

Fall Reading Break Research

Towards a Mental Health Perspective

Written by Ashley Thorup





Over that past few years, there has been an evident shift in the way that academic institutions view their role and responsibility in respect to mental health; a large majority of universities have since taken proactive steps in an attempt to repair the systems in place and combat stigma. McGill University's recent inauguration of its new Rossy Student Wellness Hub is just one example: the consolidation of the Health Clinic, Counselling Services, and Psychiatric Services aims to increase the accessibility of these supports to students and generate awareness within the community. Even with the implementation of such mental health initiatives, the current figures on mental health demonstrate a need for change at the institutional level. In the 2016 National College Health Association (NCHA) report, an average of 89.5% of 43,000 surveyed students felt overwhelmed by their daily tasks and 64.5% experienced overwhelming anxiety.¹ In the SSMU Fall 2018 survey, 83% of respondents "strongly agreed" that a Fall Reading Break would allow them to focus on their mental health. The correlation between the student populations' feelings of stress and anxiety and their strong desire for a Fall Reading Break has captured the attention of several other U15 schools that now enforce a week-long reading break during the fall term.

Given the concern that stress levels for students rise in the middle of the term, it stands to reason that a Fall Reading Break is a favorable initiative to promote good mental health; however, there is exiguous scholarly discourse on the positive mental health effects of a Fall Reading Break. This is, of course, partly due to the relatively new integration of several extended reading breaks at Canadian universities. For example, the University of Alberta successfully passed an extended reading break in 2015, which now falls immediately after the Remembrance Day Holiday. In order to better analyze the success of a Fall Reading Break, the University of Alberta Students' Union (UASA) set out a number of proposed measures, namely benchmarking internal data from the University of Alberta with the NCHA findings. Yet, the UASA explicitly noted that there would be a delay in these analytical outcomes since academic and mental health statistics are accrued over several years.² As such, it is imperative that institutions planning to adopt a Fall Reading Break, or determining its success during a "trial phase," be patient in waiting for any quantitative data on the mental health effects.

There has been a tendency in pre-existing literature to generalize about the positive effects of a Fall Reading Break on an undergraduate population. Many of the reports issued by U15 schools predict that a Fall Reading Break would give students the opportunity to see family and self-reflect, thereby lowering student stress levels, but there is inconclusive data on this front.³ In self-assessment tests conducted at McMaster University, students reported positive impacts such as time with family and friends and the ability to catch-up on work; conversely, negative impacts reported were midterm and assignment scheduling being compressed before and after the break.⁴ The significant gap in the literature has been identified by both researchers and universities: the University of Guelph Mental

¹ NCHA-II. "Canadian Reference Group Executive Summary." ACHA, Spring 2016, pp. 13-15.

² UASA, "Green & Gold Week Governance Proposal," 2014, p. 17.

³ UASA, "Green & Gold Week Governance Proposal," 2014, p. 2; AMS. "Fall Reading Break Consultation and Recommendations." 2019, p. 3.

⁴ Heather Poole, Michael Agnew, and Ayesha Khan, "One Week, Many Ripples: Measuring the Impacts of the Fall Reading Week on Student Stress." *Collected Essays on Teaching and Learning*, vol. 10, 2017.



Health Advisory Committee subcommittee identified that there is virtually no empirical evidence linking improved mental health to study breaks.

To date, the most empirical evidence regarding students' mental health prior to and following the Fall Reading Break comes out of McMaster University. Of 1146 respondents, 80% indicated that the fall break "was a good thing" for them. Similarly, 69.1% of respondents answered that the fall break decreased their stress; however, both these numbers are reflected in a survey administered the following January, which aligns with a more reflective process rather than an immediate result.⁵ A salivary test yielded a result of a lower ratio of cortisol to DHEA in first-year male Engineering students after the Fall Reading Break, therefore suggesting that it in part contributed to lower stress levels. Despite these promising findings, such results should be approached with caution due to their preliminary nature and relatively small sample size. More generally, students that find that the Fall Reading Break increases stress is due to stressors prior to the break, namely academic and personal, or is due to spending the break doing recreational activities rather than studying.⁶

A doctoral student's findings at Brock University were highly in favor of a fall study break: 91% of Brock students agreed or strongly agreed that it would be conducive in reducing academic stress levels.⁷ Of importance, Brock University's reading week, which falls during the dates following the Thanksgiving Holiday, has resulted in a higher number of students utilizing health supports. In a 2017 interview with The Brock News, Sarah Pennisi, Director of Brock's Student Wellness and Accessibility Centre, identified that, after reading week, there is a steady increase in students seeking mental health services that peaks at the end of November.⁸ While this increase puts stress on the student supports offered by the university, it is considered to be a positive transformation as it indicates a greater awareness of those supports, a reduction in the stigma surrounding mental health, and an ongoing discussion of health and wellness beyond the break.

