failure and success can be deeply rooted in cultural attitudes and values (France, Rodriguez & Hett, 2004), it was thought that it might be difficult for a student to talk about their lived experience of academics not only from an emotional standpoint but from a cultural stand on the utility of ‘talking about ‘problems’ (Robinson et. al, 2016). In addition, it was assumed that in some
cultures ‘saving face’ is of utmost importance so that academic performance could be a source of pride as well as shame and therefore painful to discuss. When this project was developed it was assumed that at least some student participants would be at risk of or worried about failing thus meeting with a researcher/advisor for the purpose of discussing their academics could have been counterintuitive, counterproductive, and possibly damaging. In preparation for the interviews, the researcher was reflexive regarding her personal attitudes and assumptions of the benefits of talking through experiences. She was aware that her constructivist views on failure positioned her in seeing failure and reflection on academics as a growth opportunity. As such, she aimed to maintain a listener and facilitator stance - intending to listen and categorize the first-year students’ perspectives as per their stance- not her own. Although it was necessary in the proposal stage to give considerable thought to the above points, in practical terms, at no point in the data collection was there any concern or ‘red’ flag regarding student concerns about discussing their first-year experience. The greatest emotional reaction was demonstrated by one student as they spoke of their frustration with the Faculty transfer process at the university, and another as they expressed their disappointment that UBC was less rigorous academically than they had expected. For the most part, student affect was light-hearted, reflective, calm, and most seemed content and even excited to be participating in the interview. This is likely due to the fact that students who selected to be a part of this study had achieved average to above average grades in most of the term 1 courses and although a few students had experienced an academic setback in one or two of their courses, all participants spoke of their experience without appearing significantly distressed. However, as described above, the self-selection process may have limited diverse cultural values and attitudes and as described below, the ways in which students were invited to share their impressions of their experience may have limited their full expression or disclosure.
**Interview structure.** While there is some unpredictability in semi-structured interviews, steps were taken by the researcher to provide a safe and accepting environment for the participants; including informing them of what to expect pre and during the interview as well as debriefing the participants and informing them of support services on campus. In collaboration with the UBC wellness team a process was determined for responding to student distress if it occurred. However, at no point in the interview process did the interviewer feel concerned for the students’ wellness during or post interviews nor was the ‘emergency’ response plan ever required. Conversely, immediately following the end of the interview process and in the email follow up messages many participants expressed their appreciation that they had chosen to volunteer and share their experiences. However, even with this careful planning such as the use of a single trained interviewer to maximize consistency and a standard practice across participants there are inherent limitations. For example, as a middle-aged woman and UBC staff member researcher, the interviewer may have elicited a certain kind of participation or perspective by the students in the interviews. It cannot be determined in what ways this influenced the twenty-three participants’ choices for sharing information and stories. Might there have been different kinds of experiences shared with a younger student peer interviewer not employed by the institution? Is it possible that students were impacted in ways they did not express to the researcher?

**ECIT method.** This research method was deemed most appropriate for this study concerned with what students see as most helpful or hindering to their first-year experience and for seeing what ideas students had for improving their own, or future first-year student experiences - however, ECIT yields frequencies rather than degrees of influences: each incident is created equal in this data analysis, the relative strength or weight of an incident is not
measured. According to Butterfield et. al., (2005), “One of the hallmarks of the CIT is the formation of categories as a result of analyzing the data (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). These categories may or may not capture the context of the situation and are reductionist by definition” (p.481). At points in the data collection and analysis for this study, it was noted that while an incident might be reported just once by one or a few students, and not deemed significant as a category, the degree of impact of an experience may not be reflected in the data. In addition, some categories that did not meet the minimum participation rate were collapsed into broader categories and thus not as prominent in the reporting of the data while potentially very prominent for the few students reporting incidents in the area.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

To address the limitations related to the research sample, qualitative research that can access a more diverse and larger number of first-year students is suggested to determine the degree to which the findings based on twenty-three student interviews is reflective of a greater number of undergraduate students. In addition, research with populations of students identified by the post-secondary persistence literature as experiencing particular barriers to their academics should be taken up to see what these specific populations of students at UBC in the Faculty of Arts report as helpful or hindering in their first year. Also, Arts students who are experiencing significant academic struggles should be sought out to add their voice and perspectives. It is recommended that future research projects replicate this study with students in other faculties and with students at other similar Canadian Universities.

**Scaling questions.** As per the limitations, future persistence researchers using ECIT as a method may consider using scaling questions with their interviews to assist with better reflecting the salience of some experiences and categories over others for some participants. In addition,
while ECIT was deemed the most appropriate method to capture the sort and frequency with which particular factors are mentioned by students as impactful in some way, future researchers interested in student experience may elaborate on the findings here with other qualitative research methods such as descriptive phenomenological or narrative approaches.

**Research replication and survey.** Research that replicates this study but with interviews conducted by similar aged peers closer in their academic/life stage to participants may determine the degree to which the findings are consistent regardless of the interviewer. In addition, a follow up anonymous survey requesting student feedback on their experience may provide a better sense of the research experience for participants.

**Comparing variables to Grit.** This study collected helping incidents, hindering incidents, wish list items, student demographic information and the students’ scores on a GRIT scale (Duckworth, 2016). Twenty-three participant results are not enough to yield significant correlative data thus comparisons across this data were not addressed. However, it is interesting to note that there was evidence to suggest that students in this study with higher GRIT scores more often reported a greater number of facilitative incidences (they seemed to have a more optimistic view point over all) and the tone of their interviews also differed in the degree to which they ‘blamed’ others or external circumstances for their stress points or ‘failures’. As emphasised earlier, this study sample size does not allow for conclusions in comparing the data yet the information collected was enough to peak this researcher’s curiosity about the interactions of various variables and psychological constructs.

**Mixed design.** Future researchers may consider combining qualitative ECIT approaches with an analysis of demographic and grit score data with a large population of Arts students - CIT has been conducted through survey research by a number of persistence researchers
(Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2008; Douglas, McClelland, Davies, & Sudbury, 2009; Vianden, 2015). Perhaps a large scale mixed design study may yield interesting information about the ways in which a high degree of ‘GRIT’ in students may mitigate challenges and influences their perspectives.

**Indigenous voices.** Finally, as UBC “continues to work toward enhancing experiences for Indigenous students (Tsukada, 2013), it is of utmost importance that researchers consider exploring what Indigenous students at UBC find to be helpful and the barriers they face, in addition to hearing their ideas or wishes for what might be improved in their first-year academic and life journey. This research must be undertaken in close partnership with, or in its entirety by, Aboriginal Student Affairs at the university as well as with Indigenous students and student researchers in order to be thoughtfully, appropriately, and meaningfully carried out and relevant.

**Recommendations for University Programming and Initiatives**

The following list of recommendations stem from the summary of findings and discussion for this study and are specific to UBC.

**Motivation, emotions and mindset.** Help Arts students feel a greater sense of purpose and value to their academic efforts by linking the Arts degree to worthwhile outcomes as well as supporting students to connect their university experience and studies to real work and personal development. Designing their degree with an understanding of themselves, their interests, and the world of work may positively influence motivation and positive mindsets.

