A Contemplative Space that Prioritizes Student-Identified Flourishing at UVA

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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STS Research Paper

Abstract

Contemplation is currently an elusive subject that is referenced frequently, but is rarely defined and therefore when used, it is used inadequately for the intended users and spaces. Professors and students alike talk about contemplation without integrating its practices into the classroom setting, and thus, nobody benefits from its principles. As a latent impact, student populations do not benefit from these scientifically-supported practices and their academic experiences are left worse off, whether they knew it or not. Mental health issues, and moreso the stigma around mental health issues, significantly negatively impact student success in higher education. Studies have shown that there is a notable disconnect between what the students in college need and identify as crucial to their thriving versus the way classroom frameworks, student spaces and programs are designed in universities today. A survey was conducted among UVA students to see if similar themes were present at this university, and to what varying degrees. The results of the survey indicated similar patterns to those identified in previous studies, and thus a recommendation was suggested for new developments at UVA. These recommendations include the implementation of resilience education, which is a method of bridging the gap between students and faculty through education about mental health issues an mechanisms for students to be as successful as possible, in the ways they identify being most important, as well as improvement in architecture to improve student spaces. This analysis uses the framework of interpretive flexibility to discuss the discrepancies between student interpretation and administrative interpretation of crucial flourishing concepts.

Introduction

Contemplation is currently an elusive subject that is referenced frequently, but rarely defined and capitalized upon. Professors and students alike talk about contemplation without integrating its practices into the classroom setting, and thus, nobody benefits from its principles. As a latent impact, student populations do not benefit from these scientifically-supported practices and their academic experiences are left worse off, whether they knew it or not. The term contemplation is notoriously hard to define because it is personal in its nature, and therefore has different meanings for different contexts. The one which applies directly to the purposes of this study is: "enhancement of self-regulation as the ability to notice and effectively manage thoughts, emotional responses, and behavior" (Dorjee, 2016, p.2).

This idea of enhancing self-regulation leads to the purpose of the project, through which the researcher intends to study what it means for students to 'flourish' – what are the factors that students actually identify as helping improve their quality of life at UVA, and how does that differ from the faculty, staff and Board of Visitor perspective? There are many student spaces that have been built on grounds and are currently utilized by students for academic and personal purposes. Despite a lot of fancy new spaces with new technology imbedded into them, it is clear that students still don't feel that they are flourishing, specifically with identifications of serious mental and physical health concerns that end up impacting their academics, their social life, and overall livelihood. This is evident from several articles published over the last few years in student publications, from social media posts, from student-given Ted talks at UVA, and from my own informal surveys and experiences. Having served UVA as a Resident Advisor and Senior Resident for three years, I have privileged information from my intimate experiences which have shaped my own insight into the depth and gravity of this issue for students at UVA. Not only have I witnessed the downward spirals of mental and physical health, but I have also witnessed some of the devastating consequences including substance abuse and self-harm, all intertwined with a commonality of helplessness among students when it comes to even knowing how to talk about their struggles in an academic setting.

It is clear that the individuals responsible for designing and promoting these student spaces - faculty, staff and Board of Visitors - as benevolent as their efforts may be, are not in touch with the student perspective and as a result, whatever spaces they design are not helping improve the student flourishing experience at UVA.

The following specific research questions will be used to guide the investigation of student perceptions of their own mental health, and how that correlates to student learning spaces at UVA:

1. What do students identify as the main criteria for them to flourish? What part does mental and physical health play in that?
2. What student spaces are used most frequently on grounds?
3. What is the correlation between students choosing to use those spaces and students feeling an improvement in their mental and physical health?
4. What do students identify as the biggest point of improvement needed in spaces on grounds?
5. What is the faculty & staff perspective on all of the above points?
6. What are the discrepancies between the student perspective and the faculty/staff perspective?
7. How can the practices of contemplation help improve these issues?

Using this central framework of questions will help uncover the necessary tools that Dr. Germano of UVA and his team will need to access the student point of view and be able to pitch to the Board of Visitors why certain aspects of the space they are creating, need to be created for the students.

Literature Review

Contemplation is incredibly useful for improving mental and physical health, and can also contribute to improvement in other areas of personal development (Bruce, et. al, 2018). There is currently a lack of understanding and integration of contemplative practices in learning spaces at UVA, and due to the many experimentally proven benefits of these practices, inclusive of benefits to mental and physical

health, this is a considerable area of necessary improvement. Additionally, the widespread mental & physical health stigma that negatively affects students at UVA, like most universities in the U.S., is an important hurdle to jump before contemplation can have lasting impact on student lifestyles. The stigma can be defined loosely as the hesitation the general population has towards conversation about the topic of mental health issues, as well as the perceived judgement people feel whenever their own mental health is addressed (Caruth, 2018).

