



# Mental Health and Service-Learning in the Canadian Context

**Vanessa R. Sperduti**

*Western University, Canada*

**Sandra Smeltzer**

*Western University, Canada*

## Recommended Citation

Sperduti, V. R., & Smeltzer, S. (2022). Mental health and service-learning in the Canadian context. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 10(1). Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.66278>

## **Mental Health and Service-Learning in the Canadian Context**

Vanessa R. Sperduti and Sandra Smeltzer

This article explores the relationship between two significant recent developments in higher education – the rise of mental health crises on our campuses and the growth in experiential learning (EL), including local service-learning (SL) activities. However, there is little information regarding the intersection of these areas of theory and practice. In this article, we look at both beneficial and detrimental impacts on students' mental health and well-being, exploring how some students may feel empowered by their SL experiences while others may feel disheartened. Informed by a 'critical hope' framework and supported by a series of qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups, our discussion further explores opportunities for SL programs to both promote and protect students' mental health, which will become increasingly more important in the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

**Keywords:** *mental health, well-being, service learning, higher education, critical hope, Canada*

## **La Salud Mental y el Aprendizaje-Servicio en el Contexto Canadiense**

Vanessa R. Sperduti y Sandra Smeltzer

Este artículo trata de la conexión entre dos desarrollos significativos en la educación superior - el aumento de la crisis de la salud mental en nuestros campus y la crecida en el aprendizaje-experiencial (AE), incluyendo el aprendizaje-servicio (AS) local. Sin embargo, hay poca información con respecto a estas áreas de teoría y práctica. En este artículo, examinamos los impactos beneficios y perjudiciales en la salud mental y el bienestar de los estudiantes, explorando cómo algunos estudiantes podrían sentirse empoderados por sus experiencias AS mientras otros podrían sentirse desanimados. Informado por una estructura de 'la esperanza crítica' y apoyada por una serie de investigación cualitativa, incluyendo entrevistas semiestructuradas y grupos de enfoque, nuestra discusión más explora oportunidades para programas de promover y proteger la salud mental de los estudiantes, que será cada vez más importante en las secuelas de la pandemia mundial de COVID-19.

**Palabras clave:** *salud-mental, bienestar, aprendizaje-servicio, educación superior, esperanza crítica, Canadá*

Editors' Note: Translation by **Maria Marchionna**  
Pennsylvania, USA

This article explores the relationship between two significant recent developments in higher education – the rise of mental health crises on our campuses and the growth in experiential learning (EL), including local service-learning (SL) activities. We examine the intersection of these areas of theory and practice because the kinds of issues students may encounter during their SL experiences can have powerful impacts

– both beneficial and detrimental – on their mental health and well-being. On the one hand, students may feel that they are making a positive difference in the lives of others, are reducing anxiety about future job preparedness, and are developing a greater sense of agency and professional confidence. On the other hand, SL may be the first time a student has seen up-close the deleterious effects of systemic injustice in their own backyard. Further, their placement may be painful if it parallels their own life experiences or those of a loved one. Whatever the reason(s), some students may feel empowered by the experience of working with a community partner for the betterment of society, while others may feel disheartened by the unfairness they encounter. Drawing on the framework of “critical hope” (Grain & Lund, 2018), a realistic optimism about the transformative power of SL for both students and attendant communities, this article critically explores mental health issues as they relate to students’ participation in community-oriented pedagogical practices.

Our exploration of this topic is, in part, informed by interviews and focus group discussions conducted in 2019 and early 2020 with faculty, staff, students, and community partners in seven Canadian cities. This primary research, completed by a team of one faculty member and two doctoral candidates, is supplemented by the authors’ own experiences facilitating SL for 20 years. Although drawn primarily from the Canadian context, research outcomes will be familiar to readers in other countries around the world as well. In the penultimate section of the article, we provide key recommendations for how SL programs can proactively promote and protect students’ mental health, actions that will become increasingly important in the aftermath of the current global pandemic.