**Behaviour and strategic action.** Normalize help-seeking as a feature of the successful student in natural student environments - such as in the classroom, in the cafeterias, and in study spaces. One of the students interviewed recommended a ‘booth’ in the Nest (the student union building and food court) where advisors and counsellors could sit and be at the ready to provide
information and advice. Another thought that more information about support options should be made available in lectures throughout the year at key stress points.

**Meta-cognition: awareness and knowledge.** Widen the reach of the SRL based tutoring offered by Access and Diversity to all Arts students. For example, embed SRL frameworks within peer coaching, advising approaches, and in class pedagogy thereby maximizing learning opportunities for all.

**Personal circumstances.** Beyond increasing financial aids or crisis counselling, there exists the opportunity for the university to train front line staff members such as Enrollment Services Professionals and Academic Advisors, often the staff that students see when struggling academically or financially, to support students by offering meaningful opportunities to reflect on difficult circumstances as per Washburn et. al.’s (2013) recommendations.

**Centralized first year specific support.** Consider offering easily accessible and easy to find first-year student support services by specific trained staff such as “residence advisors, academic advisors, and faculty, [who can] understand and monitor psychosocial adjustment difficulties, particularly in the first few months” (as per Conley et. al., 2014, p. 206).

**Classroom/program structure.** Given the ‘high impact’ of small cohort learning communities (Kuh et. al., 2006), it behooves the faculty of Arts to emphasise enrollment and consider offering more seats in these successful and healthy programs both as a student wellness initiative and first-to-second year retention strategy.

**Commuters.** In partnership with the AMS and faculty, explore ways to address the systemic inequities and limited involvement opportunities identified by the commuter students in this study.
First year residence criteria. Consider a first-year residence guideline that avoids housing first-year students in basements of buildings – it is common knowledge that a lack of natural light can impact mood and be a catalyst for prolonged low mood. It is also well known that the first-year transition is emotionally challenging (Kirsch, et. al., 2014). Placing new to UBC first-year students in basements or submerged first floors does not offer the best chance for first-year students to thrive.

Engagement and student belonging. There is an opportunity at UBC to consider ways to better engage first-year students to one another in the classroom - a “key site for enabling and promoting engagement” (Thomas, 2011, p. 49). The classroom is the most likely place to find like-minded peers taking the same course - it is also the place where students will heed the professors’ advice to keep trying to get involved and to try new things.

Diverse compassionate student leaders. Recruit for student leadership opportunities by encouraging students with well-developed empathy and personal understanding of academic struggle, the challenge in seeking help, and overcoming adversity in life and/or school.

Arts Pride. Rebrand and strengthen the Arts student identity to address student concerns of academic hierarchy at UBC that places Arts as lower than other faculties. Arts pride and recognition of the rigour of study in Arts and the worth of the degree is imperative if Arts students are to be helped to feel a sense of worth and belonging.

Orientation programming. Consider an extended Arts-specific orientation campaign partnering student leaders, faculty, and staff connecting and informing students throughout the first term encouraging resource use, promoting Arts identity and pride, fostering Arts-specific strategies for approaching academic tasks and “integrating the social and academic aspects” of the student’s university life. For example, throughout the term, upper year students might be
invited into lectures to share three-minute ‘struggle stories’ with eventual positive outcomes.

Alumni could visit classrooms and share their academic and career journeys.

**The University: Services, Policy, Process and Practice.** Offer training and incentives to front line staff to create climates of mattering in their waiting rooms, in their offices, in their interactions, and in their scheduled availability. For example, a centralized and standardized advisor training and education program potentially through the Center for Teaching and Learning could allow for high quality training and standards of advising practice across faculties and across advisors shifting the responsibility of high quality ethical interactions from the luck of the individual draw to an institutionally valued practice as Keeling (2014) suggests.

**Instructors.** The close attention to the classroom environment as a site of retention and student well-being may put significant pressure on instructors necessitating a concentrated effort to support instructors not only in their teaching but in their interactions with students. When complex student concerns are raised instructors have few resources to turn to reflect on how to best approach not only the student but their own reactions. Offer formal ways for first year faculty to consult and reflect on their experiences and practices with students. Develop communities of practice for instructors and teaching assistants that are reflective and supportive with the foundation of pedagogy and teaching at the core. The work of Dr. Butler and her team of researchers presents a framework from which this sort of support and community may be built.

**First Year Instructors.** Consider building a core team of first-year lecture professors in the Faculty of Arts (and not only in the first-year cohort programs) that are chosen because of their teaching skills and interest in engaging with first-year students. This is in line with the current UBC Strategic Plan that is committed to “its Educational Leadership Stream faculty,
whose sole university focus is education, is a bold statement of our intent, and these colleagues will play a pivotal role in achieving our goals [in transformative learning]” (2018).

**Family Influence.** Create explicit ways to help all parents support their emerging adults to navigate the first-year transition, for example through parent specific web information pages or publications. Strengthen partnerships with family members of younger members of the institution through family orientation events and on-going communications through the first year in particular. This partnership is particularly important for first-generation students.

**Proactive support.** Review demographic information prior to students’ arrival to campus and send subsequent invitations for planning and resources sharing meetings or group advising events to proactively engage and support, for example, the first-generation student.

**Peer Influence.** Acknowledge and leverage the power and positive influence of peers for supporting student wellness and academic persistence by creating ways to offer first-year students peer led workshops, peer coaching, and peer mentoring for Faculty of Arts students (as is available to Science students).

**Self-Regulated Learning.** While a full discussion of SRL and the potential strategies an institution might employ to foster SRL in students is beyond the scope of this document, it is recommended that the findings of this research provide an impetus to explore how students may be further supported by the university community early in their UBC journey and to become self-regulated learners in the first year and beyond to graduation.

**Implications for Counselling Psychology**

In 2016, UBC dedicated over two million dollars to increase mental health service options to students on campus. While this increase in resources to improve responsive mental health services is important and necessary, there remains the opportunity to offer proactive
approaches to enhancing student wellness at UBC. According to Robinson (2016), student wellness initiatives must be made available and accessible for all students: not only those willing to or able to seek out ‘help’. Given that the majority of students surveyed in Robinson’s study name academic stress as their highest concern and that the majority of students are unlikely to seek targeted support for a variety of reasons including a perceived lack of time and a reticence to ‘seek help’, there remains the opportunity to impact student wellness and academic skill and confidence development where students are most likely to be reached. Indeed, as discussed earlier, Washburn et. al.’s 2013 recommendations in, Post-secondary student mental health: A guide to a systemic approach illustrate how supporting student mental health requires not only responding through direct counselling to those who seek help, but rather through a proactive systems wide approach to promoting effective learning and greater coping, in part through reflection (2013). The commitment to fostering transformative learning in UBC students (UBC Strategic Plan, 2018) warrants promoting students’ self-awareness and perspective taking: Mezirow (1997) posits that in order to “facilitate transformative learning, educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions. Learners need practice in recognizing frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective” (p. 10). By creating the reflective climate that Washburn et. al. (2013) recommend and offering practice by fostering SRL in the classroom through instruction, in advising appointments through conversations and planning, and in peer coaching environments through peer to peer dialogue, students may have the chance to develop or improve their ability and interest to reflect on their academic and life experience. As students become more self-aware, shift their perspectives in helpful ways, and feel a greater sense of control in the
university context (Pintrich, 2004) they may be better able to be strategic and intentional in their academic planning and goal-oriented behaviour.