Culture and Stigma

It has been scientifically proven that mental health, and even more so the negative stigma surrounding mental health issues, causes increased depression and poor performance in academic settings (Holland, 2016). Self-esteem is another component negatively affected by negative mental and physical health and the stigma surrounding those topics, which often leads to students either performing poorly in academic settings because they don't believe they are smart enough, or withdrawing from clubs and other social settings, which ends up being detrimental to overall success as well (Millard & Wessely, 2014). This evidence clearly points towards the first item of business being to eliminate such stigma from the community and culture. Removal of stigma and education on counseling resources, as well as ease of access to those counseling resources with limited barriers (financial, racial, geographical, etc), is critical for student mental health (Holland, 2016; Shankar & Park, 2016).

But how is this accomplished? What are the specific, tangible mechanisms by which such a widespread concept as a "stigma" can be removed? An assessment of multiple studies shows that removal of negative stigma surrounding mental and physical health via education, which influences culture change, significantly impacts how students are able to perform better academically and also perceive themselves in a better position in comparison to their peers who are not educated on such topics (DeRosier, et. al, 2013). Teaching students how to be resilient by professionals in mental & physical health, and through example, and providing them spaces to do that, improves their mental health

(DeRosier, et. al, 2013; Holland, 2016; Millard & Wessely, 2014; Shankar & Park, 2016). In other words, the first step towards removing the stigma and thus increasing thrivingness among students, is learning about and discussing the topic of mental health more often, and becoming so familiar with the subject that it becomes part of how you view the world. Interestingly enough, this draws a parallel to the very practice of contemplation, which involves being present and knowledgeable about issues or just facets of who you are which you would normally overlook (Bruce, et. al, 2018).

Culture and Environment

The next step following improving education to remove and/or reduce stigma surrounding mental and physical health issues, would be to proactively improve upon mental and physical health by providing environments for students to work and socialize which are conducive to healthy practices. Environments which remove stress and allow students to work and think productively and in a relaxed manner can be very effective in improving student wellbeing (mentally) as well as has been shown to improve academic performance (Shankar & Park, 2016). Some of the physical modifications to a space which have been scientifically proven to have a positive effect on mental and physical health, as well as contemplation, are as follows: pleasant aromas such as lilac or peppermint based aromas, natural light and limited amount of blue light from screens, instrumental or lyric-less music with steady bass tones and limited percussion, sound proof walls to limit excess stimuli, high ceilings, calming low-wavelength colors such as restful green and calming blue to improve efficiency and focus without being stress-inducing, and access to the outdoors for fresh oxygen and vitamin D (Bruce, et. al, 2018; Shankar & Park, 2016). Additionally, Tai chi is a really useful technique to improve focus, discipline, and mental health via the endorphins released (Wang, et. al, 2004).

The essential framework which will be used to analyze these research questions is the idea of interpretive flexibility. This concept helps lay the ground for dissecting the relationship between what the students view as their flourishing in mental and physical health, as well as overall, compared to the

faculty & staff perspective (Doherty, et.al., 2006). For example, when the researcher examines what cues lead faculty & staff members to believe that students are or are not flourishing, what are the differences in their interpretations of these cues versus the actual signals students are trying to send and the interface of technology involved in this exchange.

As a method of collecting data, student and potentially staff surveys will be primarily used, as well as the method of selective/purposive sampling to acquire an equal number of student representatives from the key demographics of year (1st, 2nd, etc) and school (College of Arts & Sciences, Engineering, etc). The researcher aims is to uncover a common trend among the voices of students otherwise unrepresented that will positively influence the design and ultimate use of the space being created by Dr. Germano. Ultimately, there are a wealth of parallels to improvement in mental & physical health and contemplation practices, both in the methods they are achieved and in the results they yield. These two issues go hand-in-hand and are both necessary for ultimate success in an academic space, which is why UVA has an imperative to explore implementation of the aforementioned methods in order to improve quality of life for students at this university.

Data Analysis & Discussion

The following results, both in visual and written form, represent the data collected from the student survey entitled "Student Flourishing at UVA – Student Perspective." This anonymous survey contains a sample size of 32 students of University of Virginia, with verified enrollment in the university through the technological form requirement that access be limited to users 'in organization', meaning using a verified virginia.edu user account. No personal identifying data was recorded with the survey submissions. All time signatures of surveys submitted lie within the range of 2/14/2020 12:59:59 to 2/22/2020 14:01:02.

Students in Each School		Students in Each Year	
College of A&S	46.9%	First Year	21.9%
E-School	46.9%	Second Year	9.4%
Comm School	6.3%	Third Year	18.8%
A-School	0%	Fourth Year	50%
Nursing	0%	Fifth Year/Other	0%
Curry	0%		

Table 1: Demographics of student participants in survey. Column 1 represents the demographics stratified according to academic program/school, while column 2 represents the stratification based on class year.