Given the fact that the Rossy Wellness Hub was designed with students' concerns in mind, McGill Student Services would be readily equipped for an increase in McGill students' reliance on these supports. The University of British Columbia, who continue to advocate for a Fall Reading Break, indicates that the midterm months of October and November have historically seen the highest traffic for counseling services, which points towards the poor mental health status among students and insights change.⁹

⁵ Heather Poole, Michael Agnew, and Ayesha Khan. "One Week, Many Ripples: Measuring the Impacts of the Fall Reading Week on Student Stress." *Collected Essays on Teaching and Learning*, vol. 10, 2017, p. 167.

⁶ Ken Cramer and Rebecca Pschibul. "Student time usage during fall reading week." *Collected Essays in Learning and Teaching*, vol. 10, 2017.

⁷ Kelly Plato. "Exploring the Impact of a Fall Break on Student Mental Health Outcomes." *Year 2 Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee*, 2015.

⁸ Douglas Hunt. "Student supports available to help ease fall stresses." *The Brock News*, October 16, 2017. <https://brocku.ca/brock-news/2017/10/student-supports-available-to-help-ease-fall-stresses/>

⁹ AMS. "Fall Reading Break Consultation and Recommendations." 2019, p. 2.



There is also an inextricable link between faculty and staff mental health and the level of service provided to students. The University of Manitoba issued a Campus Mental Health Strategy in 2014 to address mental health from a holistic standpoint. One of the guiding principles of this strategy is to empower faculty, staff, and students to actively maintain and address their mental health in order to participate fully and meaningfully in both their academic and personal lives.¹⁰ Based on this tenet, a Fall Reading Break would allow for this growth and self-reflection among all the members of post-secondary institutions. The University of Alberta also proposed that the Fall Reading Break could be a time of personal empowerment and an expansion of knowledge through workshops offered by various Student Services units. The Mental Health Centre proposed three possible topics: Mental Health Information Session; Student Self-Care/Mindfulness Meditation; and How to Become a MHC Client.¹¹

A common thread that runs throughout all discourse on implementing or assessing an extended Fall Reading Break is the concern over how the university will market the break to students and faculty. Initiatives to implement a Fall Reading Break as a response to student mental health must account for other student stressors to avoid creating a domino effect. The compression of work before and after the break, isolation and loneliness, and communicating expectations are potential stressors that may be further exacerbated by implementing a Fall Reading Break.¹² These potential stressors are just that – potential – and can be negotiated through the careful consideration of feedback from students and staff. Students at the University of Waterloo agreed that the Fall Reading Break was a good thing, but noted that the advertising of the break – either study or rest – was vague and instead implied by professors that it should be used to study.¹³ McGill Teaching and Learning Services (TLS) has indicated that it will be crucial to clarify whether this will be a “reading week,” a “study week,” or a “break,” as all three have implications regarding assignment due-dates, exam scheduling, and readings.

The topic of mental health and the Fall Reading Break is one that is highly of interest to student unions and university assessment offices; however, there is a significant gap in the literature to support any concrete quantitative findings on the positive correlation between the two. Indeed, after contacting both of these units at all of the U15 Canadian universities, the student unions proved to be more responsive and provided significant documentation, but many of the findings are based solely upon self-assessment surveys. The University of Toronto, who now has a week-long Fall Reading Break just prior to the Remembrance Day holiday, communicated directly that they don't have any data on the topic, or, if it has been worked on, it would be at the College level, and that they won't share that data with the main assessment office. The problem here lies that, if data is being

¹⁰ UofM. “Success through Wellness: Enhancing the campus community to promote and support mental health and well-being.” 2014, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ UASA. “Green & Gold Week of Governance Proposal.” 2014, pp. 3-4.

¹² Carol Hulls, Chris Rennick, Mary Robinson, and Samar Mohamed. “Effects of a Fall Reading Break on First Year Students' Course Performance in Programming.” *Canadian Engineering Education Association*, 2018, p. 5.

¹³ Ibid.



Students' Society of McGill University

Tel: (514) 398-6800 | Fax: (514) 398-7490 | ssmu.ca

3600 McTavish St., Suite 1200, Montréal, QC, H3A 0G3

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collected on the topic in assessment offices at the institutional level, it is unlikely to be relayed to external unions or offices due to a breach of confidentiality.

Moving forward, McGill University should take into consideration the following factors: a continued gap in the literature on the positive mental health effects, a lack of communication between assessment offices on the relevant quantitative data, and a generally positive reception towards a possible Fall Reading Break among the student population.