Dr. Butler (Personal communication, 2018) suggests that when students develop a sense of control and increased confidence in their capacity to intentionally plan for and succeed in their academic tasks, anxiety levels are reduced and self-efficacy increased. Focussing on the classroom as a site not only for content learning but also for promoting self-regulated learners and fostering SRL through student-focused advising appointments with trained advisors, could result in a more mentally resilient and adaptive student population capable of navigating through personal challenges and set-backs with greater creativity and agency. Finally, the concept and promotion of ‘mattering’, discussed at length in this report, has been recognised in the field of counselling psychology as an important concept for engaging clients in counselling interactions and generally to create a climate of care and the sense that a person is valued and appreciated (Amundson, 1998). Fostering people’s sense of mattering is effective at both individual and institutional levels.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This qualitative exploration of first-year student persistence contributes to the post-secondary persistence literature by illuminating the areas that twenty-three first-year students in the Faculty of Arts at UBC found to be most impactful to their academic experience and performance while offering students’ ideas about how the first-year Arts student experience might be enhanced. Through examining critical incidents identified by the student participants, categories emerged that illustrated how personal contexts, social influences, and experiences within and through the institution interact and impact their levels of motivation, emotions, mindset, metacognitive awareness, decisions and behaviours, and ultimately their academics and well-being. Findings suggest that students are facilitated or hindered cumulatively: With each interaction, accomplishment, self-appraisal, set-back and problem solved, their sense of being able to endure ebbs and flows as does their belief in themselves and in the value of persisting when it feels too difficult. The students interviewed demonstrated remarkable insight, maturity, personal responsibility, and commitment to their learning at the university and seemed to embody the UBC motto TUUM EST. It is typical to perceive this UBC motto as for the students and about the students... Tuum est - “It is up to you”: the student: It is up the student to make the most of their UBC experience. UBC “is theirs” within which to explore, discover, strive for ‘excellence’ and persist to graduation. However, there is an alternative or additional interpretation that can be made. Tuum est: “It is up to me”: the ‘institution’ to make the most of each interaction with every single student as ethically caring as I can, and to instill a feeling of mattering. And, “It is mine” - my responsibility to collectively share the task of ensuring that each student is best facilitated (not hindered) to accomplish their purpose at UBC - to learn.

Upon the conclusion of this study, of what facilitates and hinders student persistence, it
becomes clear that persistence is the result of, not the purpose of attending University. Learning is the purpose (Keeling, 2014). In each interview, students talked about their learning; inside or outside the classroom, about academic content or about themselves. They were clearly at UBC to learn - not to ‘persist’. Keeling (2014) observes that, “Learning and completion are not the same thing. Completion and graduation are possible without sufficient learning, and robust learning can occur without completion” (Keeling, 2014, p. 144). His comment inspires a paradigm shift in considering what constitutes “student success” in the Faculty of Arts at UBC. In the final analysis, “student learning drives student retention” (Tinto, 1999, p. 4). Creating a climate of mattering through an ethics of care in our faculty and beyond while equipping students with the ability to reflect on and be intentional in their learning and living may have the greatest impact on retention. Each staff member and faculty member at UBC has the responsibility to interact with each student each day as if they are the most important thing at the University - because indeed they are.

In conclusion, one of the student’s interviewed for this research study is given the last word as they beautifully illustrate Keeling’s point above and demonstrate from whom the institution has the most to learn:

"As much as I try to be confident and optimistic about myself, I try my best to encourage other people to do as well as they can and to live up to their potential... One of the things that I tried to do when I was making my mentality change in my first year, was to say to myself, ‘let’s just stay calm and let’s just see what happens and hope for the best. Continue to work hard, continue your dedication and commitment, continue to have that passion, and don’t think about the outcome’. That’s what I feel a lot of people struggle with. They look at the outcome as their number one priority. I just tried to tell myself that “the outcome is the most irrelevant part of what I’m doing right now”. But at the end of the day, things happen in a way where the outcome just turns out to be the way you want it because you stop thinking about it. And I think that’s kind of the advice I would give to my fellow peers, is that if you really want to achieve something or excel at something, maybe you should just focus on what’s in front of you right now and not what’s going to come later in the future. Just take things day by day, and you never know what will happen” (First-Year Faculty of Arts student, 2017)."
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Appendix A

Invitation Email

On March 21, 2017, a Faculty of Arts Dean’s office administrator sent a bulk email to all first-year students in the Faculty. (As per REB request, a letter of permission was written by the Faculty of Arts granting permission for this study to use the student information system to reach students:

From: "UBC" <ubc.systems@ubc.ca>
To: <First-year Student>
Sent: Tuesday, March 21, 2017 1:15:18 PM
Subject: Tell your first year story!

The Faculty of Arts is interested in how students experienced their first year at university. First year Arts students are invited to take part in a scheduled one-hour interview with a Masters in Counselling student researcher in April to provide their opinions and ideas and tell their first-year story.

The information provided will inform both the Master’s student Leah Marks’ thesis, and also help to broaden the Faculty’s understanding of what students see has worked well to support their academic experience and what does not help them in meeting their academic goals. Students’ participation and interview content will not be identifiable as an individual’s experience but will be included in a report and in aggregate data to the Faculty of Arts for their use to inform future programs or support initiatives. No identifiable student information will be included in the report or data - only the primary researcher and research assistants will have access to your interview information immediately following the interview for transcribing purposes. The interview recordings will be secured, and then destroyed at 5 years post-study as per the required research timelines stipulated.

If you choose to participate, we will thank you for your time with a $20.00 gift card for the UBC bookstore.

RSVP for more information about the study by emailing: artsci.persist@ubc.ca
We look forward to telling you more!

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Co-Investigator</th>
<th>Research Assistant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Norm Amundson</td>
<td>Leah Marks, Master of Arts Candidate</td>
<td>Allison Yang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational &amp; Counselling Psychology, and Special Education</td>
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<td>Faculty of Arts</td>
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<td>University of British Columbia</td>
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<td>University of British Columbia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research concerns: 604-822-6757</td>
<td>General inquiries: 604-827-4385</td>
<td><a href="mailto:artsci.persist@ubc.ca">artsci.persist@ubc.ca</a></td>
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</table>
Appendix B

Recruitment Poster

FIRST YEAR ARTS STUDENTS: IS THERE A STORY YOU WANT TO TELL?

A Master’s student in Counselling Psychology is interested in your first year experience of academics and life on campus! This is your chance to tell us what worked (and what didn't) in your first year, and contribute to the future first year experience.

We will thank you for your time with a UBC Bookstore gift card!

This study is being supervised by Dr. Norm Amundson with the UBC Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education department. Interviews will be lead by Leah Marks a Master’s level counselling psychology student and arts academic advisor.

Please contact us at: artsci.persist@ubc.ca for more information.

Placed in Faculty of Arts Advising office and bulletin boards outside the advising office and in the Student Union Building/Nest.
Appendix C

Additional Correspondence to interested students

The following email templates were approved as amendments by the UBC Board of Research Ethics

1) Request for contact information
2) Email confirmation of the interview date
3) Study is no longer recruiting (automatic reply)

C.1) Request for contact information

Hello [Student name],

Thank you for your interest in the study! We have received a large volume of responses, and so it may take a few days for us to get back to you with further information and instructions on scheduling an interview. In the meantime, if you could please reply with your student number, phone number, and the best time to reach you in the next few days, that would be helpful.