In the detailing of this data, it is important to note that this sample size of 32 does not warrant statistically significant results for the student population at UVA, so any analyses of the data below represent the investigator's best assessment of the preliminary research. As indicated above in Table 1, 46.9% of the survey participants were School of Engineering and Applied Sciences students (e-school), 46.9% were students in the College of Arts and Sciences (college), and 6.3% were students in the McIntire School of Commerce (comm school). It is important to note that this not an accurate distribution of students at UVA, especially with the absence of perspective from the Curry School of Education and Human Development, the School of Architecture and the School of Nursing. Also shown in Table 1, 50% of the survey participants were fourth years, 18.8% third years, 9.4% second years, and 21.9% first years. This is also not an accurate distribution of students at UVA, which would reflect a more evenly split percentage of students (25%) with a slightly larger number of first and second years.

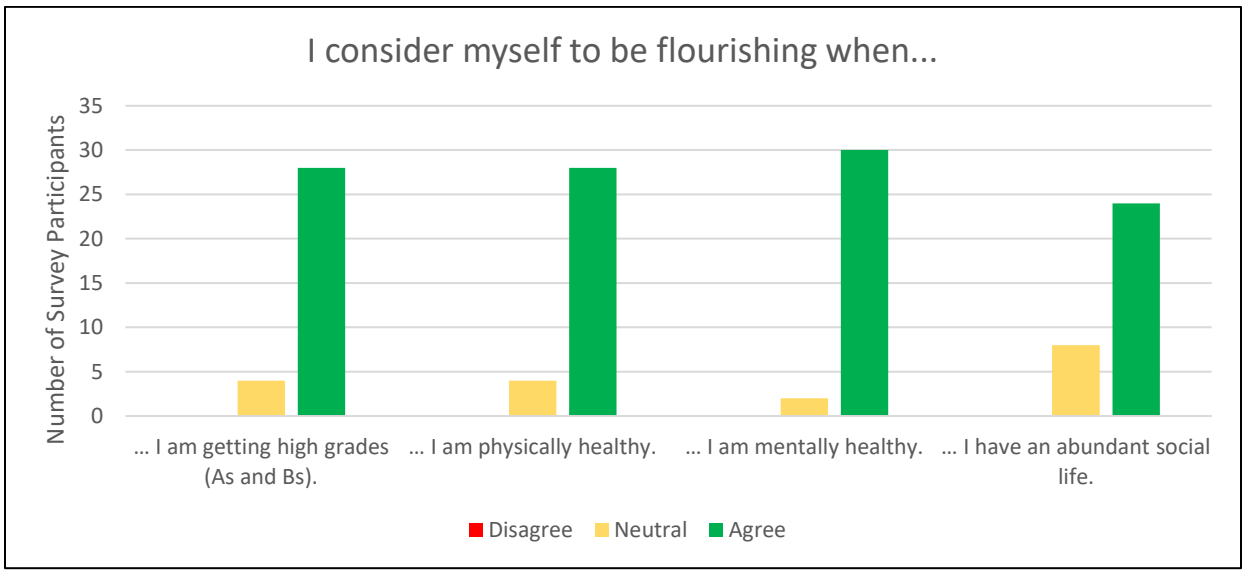

***Figure 1*. Level of agreement with aspects of flourishing**.

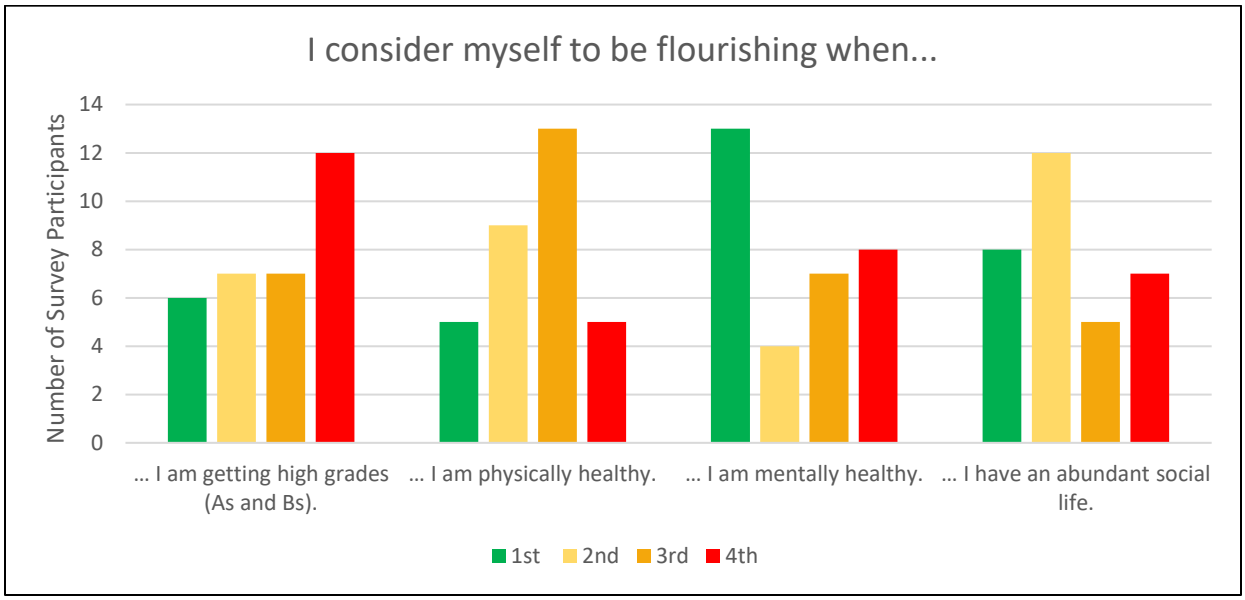

***Figure 2*. Ranking of aspects of flourishing**.

For the first material-based question of the survey represented in Figure 1, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with how four different factors of flourishing – high grades, physical health, mental health, and social abundance - are present in their own personal perspective of their flourishing, given the three choices of agree, neutral, or disagree (Caruth, 2018). The results were as follows: Grades: 87.5% agree, 12.5% neutral; Physical health: 87.5% agree, 12.5% neutral; Mental health: 93.8% agree, 6.2% neutral; Social abundance: 75% agree, 25% neutral. The next question shown

