



Re-Imagining Higher Education: Time, Learning, and Risk

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Article abstract

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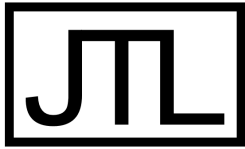
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Re-Imagining Higher Education: Time, Learning, and Risk

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Abstract

This article recommends institutional changes to higher education related to time, learning, and risk that would better serve the contemporary student population and increase opportunities for life-long and interdisciplinary learning. To begin, the changing demographic of university students will be outlined, along with suggestions about how traditional institutional arrangements are no longer conducive to optimal learning environments. Next, a review of the history of the academic year will be provided, that will show a snapshot of post-secondary academic calendars in Canada. Relatedly, a discussion of the potential drawbacks and benefits to accelerated courses will be deliberated, as well as the role of risk in terms of how this shapes students' course selection. Finally, an example of a pilot program at McMaster University, a large research-intensive university in Ontario, Canada, which is specifically designed to account for the pitfalls outlined above, will be discussed. Taken together, it will be argued that having full-course offerings on a year-round basis, providing various options for course lengths, and adjusting evaluations to reduce students' conceptions of 'risk' will better adapt institutes of higher education for the twenty-first century.



Introduction and Background

Like many institutions in our society, change in higher education comes slowly, if at all. Despite a lack of institutional change, there have been plenty of changes in terms of who makes up the student body and the demands of the contemporary labour market. Specifically, ‘traditional’ students, characterized by having just graduated from high school and with post-secondary schooling as their sole and/or primary responsibility, are no longer in the majority. Further, the labour market increasingly demands graduates with a breadth of knowledge who are life-long learners. Thus, higher education needs to be re-imagined in order to better meet contemporary student needs, foster student mental health, and create interdisciplinary life-long learners who are prepared for the ever-changing workforce. With that in mind, this paper suggests changes to the institutional arrangement of post-secondary education when it comes to the relationships among time, learning, and risk. To that end, a contemporary example is offered from a large Canadian university that looks to re-imagine some of the institutional norms of higher education when it comes to time and risk in an attempt to respond to the needs of contemporary students.

‘Traditional’ Students

The demographic information related to post-secondary students has changed drastically over the past few decades (Gonzales et al., 2021; Howe et al., 2023). Specifically, there have been notable increases in students who work part or full-time, those with crippling debt, students who have family or care-giving responsibilities outside of school, and students with various mental health diagnoses. Statistics on contemporary undergraduates show that the majority work in the paid labour force while they are in school, some for the purposes of opportunity or experience, and others out of necessity and increasing debt (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Mounsey et al., 2013). The cost of higher education in Canada and the United States has long been prohibitive, and yet, graduation rates continue to rise, bolstering the number of people entering the labour market with at least one post-secondary degree (Davies & Guppy 2014). In response, many students rely on loans in the hope of trading in a post-secondary degree for labour-market returns. Indeed, over the decade leading up to 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics reported a 400% increase in student debt burden in the United States (Hurst et al., 2013). These trends shift student realities in important ways, by creating increased pressures for students to work while they are in school, consequently increasing the potential for time-management and financial-related stress.

Relatedly, contemporary students have growing familial responsibilities that they must juggle in conjunction with their school and work lives (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Davies, 2006; Hurst et al., 2013; Linden & Jurdi-Hage, 2017). Many students have care responsibilities when it comes to children, siblings, elders, and their communities. These pressures to work, coupled with care responsibilities while in school, make work/life/study balance particularly challenging, and are part of the reason that the frequency and severity of mental health issues on campuses are increasing at unprecedented rates (Kitzrow, 2009). For example, the 2019 Canadian National College Health Assessment survey found that students’ individual academic performances were negatively shaped by anxiety (34.6%), stress (41.9%), and depression (24.2%). Further, when asked whether they had felt the following in the last 12 months, 63.3% of students reported feeling hopeless, 51.6% felt so depressed that it was difficult to function, 88.2% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, and 87.6% felt exhausted (but not from physical activity). These alarming statistics suggest that mental health issues in Canadian post-secondary experiences are not exceptions, but are increasingly becoming the norm.