Thank you again for your interest!

Warm regards,
Leah Marks
Researcher/Master of Arts Candidate,
Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
ArtSci Persistence Project | Faculty of Arts | Faculty of Science
University of British Columbia
artsci.persist@ubc.ca

Allison Yang
Research Assistant
ArtSci Persistence Project | Faculty of Arts | Faculty of Science
University of British Columbia
artsci.persist@ubc.ca

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Norm Amundson
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia
604-822-6757

C.2) Interview confirmation

Hello [Student name],

Thank you for scheduling an interview to discuss your first-year academic experience.
This confirms your date and time: …
The interview will be conducted at UBC in the **Psychoeducational Research and Training Centre**, Suite 1100 Scarfe Building, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC. This is on the first floor on the North end of the building.
Here are a few details about the study that we discussed on the phone.
**Study Procedures:** Given your signed consent on the day of the interview, you will:
1. Participate in a 60-minute audio-recorded meeting in person with a trained researcher-advisor who will discuss your experience of first year academics with you. The interview will include open-ended questions about your first year, the collection of demographic information, and the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. We will provide you with a $20.00 gift card for the UBC bookstore to thank you for your participation.
2. We will contact you two weeks to one month following your meeting in a scheduled phone or skype mini interview to check the interview content.
**Consent:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.
**Purpose:** to hear student stories of their first year including aspects they perceive as most affecting their academic performance at the University of British Columbia in the Faculty of Arts program and to collect relevant demographic information. Following individual interviews, a report will summarize the comments and themes highlighted by students as a group. This summarized information provided to the Faculty of Arts may inform future programs and initiatives for supporting first-year students academically. The researcher will also submit the final report to the department of Educational & Counselling Psychology toward the completion of her Masters of Arts Thesis in Counselling Psychology. The report may also provide information for professional publications or conferences in the field of Higher Education.
Contact: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Leah Marks at 604-827-4385 or at artsici.persist@ubc.ca.
If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.
Thanks again,
Leah
Co-Investigator
Leah Marks, Master of Arts Candidate
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia
827-4385

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Norm Amundson
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia
604-822-6757

C.3) Study is no longer recruiting
Dear Arts Students,
Thank you for your interest in the first-year academic experience and performance study! We have completed recruiting for the study at this time and are in the process of contacting students by phone and email.
If you need to discuss academic concerns we encourage you to make an appointment with an academic advisor in your faculty.
If you want to hear about more supports and resources on campus- you may find it helpful to visit the wellness centre in Irving K Barber room 183. You can find more information here: https://students.ubc.ca/health-wellness/peer-support-wellness-centre
We appreciate your willingness to participate and wish you well for your final exams.
Warm regards,
Leah Marks
Researcher/Master of Arts Candidate,
Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
ArtSci Persistence Project | Faculty of Arts | Faculty of Science
University of British Columbia
artsci.persist@ubc.ca

Allison Yang
Research Assistant
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Principal Investigator:
Dr. Norm Amundson
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia
604-822-6757
Appendix D

Letter Provided to Research Ethic Board

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Faculty of Arts
Arts Academic Advising
1866 Main Mall
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z1
Tel: (604) 822-4028
Fax: (604) 822-4923

February 22, 2017

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Re: Leah Marks, Master’s Candidate
Education and Counselling Psychology and Special Education (ECPS)
University of British Columbia

Leah Marks is employed as an Academic Advisor in the Faculty of Arts Academic Advising
Office. This year she has been seconded by the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Arts to
conduct research regarding reasons Arts and Science students succeed and fail in their first year
of studies at UBC. Leah was offered this research position because the goals of the project are in
line with Leah’s existing research interests.

The Faculty of Arts has encouraged Leah to conduct her Master’s research as a part of the larger
Faculty of Arts and Science Master’s research project. She has permission to use the data
collected through interviews with Arts students for her Masters Thesis. The data collected from
Science students, although not a part of her research, will be used to compare Arts and Science
student concerns to inform programming.

This research project will be used to formulate a paradigm by which we evaluate current
programming for students at-risk and by which we develop new programming. We anticipate the
project will result in a TLEF grant proposal co-sponsored by the Faculties of Arts, Science, and
possibly Education.

This research requires using the SISC to gather student information as well as to contact them.
As the Director of Arts Academic Advising, I can attest she has permission to take these actions
as part of her role and as stated above may use the interview data collected with Faculty of Arts
students for her ECPS Master’s Thesis.

If you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Susanne Goodison, Director
Faculty of Arts Academic Advising Office
University Of British Columbia
Appendix E

Phone Interview Script

1. If candidate does not answer leave a message:

“Hi _________ (their name). You replied to our invitation to participate in our research study with first-year students. This is ___________ (Researcher name). I am calling you today to invite you to participate as a volunteer in a research project being conducted as part of a Master’s thesis with permission by the Faculty of Arts and The Faculty of Science. The researcher is studying at UBC in the Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education Program. You may recognize her name as she works as an academic advisor in the arts advising office. This research is part of her master’s work and of interest to the Faculty of Arts. If you are interested in hearing more about the study and your potential participation, please contact me at 604-827-4385 Monday to Friday 8:30 to 5 pm”.

2. If candidate does answer:

Hi _________ (their name). This is ___________ (researcher’s name) from the UBC Faculty of Arts. You replied to our invitation to participate in our research study with first-year students. I am calling you today to invite you to participate as a volunteer in a research project being conducted as part of a Master’s thesis with permission by the Faculty of Arts and The Faculty of Science. The researcher is studying at UBC in the Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education Program. You may recognize her name as she works as an academic advisor in the arts advising office. This research is part of her master’s work and of interest to the Faculty of Arts. Are you interested in hearing more? Is this a good time for you to be on the phone for about 5 minutes?

(If NO, then let them know how to contact researcher if they change their mind or when a better time is to call).

3. If they are interested in more information:

Yes? Great! This project is called the First Year Academic Experience and Performance Study. This research project has been approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board as a Master’s level thesis that has been funded by the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science. The researcher is a Master’s student being supervised by Dr. Norm Amundson from the Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education Program at UBC. The researcher is also an academic advisor in the arts advising office. This research is part of her master’s work and of interest to the Faculty of Arts.

We are interested in giving first-year students the opportunity to talk about their experience of their first year of academics at UBC. We want to give you the chance to talk about your year and academic results. This is a meeting to share your academic experience and any other events that you believe impacted your academic results and experience.
The purpose of the study is to hear your story and understand what you found helpful and hindering in meeting your academic goals and simply to listen to you.

Before I continue do you have any questions?

...answer questions about the study- if a question is asked about the policies or appeal (if the student has failed their year) I will promise to get back to the student regarding these questions after we schedule our meetings and I provide the remaining information of the details.

Details:
If you decide to participate here is what you will be agreeing to do:

1. Interview: You will schedule and participate in a 30 to 60-minute interview with a FYAEPS researcher. The questions you will be asked will be partly open ended to allow you the freedom to share your information, your feelings, and your impressions based on what you believe is important to your story of your first year.