in Figure 2 asked participants to rank these components of flourishing from most to least important in their lives, and the results indicated: most popular number 1: mental health w 40.6%, then social life 25%, grades 18.8%, physical health 15.6%; most popular number 4: grades w 37.5%, then mental health 25%, social life 21.9%, physical health 15.6%; most voted in number 1 or 2: social life 62.5%, then mental health 53.1%, physical health 43.8%, grades 40.6%.

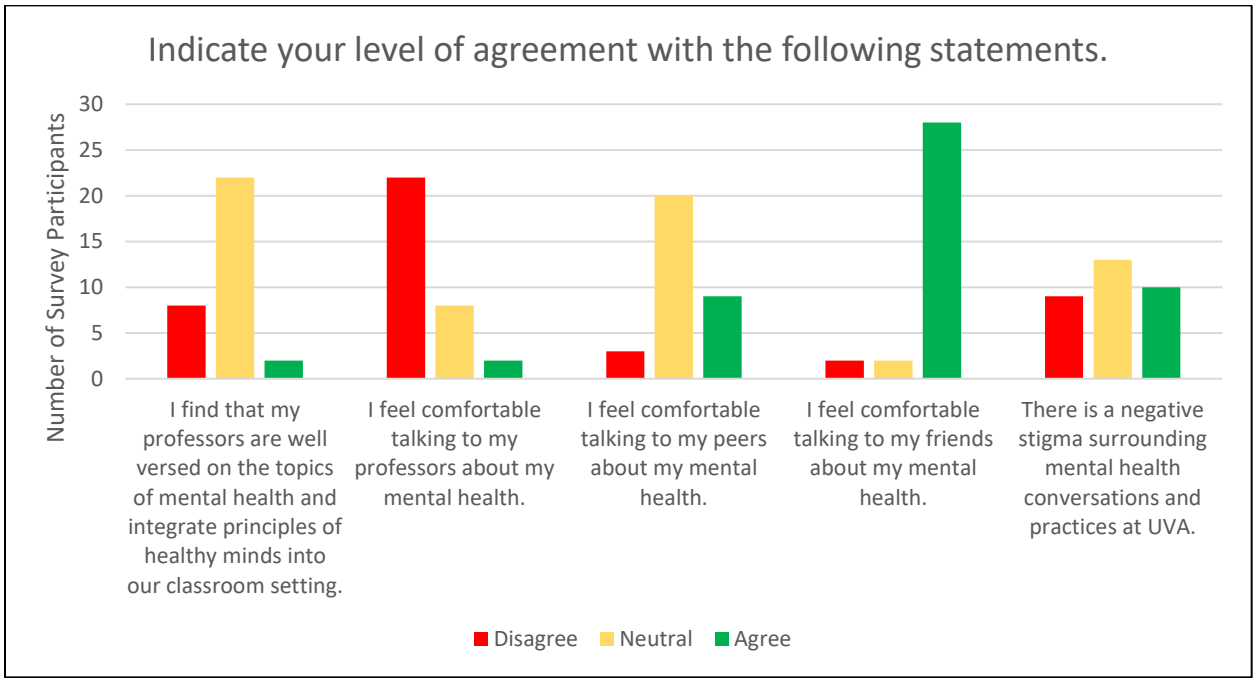

***Figure 3*. Level of agreement with mental health related statements.**

The next section of the survey, shown in Figure 3, asked participants to indicate their level of agreement (disagree, neutral or agree) with the following 5 statements in this order: I find that my professors are well versed on the topics of mental health and integrate principles of healthy minds into our classroom setting; I feel comfortable talking to my professors about my mental health; I feel comfortable talking to my peers about my mental health; I feel comfortable talking to my friends about my mental health; and There is a negative stigma surrounding mental health conversations and practices at UVA. The results show that: 93.6% either are neutral or disagree that their professors are educated on mental health, 93.6% don't feel comfortable or are neutral about talking to their professors about mental health; 68.8% explicitly don't feel comfortable, 71.9% don't feel comfortable or are neutral about talking