There are also important connections to be made between these circumstances and social locations. For example, due to systemic power inequalities and legacies of colonialism, Black and Indigenous Peoples are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic circumstances and therefore may be more reliant on loans and the need to work. Additionally, women are more likely to take on the bulk of care work (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). It is not a coincidence that the increase of students who have greater responsibilities in the realm of work and care coincides with greater populations of undergraduates who identify as women and/or people of colour. Age is another social location that is changing in the context of higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics, in the United States, projected a 20% increase in mature student enrollment by 2018 (Hurst et al., 2013). The information above contradicts much of what is implied, when thinking of a typical undergraduate student – one who is young, healthy, has no debt or financial stress, and lacks family, care-giving, and/or work responsibilities outside of school.

Given the significant changes that have occurred, when it comes to the lived realities of undergraduate students, it is important to interrogate what is implied when using the word ‘student,’ given that institutional decisions made at the administrative level are based on a shared understanding of that concept. In higher educational literature, there is increasing conversation about the existence of the ‘non-traditional student.’ Employing the language of ‘non-traditional’ creates the implication that there is a ‘traditional’ student category, to which those deemed ‘non-traditional’ are external. This categorization of students can be understood through Brekhus’s (1998) concept of the socially marked: the extremes or extraordinary in society, and the unmarked, the socially generic. In this case, the ‘non-traditional’ student is marked, often with a pre-fix (e.g., ‘working-student’, ‘mature-student’, ‘part-time student’), while those who fall into the ‘traditional’ understanding of what it means to be a student are unmarked. According to Brekhus, the language of social markedness constructs and reinforces the notion that the marked category is something to be distinguished from its more generic or ‘normal form.’ Within these linguistically constructed categories, characteristics of the marked are only seen as applicable within their category, while characteristics of the unmarked are perceived as universal to the human condition. As such, the unmarked, the ‘traditional student,’ becomes the norm.

In post-secondary education, there are explicit dangers of having unmarked categories that reify the norm. With the engrained understanding that the ‘traditional student’ is the norm in the post-secondary environment, institutions create a system predicated on the assumption that all students learn, and learn best, in a traditional environment. Consequently, the institution structures student education around a traditional, two-semester academic year, comprised of 13-week courses with approximately 39 hours of contact time, with a heavy focus on grades and high student achievement as the vision of academic success. This model of education blatantly advantages the ‘traditional’ student - a white, male student between the ages of 18 and 22, who is healthy, has no debt or financial stress, and lacks family, care-giving, and/or work responsibilities outside of school. This student can easily focus solely on their academics for two four-month semesters. Because this image of what it means to be a student has come to be accepted as the norm, our post-secondary school system has been built around it, and built to serve its needs.

‘Non-traditional’ students may not learn best, or may not be able to learn at all, under a school system predicated on assumptions of ‘traditional students.’ The irony in the language is that ‘non-traditional’ students have undeniably become the norm in the post-secondary arena today: the ‘non-traditional’ now make up the majority (Hurst et al. 2013; Mounsey et al., 2013). Given that the education system was built on assumptions about the ‘traditional’ student, many universities have introduced various accommodations in recent years to capture those that are not served by the system. It is important to consider at what point the scales are tipped to warrant broader

institutional change, rather than trying to fill cracks and provide singular accommodations in a system that was not built for the majority of contemporary students. The undeniably changing student demographic must force us to confront the truth: to meet contemporary student needs and foster student mental health, it is time to rethink the relationship between time, learning, and risk.

The Academic Year

Undoubtedly, the most common post-secondary academic calendars in North America contain two, four-month semesters, when most courses are offered, followed by a four-month break in the summer, with much fewer course offerings. Scholars debate the emergence of this model, and often relate it to the development of the elementary school calendar system, which some argue originated from the need to support an agrarian economic system. Agrarian families needed to optimize workers, often their children, during specific seasons, and children would not be able to fully participate in farm labour if they were also in school (Ballinger & Kneese, 2008; Chen, 2005; Johnson, 2010). Others argue that the traditional calendar is more likely the result of coordinating efforts towards age-graded instruction (Fischel, 2006). Either way, there have been major societal changes since the creation of the first academic calendars, including urbanization and a shift to the knowledge economy. In addition to economic and societal changes, there have also been significant developments in teaching practices, technology, knowledge accumulation and translation, post-secondary attendance, family structure, the characteristics and size of the population, and many other factors. Many argue that with these extensive social changes, the semester calendar has become outdated, based heavily on traditional and arbitrary divisions of time, rather than what is best for teaching and learning (Davis, 1972; Scott, 2003; National Education Commission on Time in Learning, 1994). As a major social institution, it is important that post-secondary establishments evolve and adapt alongside other major societal institutions, such as the economy/work and family.