2. Checking: After the interview you will receive an email or phone call (depending on your preference) and a summary of your interview will be shared including what you identified as most critical to your academic experience and performance. At that time, you can feel free to correct any mistaken points or details.

3. Thanks: To thank you for your participation you will be provided with a $20.00 gift card following the interview.

Now that you know about what is involved in the study do you have any other questions?

Answer all questions...

Thank you for your honesty in answering these questions.

Do you have any questions for me?

Answer all questions...

Invite student to participate

A): If student says no

If student chooses not to participate: “I appreciate your time today and I am glad that you are doing what you want and saying no to participating. I welcome you to get in touch with me if you change your mind.

B) If student says yes

Would you like to be included in the study?

I. Yes: Great! Thank you for agreeing to participate. I will send you an email right away with all the information we just discussed and options for a meeting time with an advisor researcher-
Please choose a time that is best for your schedule and provide contact information. If there is not a convenient time on the email, please let me know the best time for you to meet- we can also set up a chat meeting time now if you prefer.

Notes

Spoke to candidate and needs a Call back: ☐
Left a message- call candidate back: ☐

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phone number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
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</table>

Complete the following information or circle the answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would like to participate</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Reason provided</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Reason provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice of meeting</td>
<td>In person</td>
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<td>Best days for the meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Times available</td>
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</table>
Appendix F

Research Participant Consent Form

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Norm Amundson
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education University of British Columbia
604-822-6757

Co-Investigator
Leah Marks, Master of Arts Candidate
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education University of British Columbia
827-4385

Purpose:
The purpose of this research is to hear student stories of their first year including aspects they perceive as most impacting their academic performance at the University of British Columbia in the Faculty of Arts (or Science) Program.

Study Procedures:
Given consent, you will:
1. Participate in a 60 to 90-minute audio-recorded meeting in person with a trained researcher-advisor who will discuss your experience of first year academics with you.
2. Two weeks to one month following your meeting you will be contacted in a schedule phone or skype mini interview to check the interview content.

Confidentiality:
You will have the option of making any or all parts of your interview confidential. If you choose to have any of your comments kept confidential, you may request that any recording devices be switched off while these comments are made. Comments made in confidentiality will not be shared with other researchers. In addition, your participation is confidential. There will not be identifying information linking you to the interview or questionnaires. Your interview will be numbered as per your place in the study. 1-20

Contact:
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Leah Marks at 604-827-4385 or at leah.marks@ubc.ca. If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information line in the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

__________________         ___________________________                   ______________________
Participant’s Signature         Participant’s name (please print)         Date
Appendix G

ECIT Interview Framework

The following open-ended ECIT script is meant to provide a framework for the interview.

The interviewer will have been trained to respond within the framework of ECIT with empathy and authenticity. Interview approach and content will include set questions (see below), active listening (verbal and non-verbal encouraging) to encourage the student to share, restating and reflecting back to the participant what they have said (or the researcher’s understanding of what they have said), summarizing the participant’s story for clarification, and finally confirming helpful and hindering factors and wish list items mentioned by the student.

Part One Introduction:
Thank you for coming in today and being a part of this study. As I said on the phone, this project is called the First Year Academic Experience and Performance Study and it is a research project that has been approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board and is funded by the Faculty of Arts and faculty of Science. I am a Master’s in Counselling Psychology student in the at UBC as well as an arts academic advisor and research coordinator.

The purpose of this study is to give first-year students in Arts and Science the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their first-year experience here at UBC and to find out what students see as most important in helping them meet their academic goals. I want to give you the chance to talk about not only what you have found helpful but also what you see as a barrier to your academic performance this year.

Do you have any questions?

Consent:
Before we begin I would like to remind you that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Here is the consent form for you to complete and sign to before we begin- this is the same form that you received by mail. Your signature indicates that you understand the purpose of this study, your rights as a participant- including withdrawing at any time, the boundaries and limits of confidentiality, and that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records and that we have discussed and you understand the content. Your signature also indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Do you feel ready to begin the interview?

Questions/protocol as per ECIT:

1. Contextual background
   - Collect demographic information- see Appendix A and carefully review consent- see Appendix B
- Initial questions and comments to establish the context of the interview: “We are here today to talk about your academic experiences as a first year Arts student; After we cover some basic information about you and your program, I’d like to hear about what it was like for you to begin university in September through what it is like for you now; what do you feel worked well for you in your first year and what you feel did not work and what you might wish for if given the chance- in other words, if you could change/add/or remove something about your experience, resources, decisions what that would be”.

- Though a conversational style, complete demographic information and ask about where they are at now in the program (number of credits, favourite course, present interests), at a natural point ask student to talk in a general way about their year for context, then ask about facilitative aspects to begin research content portion of the interview.

2. Content

- Collect information related to helping and hindering incidents remembered by the student:
  
  o Can you tell me about what you thought worked well for you this year as a student: Prompts may include: “times over this first academic year you felt supported, encouraged, accomplished- when your academic goals were facilitated? Please provide details about the people involved, situations, events, remembered feelings and thoughts, and any details related to what you feel helped you.
  
  o Can you tell me about what you thought got in the way for you this year as a student: Prompts may include: “times over this first academic year you did not feel supported, encouraged, accomplished- when you felt barriers in the way of your academic goals? These could be internal barriers or external barriers. Please provide as much detail as you can remember about these times.

3. Exploring a Wish list

- In order to explore options for student support and improved academic conditions, wish list items will be collected as per ECIT: What might have
helped you in those times you just described? What do you wish had been available or in place for you this year? If given the chance to change anything over the year what would you wish to change?

4. Summary

- Interviewer will summarize helpful and hindering aspects identified and wish list items: Now, I would like to summarize what I heard you say and you let me know if I have it right; I heard you say…

Additional questions

In addition to the typical areas of inquiry in ECIT, this study will include final questions regarding the students’ current affect to enrich the information gathered and for potential future studies: Has this interview been helpful for you? How hopeful do you feel right now? (May be open ended or prompt with… 1 not at all hopeful, 2 not very hopeful, 3 a little hopeful, 4 very hopeful)

- Check/Collect Demographic data as outlined in Appendix A
- Confirm phone number, email address, and best way to reach student for credibility check
- Ask if student has any questions before ending the interview.
Appendix H

Demographic Information

(Collected at the end of the interview and saved in an encrypted file only)

Date of Interview:____________________________

Participant #:_________________________________

Course structure: Cohort: Arts One, CAP, or Custom timetable

Full time or part time studies

Commute to classes:

Transit, car, or walking

Length of commute 1-10 min, 11 to 20, 21 to 30, 31 to 45, 46 to 59, 60 to 89, 90 to 120 minutes, over 2 hours.

Age: ______

High school location: city, province, country: _______________________________________

Were you in High School last year? Yes / no

If not, what did you do during your Gap year (s)?

______________________________________________________________________________

Gender identification: ______________________

Race identification: ________________________

Cultural heritage (s): ______________________

First Language:________________________

Country of Birth: ________________________

Student designation: International, Domestic, Permanent resident

First generation student: yes   no

Current Employment:_____________________________________________

Financial details: Loans, scholarship, band funding/parent/family help, self-funded

**********************************************************************

Interview timing: From_____to_________

Recording Checked: yes   no   Issues? _________________________________

Interviewer’s Name: ______________________
Appendix I

Sample Follow up Email for Cross Checking

Adapted from Butterfield et. al. (2009)

Dear [Student’s preferred name],
I hope you are doing well!