to their peers about mental health, only12.5% don't feel comfortable or are neutral about talking to their friends about mental health, and 71.9% believe or are unsure if there is a negative stigma surrounding mental health at UVA.

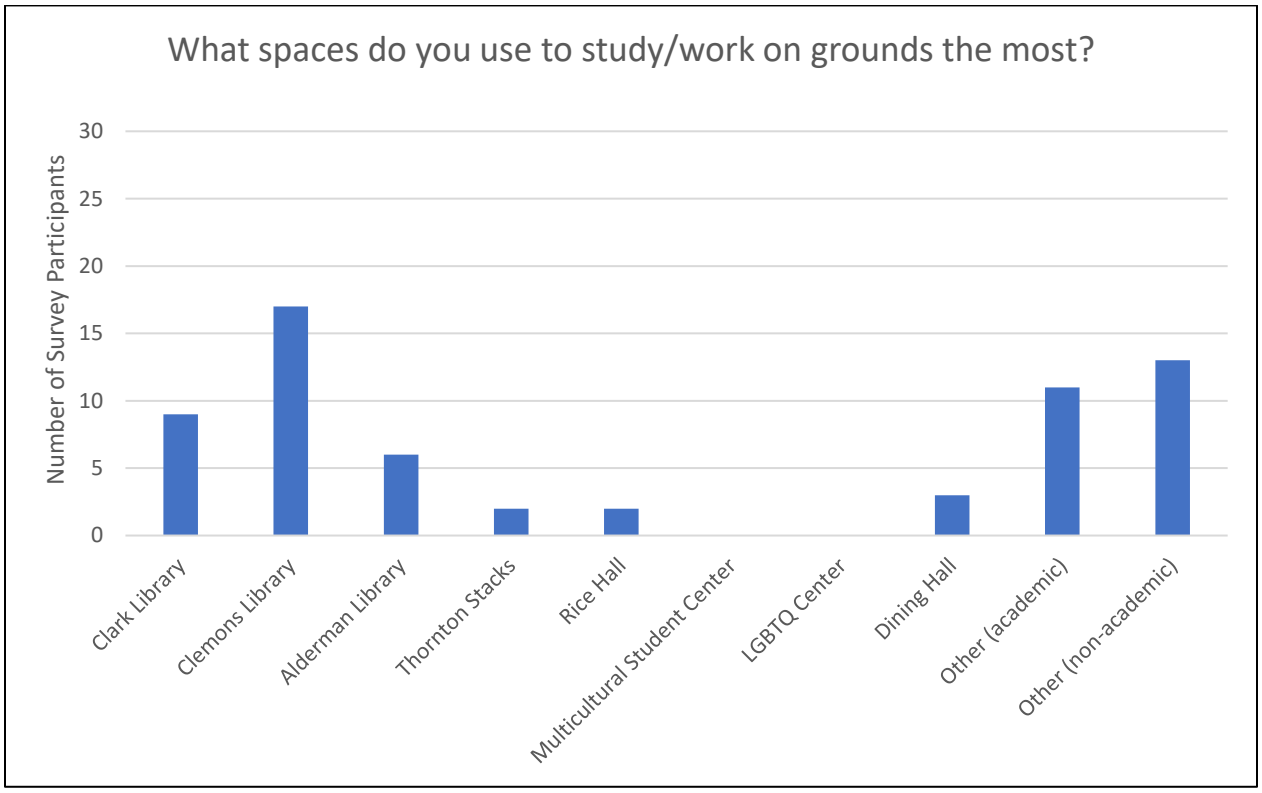

***Figure 4*. Mapping of student study space preferences.**

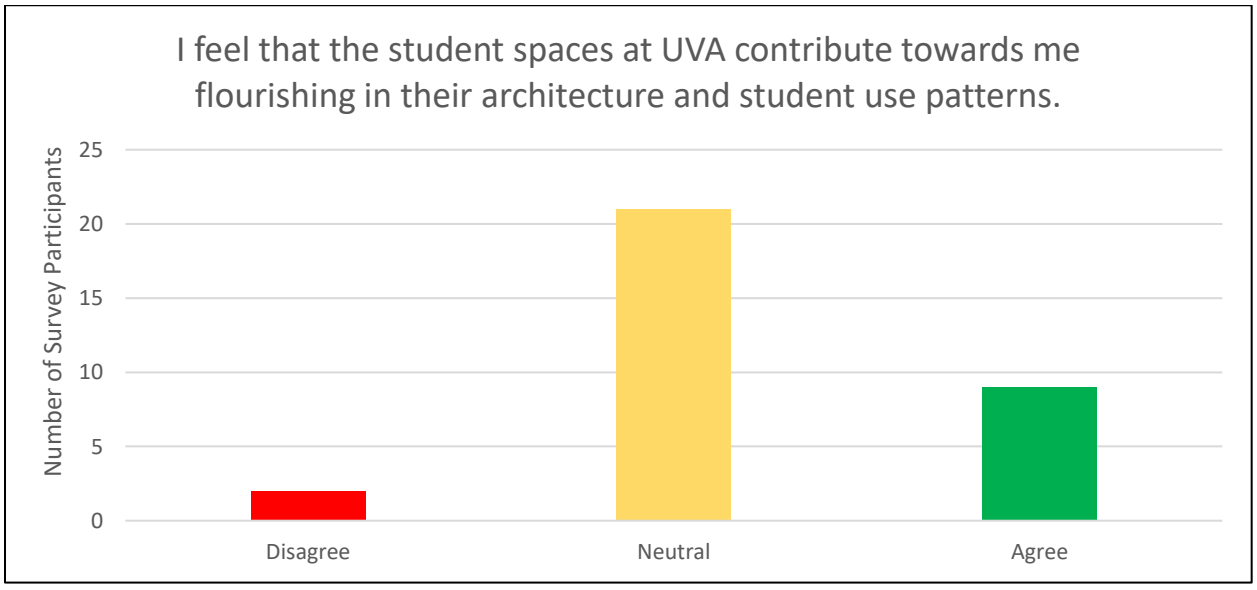

***Figure 5*. Level of agreement related to student spaces and thriving**.

The final section of the survey focused on student spaces at UVA, with the first question, represented in Figure 4, asking students to identify which space(s) on grounds they work or study in most often. These results indicated: 53.1% Clemons library, 28.1% Clark library, 25% 1515, 18.8% Alderman library, 0% MSC and LGBTQ centers, and 56.3% chose spaces that are either not on grounds or are not spaces designed as student workspaces. The second question, depicted in Figure 5, asked students to rate their level of agreement (disagree, neutral, agree) with the following statement: I feel that the student spaces at UVA contribute towards me flourishing in their architecture and student use patterns. Only 28.1% identified that they feel like the spaces at UVA positively impact their success.

Breakdown & Analysis of Data by Class Year

The following represent some noteworthy trends of data and some possible explanations for such, with regard to stratification of the data by class year.

All first years ranked mental health as number 1 or 2 and high grades as number 3 or 4. The only 2 people in the entire survey who indicated they do feel comfortable talking to professors about mental health are first years. Finally, all of the people who put dining hall to study were first years. These all possibly indicate that first year students undoubtedly care about their mental health more significantly than their grades, and any comfort that students have communicating about their mental health is relevant to their fresh perspective towards UVA. The dining hall aspect is to be expected since the meal plan program is geared towards first years at UVA.