As such, there have been some debates about changing the academic calendar, though it is important to note that the literature contributing to this conversation has come from a predominantly U.S. context, and is largely situated in the secondary and elementary school systems. While post-secondary academic calendars have been relatively stagnant over the years, there are examples of experimentations. Two of the most popular early attempts to revise the traditional calendar were the early semester system and the four-month, one-month, four-month (4-1-4) system (Oleson, 1971). The early-semester system shifts semesters back a few weeks, cutting into the end of the summer period (Davidovicz, 1972; Oleson, 1971). The 4-1-4 calendar runs like the early semester system, but uses the month of January as an intersession period devoted to study, travel, work, or community service before the second semester begins (Oleson, 1971; Walters, 1977). While these innovations, which continue to exist today, show some capacity for change in the United States, the two-semester system remains dominant.

Where significant change has occurred is in the use of the summer sessions. The late 1800s saw the beginning of post-secondary institutions providing academic instruction through the full summer term, however, it was several years later, between the 1960s and 1980s, when literature on post-secondary institutions expressed a broader interest in calendars that extended into the summer term. In the following decades, many reports were published comparing potential systems, and reporting on new calendars, or trials of pilot calendars. In addition to the 4-1-4 and early semester calendars, these reports introduced the trimester calendar and quarter calendar, which involve three and four semesters respectively, as well as the modular calendar,

which involves taking courses one at a time, consecutively throughout the year (Davis, 1972; Davidovicz, 1972; Oleson, 1971).

To gain an up-to-date understanding of the state of Canadian academic calendars today, a review was conducted of academic calendars using the websites of Canadian universities. Included are all Canadian, public universities that have undergraduate programs, except for affiliate or federated colleges/universities of other universities (Figure 1).

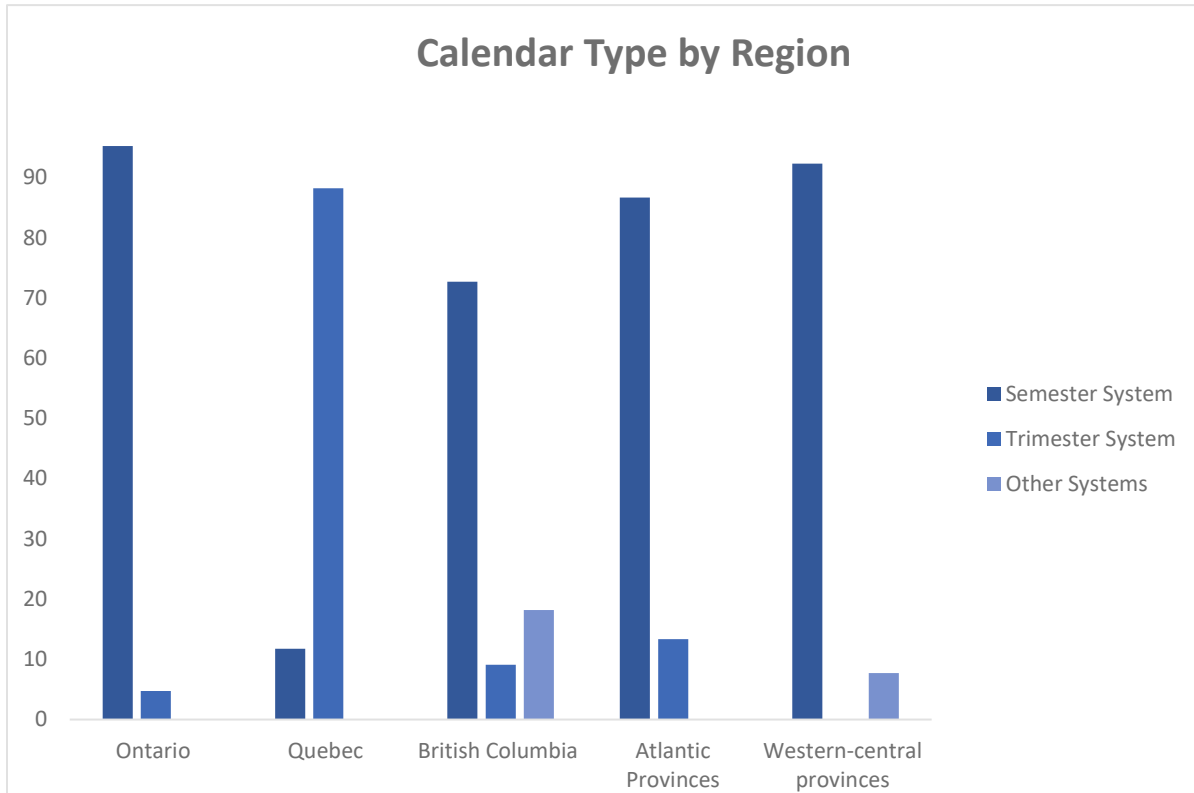


Figure 1: Calendar types by regions in Canada.