Thank you for participating in the ArtSci Persistence Project interviews at the end of your first year! I so enjoyed meeting with you and reviewing your first-year experience last.

As promised, I am contacting you to check the information we heard you offer in your interview. Please find below a summary list of the helping, hindering, and wish list factors that we noted from YOUR interview. I would like to ensure that the lists in the chart below reflect what you discussed in your interview as most important to your first-year experience.

Also, I would like to know that the categories we created make sense to you (a detailed explanation of each category is pasted below your summary chart should you want to read a more detailed description of the categories).

Your feedback can be as simple or as detailed as you would like. If you do not have any changes you want made just reply with a brief sentence (like “all good”) and I will summarize this information as is (remember that the information is in a general form and will not identify you in any way).

Or if you want changes made, let me know (please add/remove the following...) and your interview points will be revised to reflect your individual experience (generally) within the overall summary report.

Please reply to share your thoughts on the information provided here and/or to discuss any questions or concerns you may have.

As you read the summarized list please note the following:
1. Are the helping, hindering, wish list items correct as you remember talking about them?
2. Is there anything missing or that you want revised?
3. Is there anything else that should be added to provide a more accurate or detailed description of your experience?

Your experiences are placed into categories that were common to several other participant interviews. Please review these categories (left side of the chart) and comment on the following:
1. Do the category headings make sense to you?
2. Does the category capture your experience and the meaning that the factor had for you?
3. Are there any categories that do not appear to fit the factors you identified?
YOUR INTERVIEW is summarized in the chart below - please read all sections to be sure we have represented the most important factors you believe influenced your first-year academic experience and performance. Thank you!!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Helping Factors (what helped me succeed academically and improved my experience in my first year)</th>
<th>Hindering Factors (what got in the way academically and negatively impacted my experience in my first year)</th>
<th>Wish List Items (What I wish was available or I did differently in my first year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour/Strategic Action</td>
<td>(including asking for help, decision to use academic resources or support services, choice of program, reduced course load, scheduling, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognition &amp; Metacognition</td>
<td>(includes reflections on and awareness of personal learning style, skills, and ideas about how to learn)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion &amp; Motivation</td>
<td>(includes Mindset &amp; Attitudes, comments on feelings and moods, and comments about motivation for academics)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Circumstances</td>
<td>including: Physical &amp; mental Health/adjustment Issues &amp; personal challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom/program structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence of Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>(Faculty members and Teaching Assistants’)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
approach to teaching and evaluation, accessibility for help etc.)

Living arrangements (includes commuting or living in residence)

Orientation Programming (includes comments about Jump Strat, Imagine day, and Destination UBC)

Extra-curricular Engagement and sense of Belonging on campus (Includes comments about extra-curricular involvement and overall feelings of being a part of the university campus experience)

The University (incidences related to the environment, policies, process and services)

All the best,
Leah Marks

Principal Investigator
Dr. Norm Amundson
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
University of British Columbia
Research concerns: 604-822-6757

Co-Investigator
Leah Marks, Master of Arts Candidate
Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
Education
University of British Columbia
604-827-4385

Categories Defined
The student persistence research indicates that both Internal and external Factors influence university students’ academic performance and experience. The internal categories have been selected and organized through the dimensions of a socio-constructivist model of Self-Regulated Learning that acknowledges Individual learners navigate contexts as they are learning and living (Butler et. al, 2017): University students bring to their academic learning experience; life experiences, individual strengths and challenges and varying degrees of meta-cognition, levels of knowledge, and personal beliefs and attitudes about academics and their learning specifically.
The internal categories were created through student comments about their learning experience and external categories emerged through student comments about their learning and living experience: Both reflect the SRL contextualized way of viewing learners as influenced by a dynamic interplay of internal and external factors both within and outside their control.

**Personal Context**
The following categories reflect aspects students bring to their university experience and are organized through a Self-Regulated Learning lens:

1. Behaviour and Strategic Action:
   This category reflects the actions students take to cope with and take control of the realities in their learning life. “Interpreting tasks, setting goals, planning, enacting strategies, monitoring, and adjusting” (Butler, 2017) are behaviours students reflected on as influencing their academic performance and experience. This section includes help-seeking and academic resource use, choice of program and scheduling, reducing course load, choice to engage in university life, management of their environment (such as choice of study habits and locations) and routines and rituals developed to maximize their academic success, wellness, and personal satisfaction. (Note: Program/schedule change/or environment comments were included here only when students identified these factors as a conscious choice they made/or did not make but wished they had)

2. Cognition & Metacognition or ‘Learning strengths & needs’:
   Included in this category are students’ reflections and comments related to their awareness of personal learning styles and skills, their ideas about how to learn, and understandings of options available to them for learning.

3. Emotion & Motivation:
   This category includes factors related to mindset & attitudes that impact and reflect motivation. Student statements regarding purpose, attention to grades, and attitudes toward various opportunities and academic challenges and life realities, including the weather, campus life, and chosen goals and focus are present in this category as are statements reflecting their attitudes toward their personal strengths and weaknesses. “Individuals’ willingness to invest & engage in activities”, as well as their “affective responses when engaged in or presented with a task” (Butler, 2017) are reflected in this category.

4. Personal circumstances:
The above categories reflect what the student brings psychologically and behaviourally to their academic learning and life at university. The following category acknowledges the psycho-social and systemic realities and unexpected circumstances that arise for students as they navigate through their first year. Personal circumstances and factors related to physical and mental health, readiness for university, adjustment concerns, financial and socio-political privilege and challenges are included in this section.

**External Factors**
Persistence research is replete with the many ways that a university living and learning environment and offered services can positively or negatively influence a student’s academic
performance and overall experience. This section of categories includes the helping or hindering incidents and wish list items that students identified related to the university’s offerings.

5. Classroom/program structure:
Students named the classroom environment and style of teaching as critical to their learning and interest to engage with the course material as well as to their overall experience as a university learner. Incidents included here are those that reflect the students’ critical experiences in the classroom and as a student in their Faculty that they felt impacted their academic performance and experience as a first-year Faculty of Arts student.

6. Influence of Family
This category highlights how family members are perceived by first-year students as supporting or hindering them in their academic goal striving and overall quality of university life.

7. Influence of Peers
Student comments regarding the facilitative or hindering influence of peers was included in this category. Unlike ‘student belonging’ (often described as an overall general feeling or sense), peer influence incidences were those where other students specifically helped or hindered a student in their striving toward academic goals or experience of learning.

8. Instruction:
In this category, incidents related to the student’s experience of their instruction within and outside classrooms are included. Faculty members and Teaching assistants are mentioned in this section as it became clear that often students were not aware if their instructor was a ‘full professor’ or Graduate student. In addition, these two instructor types were merged to reflect that both Professors and Teaching Assistants were named by students as positively or negatively influencing the students’ academic performance and experience.