All second years agree that there is a mental health negative stigma at UVA. This is possibly skewed as there were very few second years who took part in the survey - 4 out of 32 of the survey participants. It could also indicate that after having a year of experience at UVA, students feel the burden of the stigma more strongly than in their first year.

The only people who did rank grades as number 1 were third and fourth years. The only students to be explicitly certain that the workspaces at UVA do not contribute to their thriving are third years. These both are indicators of the commonly known trend that third year curricula is most difficult for

almost every academic program, and the burdens and pressures of beginning to apply for internships or prepare for post-graduation influences the amount of mental space that is taken up by academic performance for third year students.

Half of the fourth years ranked mental health as number 1, while the other half ranked it as 3 or 4. This indicates a sort of dichotomy where either mental health becomes an undeniable priority or it becomes explicitly placed in the background of focus. The vast degree of answers were neutral for professor's knowledge of mental health issues, including & especially among fourth years, meaning that even over 4 years in school, the majority of fourth years had no idea whether or not their professors are educated on mental health issues.

Breakdown & Analysis of Data by School

The following represent some noteworthy trends of data and some possible explanations for such, with regard to stratification of the data by school.

Agreement/neutrality distribution for facets of flourishing were consistent among all participating academic programs. For college students, 73.3% ranked high grades in number 3 or 4, and the same percentage ranked mental health in number 1 or 2. For comm school students, 100% ranked grades and social life in number 1 or 2 and physical and mental health in number 3 or 4. For e school students, 53.3% ranked grades in number 3 or 4, and 40% ranked mental health in number 1. This data possibly indicates the positive impact of a liberal arts education on the importance of mental health in a student's priorities.