Except for Quebec, the majority of schools run on a two-semester system, where the vast majority of courses are offered during the fall and winter semesters, with some type of instruction during the summer months, the extent to which is institution-specific. Those schools whose summer course offerings were significantly less than that of their other two primary semesters were labelled as part of the semester system. Seventy-seven universities were examined, and the results were that 19 run on a Trimester System, one has rolling registration, one has an online-in-person blended format, and 56 run on a Semester System. Of the 21 schools that are non-semestered, 14 are in Quebec, and another two are French speaking schools outside of Quebec.

While there were a few examples of opportunities to earn credits in-between the traditional two semesters, the majority of innovations were offered over the spring and summer months. In fact, all semestered schools (56) offered some kind of summer instruction. The most common form of this was five-to-eight-week spring and summer sessions (51), followed by a full-length term of 13 to 17 weeks (39). It was significantly less common for schools to offer accelerated sessions of three to four weeks (20).

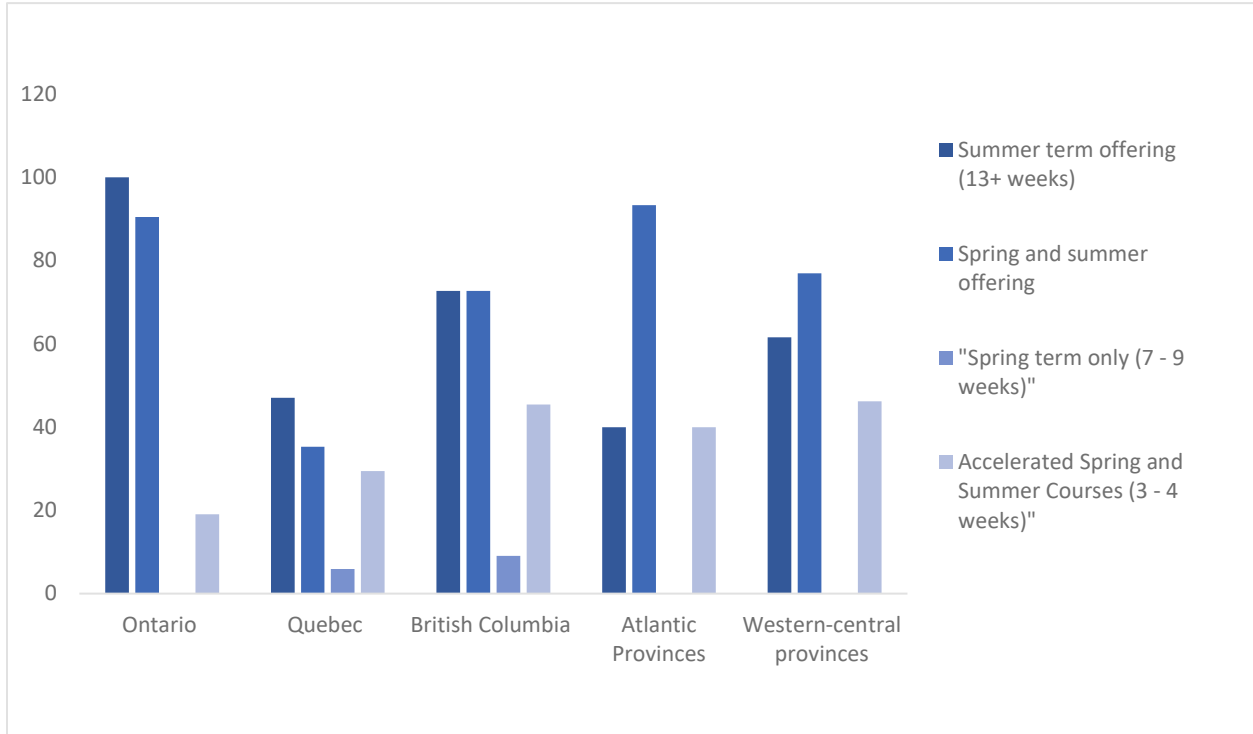


Figure 2: Spring and summer course offerings by Canadian region

Nineteen of the 77 schools examined had some kind of “calendar innovation.” Interestingly, the most rapidly growing innovation in Canadian academic calendars is the growing presence of “intersessions.” These are accelerated periods, typically two to six weeks, which provide students with course options, largely during the late spring and early summer. In the chart above, intersessions are represented by the light blue category. For example, the Western University offers the same courses that would usually happen over a 13-week semester in a condensed time frame over the spring and summer. Some schools have carved out other breaks for accelerated learning. The University of Calgary, for example, offers a one-week “block week” at the beginning of each semester, in which students can complete a credit within the week. As a general trend, academic calendar innovations are more common among universities that have been more recently accredited. Arguably, the lack of a longstanding tradition creates opportunities to experiment with novel approaches.

Taken as a whole, the academic calendar changes that took place in the last century in the U.S. and Canada represent some movement. In particular, the use of the summer term and other historically non-academic periods denotes a trend towards a more year-round approach to education. The initial trend toward year-round calendar changes can be generally explained by increasing enrollment, threats of over-crowding, and fiscal advantages of making better use of facilities on a year-round basis (Burton & Nesbitt, 2002; Hood & Freeman, 2000; Gokhale & Yamin, 2001; Graves et al., 2013, Hand 1983; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; National Education Commission on Time in Learning, 1994). Another initial reason for year-round calendars that has become more significant in recent years is the desire to provide greater flexibility to students, and increased personalization of the learning experience (Anastasi 2007; Davis 1972; Lutes and