9. Living arrangements (includes commuting or living in residence):
Critical Incidents in this section are those related to the student’s residence. Some students lived on campus in UBC first-year residence. Others commuted from homes outside the university. Students living in both environments noted that their academics and overall first-year experiences were impacted by barriers and facilitative aspects based on where they lived. Commuting students also noted incidents related to their access to/use of Collegia, the on-campus ‘home’ for commuting students.

10. Orientation programming (Jump Start & Imagine Day):
UBC offers all students, including Faculty of Arts students orientation programming: “Jump Start” a fee for service, resident based two-week program for new International students offered prior to the beginning of the first term classes and “Imagine day” a one-day orientation event for all students the day after Labour Day. The critical incidents and wish list items included in this category are those that students indicated UBC orientation offerings as critical to their first-year experience in some way. Almost all critical incidents in this section were related to making (or not making) connections with peers.
Appendix J

Samples of Student Participant Quotes

(F) “I think at the end of the day I figured there was possibility of actually achieving what I want and thought, it’s on yourself and no matter how much resources the university gives you, it is I who decides whether to use them or not or to actually do something with the resources, with my time, so that’s something”.

(F) “In one of our classes we interviewed an alumni who graduated in 2002, and it kind of gave perspective on the whole you don’t need to know what you want to do yet, and you can just relax and try things a bit more, and be more open, and like it’s not that scary as you think it is, and I think hearing it from their perspective, that’s like a good thing to have, because then it puts what you’re doing into perspective because then you’re like I don’t need to know yet cuz they didn’t know and they’re fine now.”

(F) “I do try to set goals for myself, like no more than skipping 2 classes per course a semester, that’s what I try to tell myself. That way I can really strategize what days I allow myself to not go to class. I don’t want to be the kind of student to skip class, so I think originally, I just wanted that goal for myself to be one class to be able to skip one class a course per term, and I overstepped that once, and told myself but no more. So, I kind of made that my de facto rule”.

(F) “Although I always thought I was independent, I never had the chance to really see it because I was always with my parents. I think this is the one time where I was able to actually prove myself that I could do things alone and ask for help when I am in trouble. That’s part of being independent. So yeah I’m proud of myself for that”.

(F) Especially living alone, self-discipline comes in to play, especially in your own room where there’s no one looking at you, asking what you’re doing. Self-discipline is …putting a timer on Facebook which then it will ban you, from certain websites after set amount of time. That helps”.

(F) “I remember how I met one of my first friends here, and it was the second day of school. We had, there was like a Totem football league thing that you could go and play football for the day, and I don’t play and I don’t know how to play, but I was like this could be fun. So, I was going to go, but then I had to go alone because it was during the day, and no one I had talked to the day before wanted to go, because they weren’t into sports and stuff, and so I was like, no I’m just going to go on my own. And I saw this one girl on the way out and I was like, are you going? And she said yeah, and I said oh my god can I go with you? And so I went with her and then I ended up meeting someone else on our floor, and then we’re best friends now, and there were only 4 girls there but it worked out really well, and because we were friends, I met another one of her friends, and so it really paid off going, even when I was really nervous to go to begin with because I didn’t know what I was doing, and I had to go by myself, and I had to go outside and look like an idiot for a few hours.”
“I’m just going to make sure that I finish all the work before I game, and I think if I do that, it would not drag my grades down because I did all the assignments. I would wait for my friends if they are free, then I will game for an hour or two. But if they’re not free, then I’ll just do other things like reading”.

“I was shocked (by my grade) but then being the person that I am, I don’t really want to keep that dragging me behind. I want to be ahead, and do what’s best for myself, so I decided to listen to the TA and try out the writing center, which is how I found out more about the writing centre. And that really helped me”.

“sometimes I’ll deconstruct things into manageable parts, think about them that way to reduce my stress load. I know sometimes when I really need to get things done, I’ll pack up and head to this library actually, downstairs there’s some really nice studying areas, so I’ll sit at a desk and force myself to be there for a couple of hours and just do whatever it is that I need to do, and really concentrate”.

“Both of my parents graduated from UBC actually, so before I even went to UBC, they tried to help me with selecting courses and things like that, but things have changed since then. That was pretty helpful I guess. I think they kind of have a sense of empathy almost... I have this friend where her parents don’t have university degrees and she tells me stories about how they’re ‘not empathetic’ and harsh towards her, so I think that definitely my parents’ experience has positively helped support me”.

“a lot of Arts students have discussion courses instead of labs, and that’s where we actually dig into the class materials and put in our own interpretation and I think that’s really important, discussing class materials, because that’s where you actually get your ideas for your essays, for your exams, and that’s how you become, how you reach that higher level of understanding and skill”.

“last term, I made some friends in my discussion group for POLI 100. So that was nice. And it’s good because then you can meet people – it’s not as intimidating as 150 people where you’re like who do I speak to? It also sort of ties in everything with what we’ve learned”.

“Definitely I felt a lot of stress this year with things like big projects and essays and things like that. For example, in my Japanese class this year, we had to prepare for this oral examination, that involved us speaking for 5 minutes in Japanese, so that was a very tough assessment that I had to prepare lots for. It kind of stressed me out...in the Anime club, there were two other people taking the same class as me, and we kind of coordinated together...we practiced all the given scenarios with each other and I think we did that together over the course of a week continuously and regularly. That really helped”.

“and the realization that you can actually not do well in a course and that people are working very very hard next door or in the library pushed me to actually study harder.”
People are putting in more effort than you are and they deserve the grade that they get because of the efforts.

(F) “I really like how people do not only focus on their GPA here... they do not talk about exam skills that much, or how to get a higher grade. They actually talk about what they want to learn and talk to the professors and what they actually think, rather than this is going to be on the exam, this will be on here, so I like that a lot”.

(F) “It was actually a lot of my friends that got me through it because we don’t really study together, we just hang out and didn’t understand something that was new, I could just ask questions. I feel more comfortable asking my friends for questions I guess rather than the professor, because part of me feels like I would just be bothering them with small things but I do ask in class and things like that, but yeah I ask my friends a lot”.

(F) “after the first term ended within our friends, we make a bet. The one with the lowest grade in second term would pay for dinner for the whole group, so it’s like a big encourage to actually get better grades and I’m actually not in the bottom now. It’s good for academics and it’s actually fun, to compare our grades every week. Every weekend when we meet, we calculate our most recent grades, so we can keep up and see who needs to work harder, and the ranking would change”.

(F) “...my RA was also very helpful. Just being able to vent to her and just even if I was dropping by to pick up a vacuum to clean my room, we could have really meaningful conversations, and she could offer me some really cool advice just in general about university life”.

(F) “one more thing which is definitely positive, is the diversity of UBC students, especially in the first few months, was pretty amazing to be exposed to people everywhere, just pretty eye opening, and again, great connections for later in life. It was great. I mean, UBC attracts students from a lot of different places, so it was really cool to be exposed to many of them and make so many friends who are from these bizarre places, which was really awesome”.

(F) “...And in Vancouver, the weather is similar as back in Hong Kong. So, I chose this (UBC) ...the campus is nice. Yeah, it [the environment] actually makes me want to do work instead of just staying in my room and doing nothing”.

(F) “I emailed them (professor and TA) and told them I got chicken pox and (I couldn’t go to class) and my ECON professor said maybe I can stop by before the finals and he can give me all the important notes I missed in class. It’s really nice of them”.