The only 2 students who agree that their professors are well educated on mental health issues are in the college, as well as the only 2 students who feel comfortable talking to their professors about mental health. They are the same 2 students which indicates a consistency with people not being confident in their professor's education on the subject, and therefore, are not comfortable sharing with them, contrary to the students who are secure in that knowledge basis, and thus they feel comfortable.

The student spaces which received the most votes have equal distributions of use among students in different academic programs. Additionally, 80% of engineering students say that the spaces on grounds don't positively or negatively impact their thriving. This could be an indication of a particular deficit in the incorporation of mental health education, resilience education, and contemplation into the designs and use patterns of engineering student spaces. It could also indicate that engineering students do not understand how to answer that question, which still reflects a lacking because that is different from their counterparts in the college.

Overall Analyses

The framework of interpretive flexibility can be utilized to analyze the meaning conveyed by much of the data presented above. One of the important takeaways includes the interesting note that not one student indicated having an abundant social life as detracting from their flourishing. It is a common interpretation among more conservative-minded academics that an abundant social life can be destructive to student thriving, most often referring to the negative impact on grades, but also often extended to having a negative impact on mental and physical health (Manyanga, et. al, 2017). In many institutions including UVA, that perspective is evident in many classroom policies and course loads, as well as in the design of student spaces to rid the students of any possible distraction. While there is merit to that perspective since an overly abundant social life in a college setting can lead to counterproductive habits such as procrastination or destructive habits such as alcohol and drug abuse, that clearly does not represent the full reality, as the survey participants exhibited another more positive interpretation of the impact of abundant social lives (Fogle & Pettijohn, 2013). This framework can also be used to explain the clear and significant disconnect and discomfort presented by the academic setting when it comes to topics of mental health. Students on the whole do not feel that their professors are educated on the topics of mental health, and in distinct correlation, do not express comfort with the possibility of having conversations with these professors, and to a lesser but still majority-level extent, with their peers as well. However, students express resounding comfort speaking with friends about mental health, which

highlights the distinction that the problem is not a discomfort with the subject matter, but rather with the audience when the academic setting is introduced. In other words, student interpretation of their comfort with mental health conversations is flexible depending on the audience and the setting. This is an important realization, because it is also evident from the majority of students that they not only identify their mental health as being a certain contributing factor to their success as a student, but in the majority, the most common top priority of all the flourishing aspects.

Another example of interpretive flexibility is the idea that out of all of the student spaces on grounds that are advertised as and renovated for the purpose of benefiting student success, not one of them captured any significant majority of student preference to their use. To further drive that point, over half of the students identified their most utilized study spaces are spots which are either clearly not designed for that purpose, or are completely unaffiliated with UVA. Only roughly a quarter of the students identify a positive impact of student spaces at UVA on their personal success. It is also interesting to note that the most recently renovated student spaces of the Multicultural Student Center and the LGBTQ+ Center both received zero votes for preference in their use (although it is possible this is due to their renovation being so recent that students have not had the chance to assess the improvements). It can be deduced from this information that the student body in general is not interpreting the study spaces on grounds as being beneficial towards their personal flourishing, despite the fact that the University invests tons of money in renovating and marketing these spaces and theoretically is designing them for student success. This demonstrates a disconnect between what UVA believes students desire and require in student spaces versus what the students themselves identify as being necessary. It is worth noting that roughly half of the students, consistently among class years and schools, identify Clemons library as a preferred student space of productivity, beating any other space for the most preferred by a landslide. While there was not a portion of the survey to indicate which features about the library make it preferable, when applying principles from the literature review, there are some clear consistencies with what research indicates are positive architectural and social features of a space and the features that

Clemons uniquely provides. Clemons offers options of varying degrees of interaction with other students, whether it be completely limited in a silent space with seating arrangements to match the solitude, or allowing for free-flowing communication in various group sizes with all sorts of open concept seating arrangements and interactive amenities to match. In Clemons most popular student spaces, there are several opportunities for students to take part in programming, focus-inducing and calming colors such as sage green and sky blue are the foremost colors present in the design, and ample natural light pours into the spaces. Those are all research supported components which yield to higher productivity and incorporate concepts of contemplation into spaces of work and social connection (Bruce, et. al, 2018).

As the survey results and the above interpretations indicate a common theme of a need among UVA students to feel mentally healthy, as well as the obvious disconnect between student conversations about mental health and the academic setting, resilience education is ideally constructed to address these themes and help bridge that chasm between students and faculty when it comes to mental health and general personal success. Resilience education includes practices of mental health education and programming, as well as contemplative practices that are beneficial for personal health such as meditation exercises and other thought exercises which allow students to clear their minds of stress and focus on fundamentally important things, all in a setting with their academic peers an faculty such that the stigma about the conversations can be squashed. Resilience education is also poised such that it boosts student self-esteem, or in other words, improves student view of themselves and their perception of their own flourishing, which is a practice proven to universally improve an individual's mental and physical health (Millard & Wessely, 2014). So not only is resilience education able to directly address issues of mental health and improve upon them through education about such topics, but also incorporates discussion of giving students the tools to seize their own success, which indirectly loops back to further improve their state of mental health.