Davies 2018; Pennington 2006). Despite the shift toward year-round schooling, the majority of school availability and attendance continues to occur from September to April.

Further institutional and cultural movement is required to consider the entire school year as an opportunity to take courses. For example, universities typically offer far fewer courses throughout the spring and summer months. Additionally, registrations for the fall and winter semesters tend to have a separate, later, opening date from courses in the spring and summer. This means that students do not get to see what is available in the spring and summer when they are choosing their fall and winter courses, and therefore, cannot effectively plan their entire year for fear of missing a course that they may want and/or need. This restricts the autonomy of students to better schedule themselves for success, especially with the increases in pressures that many contemporary students face. Further, the cultural norm that students take five courses in the fall and winter semester remains strong, creating high degrees of stress in students who take a full-course load, and a sense of inadequacy in those who do not. This culture is encouraged by some professional degrees (e.g., Medical School at Western University) that do not consider courses that were taken in the Spring and Summer as part of a full course load, and therefore, do not consider them when calculating students' academic averages. Ultimately, a commitment to year-round learning in post-secondary environments is critical to support the needs of contemporary students.

Accelerated Learning

Changing academic calendars is not only about increasing the time spent in schools, but also rethinking relationships to traditional notions of the length of courses. The recent experimentation with accelerated courses, as seen through the increase in "intersessions," is part of the trend toward year-round education. Early attempts at accelerated learning come from summer teaching institutes in the late 1800s, language acquisition programs for soldiers during the second world war, as well as early forms of modular calendar systems and weekend colleges in the mid-1900s (Gokhale & Yamin, 2001; Seamon, 2004). Most of the literature on accelerated learning is taken up with responding to the primary criticism of the time-condensed format: inferior learning outcomes due to a lack of time for learning (Burton & Nesbit, 2002; Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Hyun et al., 2006; Lutes & Davies 2018). Though accelerated learning is a relatively recent research field, the sizable and multi-disciplinary body of literature on time-condensed learning clearly establishes that students perform at least as well in accelerated courses compared to traditional formats, ultimately dismissing claims of inferior outcomes (Anastasi, 2007; Davies, 2006; Gokhale & Yamin, 2001; Grant, 2001; Lutes & Davies, 2018; Seamon, 2004). This finding is true across disciplines, which goes to show that all subjects are conducive to acceleration, though the literature is clear that some subjects, such as 'non-numerical' ones, are more successful than others (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Lutes & Davies, 2018). Additionally, it should be noted that there is little research on the long-term learning impacts of accelerated versus traditional learning, with pre-existing literature calling for this to be a focus of future attention (Daniel, 2000; Gokhale & Yamin, 2001; Seamon, 2004).