(F) “she’s one of the professors that learned people’s names, ...if you spoke in class the first two weeks, she knew your name and she’d call people’s names - She was strict, like ‘I’m strict but I’m strict for a reason, so if you have a good reason for something, then I’ll hear you out’ kind of thing. She had this rule where if you don’t like your grade on a paper, then you can come back and say you want a better grade, but you need a write on
a piece of paper to be like, ‘I’m serious about wanting to change this...’, she was quite straightforward.

(F) “joining clubs makes me know people not only in first-year but also people who are in upper years, and I think they’re more experienced in UBC and if I have any questions I can just ask them”.

(F) “the Jump Start program helped a lot because they put you and the people in the same program together, so you get to know them better before the year starts and I think JS helped me to make most of my friends in the year actually because I still keep in touch with them even though we’re in different faculty”.

(F) “All the clubs tables on imagine day [helped transition] Everyone was so friendly!”

(F/H) “I was shocked when I received my first grade in university, I think it was an Arts Studies paper. I received a 73%, and I’m a 90% or something around there student in high school, so when I saw that I was like this is terrible, what has happened to me? That was really shocking but I kind of got over it by realizing that when I kind of saw the grading scale, scheme, so like an A is yeah it was just totally different from what I was used to so I think in terms of academics it was a bit hard to adjust, but once I realized even though I’m putting, it came to the point where I even was proud of an 82% I got on a paper at the end of the year...I guess it was an understanding that it wasn’t specifically me that was performing poorly, but that my environment had changed sort of, so it was easier to get away with writing a paper the night before in high school ... learning to manage my time better too has helped a lot”.

(H) “...whereas classes like PSYC 101 and stuff, it was like we were being taught with a screen or something. Like we didn’t exist as students, and he was just speaking to the air and I didn’t like that about it. No one had a name, no one had an opinion or anything, so it just felt like a distant kind of teaching... I think I put off PSYC assignments more than the other ones... like I’m more interested to do and to finish the POLI one that you hand in to your TA, and you know they’re going to read it, whereas the PSYC one, you just upload it online, you don’t know who’s looking at it, and then you just get a letter back. So, it’s been kind of difficult because I don’t want to choose my major (Psychology) based on this teaching I guess. But so far, PSYC has been disappointing for me”.

(H) “Right now, I only prioritize school...I feel I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well, and the grades aren’t really showing anyways, so maybe I should take a step back and chill a bit”.

(H) “as much as I found interest in, I wasn’t engaged enough to completely apply myself... I just disconnected myself from everything else. So, I did fine but when I got my results I was quite disappointed. I just needed the willpower to force myself to (apply myself)”.
“JS seems to be so varied by the prof that you’re assigned to. I mean, other courses like the Engineering groups, they built little boats and raced them competitively and some groups had long discussions about UBC resources and how to go about taking a course and how to access resources online and where to go if you need assistance. We didn’t do any of that during JS. It was dependent on the professor. And that was really frustrating because the whole point of JS is to get you used to, acclimatized to UBC as an international student.”

“so, the loneliness really, really, really sucked. That kind of prevented me from doing better in semester one...I never had a friend group...On Imagine day, my initial thought was that I’d meet my group and be like hey how’s it going, but when I came in, they were all international students, they were all from their dorms, and they really did not want to talk to you. But I don’t blame them but they did not want to interact because they already had the tour on some other day (in JS)”.

“It’s like sad, even when I meet Arts students, when they say their major, they just...they’re like, they make a joke, just aware of it. In high school I would do the same thing, I would make fun of it but I’m in it [Arts] now so I stopped, now I’m not going to say anything about any Faculty but the hate is real. There’s no pride. I at least wish people in arts would be like mad about I don’t get it, I’m in arts, I can have it equally as hard as you, or something but they will make jokes about it too. People lack a lot of backbone, and I really felt like what I felt was really bad for that girl who actually got bullied in university. I didn’t expect to happen because this is not high school, there’s no social hierarchy or anything but I actually got mad at her, like why didn’t you stand up, you should’ve said this to their face”.

“Residence has just been a bit of a struggle to be quite honest with you, not because I don’t like my floor mates, I like a lot of the friends there. It’s just the atmosphere that I’ve noticed in a lot of these residences. Many kids my age like to party a lot... It’s really not my thing to be quite honest with you. I’m kind of an introverted person when it comes to dealing with people and interacting with them. I mean I can get along with friends, but at the same time, I also value my own personal privacy, and so when I hear people really loud at like 2am in the morning, it kind of gets a bit disturbing, and it’s just that negative atmosphere”.

“I think what also was a barrier to me was I actually took a lot of classes that weren’t filled with first years, like I took CONS 200 class, JAPN 320, and a FNEL 282 class, so I took courses maybe obscure to first-year students, not a lot of them were in it. So, I think it’s probably easier to make friends in first year courses because you’re all in the same level, and you’re all anxious and new to university, so I think that was probably also a bit of a barrier”.

“I come from a very different education system. I mean back home, just a bit of background, all you have to do is really just memorize stuff, and it’s really – not very flexible, just one answer, and you give the answer, and then you do really well and that’s
it... it’s just that I worked really hard, but then the grades aren’t really showing that, it’s not like fantastic, so I guess I was a little disappointed”.

(H) “In university everyone wants their own space and they want to have their own freedom and not be told what to do. But, at the same time, because they’ve been told what to do for so much of their lives, especially in education, you’re like spoon fed until you’re 18 and then it’s like, ‘okay do what you want’, and you’re like ‘oh I don’t know what I want, I don’t know how to do it’”.

(H) “Ran out meal plan dollars, lost my debit card, and tried to live on $15/week on groceries - worked as a referee but snow cancelled games so, no pay for weeks- lots of the focus went on trying to get food”.

(H) “...it [‘bad grades’] comes from since first term, hanging out around too much, and I feel like I waste all my time, doing like, when I reflect back, I don’t know what I did. Yeah, like time flies... every time I was just thinking oh I can just do it tomorrow. That kind of like tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, until the final day, and it’s like I have no idea what’s going on...Yeah, it comes back to life style and life schedule and stuff”.

(W) “Should have written down goals when I had the motivation, and looked at them at points throughout year when I wanted more clarity, more structure, purpose... like to know ‘what is the point of it all’”

(W) “Should allow students to cook (their own meals). For first-year students, for second, third and fourth years you get to go on the residences that have their own kitchens. I don’t understand why we can’t. I feel like it should be a choice”.

(W) “It’d be nice to have more first-year events, and also, events only happening in the evening are hard to go to because of commuting in dark, so (wish for) somethings planned at reasonable time...I maybe would have met more people if I could have gone to meet ups”.

(W) “I would’ve registered with A&D earlier for help with my chronic back problem”.

(W) “I wish that I would be able to balance school and social life a lot better”

(W) “UBC should recognize that people will have issues with the size of the school”.

In closing…Tips from and for a first-year student:

“take term 1 to figure out how to adjust to university, get agenda to help organize, try any course you have even a mild interest in, talk to pros -everyone wants to talk to you as long as you reach out to them- be persistent in communicating, don’t take 5 courses in first term, 4 courses is a good number, everyone should go at their own pace.”