All of these factors considered, it becomes apparent that a recommendation to Dr. Germano in his new student space construction, as well as to UVA leaders charged with other new construction projects in the future, includes the following:

1. Implementation of resilience education as a consistent programming feature in the new student space. Working with the Dean of Students and directors of the various different academic programs at UVA could also provide a rotating opportunity for students in different programs to experience this education in their first year general required courses, alongside their professors and peers, so that their journeys at UVA are equipped with the tools to be successful from the first moments they spend on grounds.
2. Implementation of architecture which keeps in mind the principles of contemplation, such as:
    a. Opportunity for a diversity of different seating arrangements, especially including various group sizes, public and private rooms, etc.
    b. Incorporation of natural lighting.
    c. Design elements which include productivity-inducing, and calming, colors in the muted green and blue color families.
    d. Opportunity for incorporation of physical activity, such as Tai Chi or other contemplative-infused activities, into the space.
    e. Central location, and accessibility to all years and academic programs of students.
3. Generate a survey that grants access to a greater number of students so that not only the full statistically significant perspective is considered prior to construction, but also, so that there is a consistent flow of feedback from students even after the space is opened, so that the programming can continue to be updated to reflect what students identify as a need in their personal success.

Potential for Study Improvement

Primarily, the study was not able to be conducted in its full original intent of incorporating a staff and faculty perspective of these student issues to more directly speculate about any discrepancies between opinions. This portion of the study, despite being complete in its design with a survey entitled "Student Flourishing at UVA – Faculty Perspective", was limited because the study investigator was unable to access any avenue through which this survey could be distributed to faculty. While this lack of insight could possibly have skewed the analysis of the data, it was not imperative to learn fundamental information about student flourishing at UVA, nor was it crucial towards making suggestions of potential areas of growth in the UVA ecosystem of resilience education. Secondly, while it has already been noted that the sample size is not significantly significant, nor do the demographics distributions appropriately align to those in UVA's entire student body, the reasons for the bias have not yet been addressed. There is likely a weighted presence of both fourth years and e-school students in the survey participation because both of those identities align with those of the study investigator, which likely influenced the circles of students which received the survey and were inclined to complete it. Finally, information about which features about the spaces were appealing for student thriving would have been useful information to include in the survey, as it would have removed the speculation in that analysis.

Conclusion

For the most accurate, informative and compelling data, a vast degree more of student responses are required. UVA represents a great diversity of students when it comes to their identifiers, as well as their interests and interpretations of their own health and success, and so for any actionable change, it would be highly recommended to cast a wider net of students. It may also be beneficial for learning purposes, with intentions to supplement that learning with positively impactful actions, to add some more identifiers to the survey and thus increase understanding about how this issues and perspectives traverse barriers of gender, sexual orientation, race, and socioeconomic identities. Regardless, some of the

prevalent themes throughout the data noted above are undeniable and thought-provoking even on a small scale of responses. For example, it remains a common theme that students do prioritize their mental health, especially those students focusing their college tenures on a liberal arts education, and they almost universally recognize as crucial to their thriving. And yet, on the whole students don't have any comfort in talking to their professors about their own mental health, likely because these students do not have confidence in their professor's education on topics of mental health, as revealed in the survey results from Figure 3. This is exactly the theme proven in the several referenced studies in university settings, and each similar student blueprint benefited greatly from the implementation of resilience education.

As far as opportunities UVA has for implementing these principles of resilience education and contemplation, one obvious window is through the use of student spaces which are already in the process of being renovated on several accounts, and especially through the entirely new space being constructed for students by Dr. Germano's team. The problem identified through the survey data, as well as statistically significant data from other universities, is not necessarily that the spaces are negatively impacting students, but the fact that they are resoundingly unimpactful towards student success. The reality that the places designed and heavily invested into for the purpose of giving students a place to work and thrive gives a huge indication yes, of wasted tuition and donor money; however, it also yields a great opportunity for growth where the investors and designers of these new or renovating student spaces can re-define how students view and benefit from these spaces, according to students own perspective of what helps them to truly thrive. UVA, and virtually any institution, can only benefit from the optimal performance and satisfaction of its primary stakeholders. By incorporating design elements which nurture contemplative practices and implementing resilience education programming into the public student spaces as well as the classroom framework, UVA can help follow in suit of many other universities which are beginning to learn from their constituents, the students, and create an undergraduate experience which helps them to flourish and thrive in the way they best identify doing so.

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