Accelerated learning is also critiqued for its potential to create a heavy, and, at times, overwhelming workload for both students and faculty (Daniel, 2000; Gokhale & Yamin, 2001; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Seamon, 2004). In response to these criticisms, scholars have set certain recommendations for when and how accelerated courses should be implemented. These include limiting the number of accelerated courses taken concurrently, ensuring that faculty are well-prepared, and using effective teaching methods (Hyun et al., 2006; Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010;

Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Scott, 2003). A comprehensive explanation of the factors necessary to create effective accelerated courses is described by Scott (2003), including specific instructor characteristics, teaching methods, classroom environments, and evaluation methods. When implemented effectively, accelerated courses have high rates of student motivation, effort, focus, attendance, and participation, as well as positive classroom environments and student to student and student-faculty interactions (Anastasi, 2007; Burton & Nesbit, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Kretovics et al., 2005; Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Lutes & Davies, 2018; Scott, 2003). These are particularly helpful findings as they move beyond academic outcomes to showcase a more holistic view of student and faculty satisfaction.

One of the central reasons for the creation of accelerated courses is the flexibility these courses provide to students. Taking an accelerated course allows students to have more choice and autonomy over their schedules, whether it allows them to accelerate, catch up, or lighten their load for future semesters (Burton & Nesbit, 2002; Hyun et al., 2006; Kretovics et al., 2005). This particular benefit of accelerated courses is critical, given the mental health crisis on post-secondary campuses. There are many factors that contribute to post-secondary student stress and mental health, including academic activities, pressures to succeed, relationships, new environments, care responsibilities, and financial difficulties (Byrd & McKinney, 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Hurst et al., 2013, Linden & Jurdi-Hage, 2017; Robotham, 2008). Of these stressors, academics play a key role, with heavy workload and time-management cited as significant contributors to student stress (Hurst et al., 2013; Jogaratnam & Buchanan, 2004; Robotham, 2008). With this in mind, giving students flexibility and control over their academic situation is critical. In fact, evidence suggests that students who perceive themselves as having control over their situation report lower levels of stress (Robotham, 2008). As such, the flexibility and control afforded by accelerated courses, offered throughout the year, exists, in part, as a tool to support students with increasing demands on their time and stress levels.

While there are some stressors that apply generally to most post-secondary students, other student stressors are unique to specific groups. For example, students in marginalized groups based on race, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability face unique challenges that generally increase overall anxiety when compared to privileged groups (Douglas et al., 2008; Dusselier et al., 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Hurst et al., 2013; Jogaratnam & Buchanan, 2004; Linden & Jurdi-Hage, 2017). Relatedly, students who tend to report the highest rates of tension are considered to be ‘non-traditional’ students, such as part-time students, mature students, working students, care-giving students, or students who have other burdensome responsibilities while they are in school. While all students can benefit from having more control over their academic situation, accelerated courses are particularly helpful for those with numerous competing responsibilities (Burton & Nesbit, 2002; Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Hyun et al., 2006; Seamon, 2004). The increased flexibility and control offered by accelerated courses can positively contribute to striking a work/life/study balance. Thus, their continued creation is not only a response to the contemporary student in terms of rates of stress and mental illness, but also a response to the changing contemporary student demographic. Therefore, institutional support from university faculties and registrar’s offices for innovative accelerated courses should be a priority.

Student Risk

Thus far, there has been discussion of some of the institutional logistics related to time and learning that would better meet contemporary students where they are. Now, the relationship between learning and risk will shed some light on how the current structure of merit and evaluation in post-secondary institutions undermines opportunities to prepare students for the demands of the contemporary labour market. With continuous technological, economic, and social shifts over the last century, the labour market is ever-changing. According to the World Economic Forum's 2016 Report, *The Future of Jobs*, 65% of students currently enrolled in primary school will be employed in jobs that do not yet exist. This shocking statistic raises the important question of how society can prepare young leaders for such unknown futures. It comes as no surprise that the answer lies in how educational institutions teach students. The first thing schools must do to prepare students for an evolving world of work is to teach breadth, not just technical expertise. In other words, students and the economy would profit from being taught through an interdisciplinary lens. To that end, a study out of Northeastern University found that the overwhelming majority of Americans and business owners polled valued broad education over industry-specific skills (Stratford, 2013). If schools can teach breadth of knowledge through interdisciplinary learning, graduates will be more versatile and better prepared to adapt to the changing needs of the labour market. The second critical aspect of preparing students for an uncertain future is facilitating life-long learning. Defined as a necessary condition of survival in the 21st century by Glastra et al. (2004), life-long learners are essentially those who understand that they must continue to learn throughout their lives. Bye et al. (2007) argue that life-long learning is facilitated when students are genuinely interested in what they are learning. In other words, when students are intrinsically motivated, seeing learning as an end in itself, promotes autonomous learning, psychological well-being, deeper understanding of information, higher grades, and persistence (Bye et al., 2007). If genuine interest and intrinsic motivation to learn are fostered in schools, students will graduate as life-long learners, prepared for the contemporary labour market, because the concept of continuous learning is deeply embedded in their understanding of the world.

Many see the value in university education encouraging breadth and life-long learning. Additionally, students are often encouraged to 'do something they are interested in,' pursuing depth through a major field of interest, while still having breadth requirements and/or opportunities to take electives outside of their field of study. In practice, however, educational norms have created and deeply embedded a significant barrier that is sabotaging both interdisciplinary learning and life-long learning in the university context. This barrier is grades. Instead of taking courses they are genuinely interested in from a breadth of subject areas and reaping all the benefits of doing so, students are choosing courses based on perceived level of difficulty and expected grade outcomes (Daly & Last, 2017; Gaughan, 2018; Holtgrieve, 2016; Ting & Lee, 2012; Warner, 2016). Though there are few studies that look at the reasoning behind students' choice of electives, those that do exist have found that the central driver of elective choice is perceived difficulty and workload (Daly & Last, 2017; Ting & Lee, 2012). In a study on a public university in Malaysia, Ting and Lee (2012), found perceived interest to be the second highest motivator of course choice, however, they also concluded that students will avoid enrolling in difficult courses, regardless of their level of interest. Ting and Lee (2012) get to the root of why students take the easiest possible courses to have a higher GPA, by further arguing that the education system places more emphasis on grades than the learning process itself.

The valuing of grades over learning has been the subject of extensive discussion amongst educators, many of whom are writing about their frustration related to their students' obsession with grades and doing well, at the cost of their own learning (Gaughan, 2018; Holtgrieve, 2016; Klein, 2020; Warner, 2016). Some have even explored the possibilities of “ungraded” courses which have been shown to improve the overall learning environment (Guberman, 2021). Not only do students want to achieve high grades, but many also want to do so with the least amount of possible effort (Holtgrieve, 2016). Discussion boards on popular websites for Canadian university students confirm this motivation. There are an endless number of websites and social media groups that direct students to, and are heavily populated by, student inquiries about the easiest possible courses at each university. Birdcourses.com, for example, allows any student to type in the name of their university and see a list of the easiest courses at that university. Other websites like Humans of University or OneClass have similar functions, with sections called some iteration of “10 of the Easiest Classes at ____ University.” Further, students post their own inquiries about easy courses on social media groups and Reddit threads. These platforms are filled with entries like “please let me know the easiest courses to get the highest grades in,” or “19 easy as hell classes, where you’re almost guaranteed to get an A,” to name a few. People respond to these posts and list all the easy courses they have taken or heard about. These websites and posts heavily reinforce the idea that students are trying to find the courses that will give them the highest grades for the least amount of effort.

As a result, it seems that in practice, many students are not engaging with the kinds of learning that will prepare them for the contemporary labour market. Instead of being intrinsically motivated, exploring their interests, and choosing a breadth of courses, students are focusing on the extrinsic motivation of grades and avoiding higher levels of challenge or risk. This is a logical response, given that, as outlined above, many contemporary students are juggling multiple responsibilities and feeling overwhelmed as it is. In this way, grades are a critical barrier to the academic risk-taking that will enable interdisciplinary and life-long learning. Of course, students' obsession with high grades has a logical basis, because of the increased competitive and precarious nature of the labour market. To contend for secure employment, many students recognize that further graduate and professional schooling is necessary. Consideration of grades is an entrance component to nearly every graduate and professional program. Unfortunately, this grades-based system and increased interest in multiple credentials is not likely to go away. This means that opportunities for change in this realm lie, again, with post-secondary institutions themselves, and their organizational and re-organizational priorities. If universities are to prioritize an intrinsic motivation to learn and develop lifelong, interdisciplinary learners, universities must re-think risk and enable low-risk, interdisciplinary environments that foster curiosity and reward students for what is most important: the learning process, not the self-defining grade that results from it. Next, a discussion of one such effort to re-prioritize will be presented.

Intersession and Inspire 1A03

In response to the issues raised above related to re-thinking time and risk in the post-secondary context, McMaster University in Ontario, Canada that has launched a pilot initiative to create a fulsome intersession semester that includes accelerated, experiential, low risk courses within the month of May. This timing is unique, in part, because like most Ontario Universities, McMaster teaches the majority of their undergraduate courses during the fall and winter semesters. This

innovation is meant to provide students with more opportunities to direct how and when their learning takes place, in part, to reduce overall stress. Additionally, intersession is meant to provide a space for innovations in teaching and learning, and provide unique courses for students to explore topics of interest that are outside of their home disciplines in a relatively ‘low-risk’ way. The intersession foundational course, INSPIRE 1A03 is an excellent example of this. The course allows students to complete a full credit in a condensed three-week period during intersession in the month of May. Students in INSPIRE 1A03 achieve the credit by selecting and completing three modules, each taught by a different instructor, from a cross-discipline list of modules focused on interdisciplinary and experiential learning. Like other calendar innovations over the past century, INSPIRE 1A03 is a change to the academic calendar that takes a more year-round approach by making use of the early spring session that is often disregarded as part of the academic year. Additionally, INSPIRE 1A03 aligns with the trend toward accelerated learning, and the growing presence of intersessions to better meet the realities of contemporary students.

The reasons for the creation of INSPIRE 1A03 are threefold. Like many other institutions that pursue year-round learning, one of the primary intentions of INSPIRE 1A03 was to make better use of the McMaster campus on a more year-round basis. With beautiful grounds that are less densely populated in the spring and summer months, INSPIRE 1A03 exists to increase students’ on-campus presence in the underutilized month of May. Further, INSPIRE 1A03 was created to provide students with the space to explore their educational path, by allowing students to choose three interdisciplinary modules without prerequisites or required experience with the module topic. Thus, INSPIRE 1A03 allows students to get a feel for a variety of fields of study in a relatively low-risk environment in two ways. First, success in these courses is based more on reflection and the learning process than on content outcomes. Second, if students realize that they do not like the topic (or instructor), they are not committed to months of the course, but rather are done with it in a week. In response to the student stress and mental health conversation, the final key reason for the creation of INSPIRE 1A03 is the flexibility it gives students. INSPIRE 1A03 provides the opportunity to achieve full course credit in a few short weeks during a non-traditional academic period, granting students more flexibility and control for future semesters. Given the flexibility it provides, INSPIRE 1A03 is a direct response to the needs of the contemporary student, in terms of the growing rates of student stress, especially for students who face unique work/life/study stressors. Intersession at McMaster is part of a broader campaign to provide more flexibility and control for students and innovation in teaching and learning, by promoting year-round schooling and innovative courses.

Conclusions

In conclusion, by revising traditional approaches to time and risk in post-secondary schooling, significant implications for meeting diverse student needs and fostering student mental health can be achieved. It has been established that previous decisions made about academic years and lengths of courses are based upon the idea of a ‘traditional’ student, which is no longer representative of the current student demographic. In response, institutions are encouraged to consider a greater commitment to year-round learning, innovative courses that encompass various lengths, and an increase in ‘low-risk’ learning opportunities. The benefits to student mental health and the opportunities for innovative teaching are two major reasons for post-secondary institutions to consider a more fulsome emphasis on year-round schooling and

accelerated courses. If institutions become more committed to offering and promoting courses throughout the entire year, there is a better chance of students planning their courses around the whole year. This shift would be an important step in making this the norm, and potentially reducing some of the stigma and stress associated with not taking a ‘full load’ throughout the traditional academic year. In addition, offering courses that are ‘low-risk’ can help encourage students towards life-long interdisciplinary learning. There is much to gain by adapting institutions to better reflect the lived realities of the 21st century.

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John Maclachlan is a graduate of McMaster University receiving his PhD from the School of Geography and Earth Science in 2011. His research focuses on the glacial outwash floods in Peru; erosion rates of the Niagara Escarpment; and the improvement of student success in higher education. Currently working as the Manager of Educational Initiatives and Assessment for McMaster University Housing and Conference Services John is using his experiences from teaching and research to improve the student experience. John has taught over 150 university courses and in 2014 he won the McMaster University Presidents Award for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching and Learning.

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