## **Expanding Service-Learning Meets Growing Mental Health Needs**

In response to pressures exerted by local, regional, and federal/national governments, combined with ever-growing demand from students (and often their parents), institutions of higher education (IoHE) are increasingly incorporating EL activities into their degree requirements (Finley & Bowen, 2021; Universities Canada, 2017; Waddell et al., 2018). Our institution, Western University, describes EL as “an approach that educators use to intentionally connect learners with practical experiences that include guided reflection” (2019, p. 1). Types of curricular EL range from short-term internships with private sector companies to co-ops with government agencies to faculty-led study abroad programs. Although different departments and faculties may focus their energies on facilitating certain types of local and international EL, all activities must adhere to overarching principles that emphasize the importance of ethical practices, guided reflection, and “reciprocal connections between theory and practice” (Western University, 2019, p. 1).

In this article, we examine a specific component of this EL ecosystem, community engaged learning (CEL), for which “[s]tudents engage in a project, developed collaboratively with a community partner, that has mutually beneficial outcomes” (Western University, 2019, p. 1). For us, CEL underscores reciprocity, a commitment to collaborative community work, and a respect for the experience and expertise of community partners (Aujla et al., 2018; Brabazon et al., 2019; Goemans et al., 2018; Groulx et al., 2020; Kepkiewicz et al., 2018). Although the term CEL tends to be quite common in many Canadian universities, some institutions also describe this form of EL as “service learning” (SL) or “community service learning” (CSL) (Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022). Regardless of the term used, SL is on the rise throughout Canada’s post-secondary system, in part to demonstrate the societal relevance of publicly funded institutions (Butterwick, 2018; McQuarrie, 2019; Smeltzer, 2020). At our university, for instance, curricular SL course offerings more than doubled from 2017 to 2020 and are expected to continue expanding for the foreseeable future (see Western University, 2021).

Concomitantly, Canadian IoHE is witnessing mental health crises, mostly involving students’ chronic and cumulative stress (Monaghan et al., 2021; Porter, 2019). While some sources of stress remain constant throughout many students’ post-secondary experience (e.g., financial constraints, personal relationships, course workload), equally, other sources of stress can change by academic year (e.g., first-year students transitioning to post-secondary life, upper-year students preparing applications for graduate programs or jobs) (Lisnyj et al., 2021). According to Statistics Canada, “teenagers and young adults aged 15-24

experience the highest incidence of mental disorders of any age group in Canada... The education environment, and perhaps especially the transition into college or university, poses distinct challenges” (Massey, 2019, p. 89; see also King et al., 2021). The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2019) shared alarming statistics: “two out of three post-secondary students in Canada say stress negatively affects their studies. Half have used campus mental health services – 10 percent in crisis situations – and more than a quarter have experienced thoughts of suicide” (para. 1). It is thus not surprising that institutional supports are straining under increasing demand to address the complex interplay of demographic, psychological, emotional, social, physical, and academic factors impacting students’ stress (Ogrodniczuk et al., 2021). To illustrate the extent of this crisis, the number of students seeking help from our university’s Accessible Education Services tripled from 2008 to 2018, and students requesting psychiatric/mental health support more than quadrupled between 2010 and 2018 (Western University, 2018, p. 5). While the increased usage could be attributed to various factors (e.g., additional supports have been made available, students are more willing to use on-campus resources), these statistics do give serious pause. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a particularly concerning toll on many students’ mental health, especially during periods of “quarantine and social isolation” precisely “because they are already more likely to have mental health issues than the general population” (Boutros & Marchak, 2021, p. 51; Kennett et al., 2020; Mushquash & Grassia, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2021; StatsCan, 2020a).

The Canadian-based reports referenced above, quite understandably, focus on mental ill-health and the ways in which IoHE can help mitigate crises. However, in his oft-cited model, Keyes (2002) reframes a more common understanding of what constitutes mental health. Keyes describes the presence of mental health as “flourishing,” or what we might refer to as thriving, whereas “the absence of mental health is characterized as languishing” (p. 208). He depicts mental health as a continuum between these two ends – flourishing and languishing – with individuals occupying different nodes at distinct points in their lives based on a wide range of internal and external variants. What is especially important to understand here is that mental *health* should be viewed as “more than the absence of mental illness” (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010, p. 110). Thus, by proactively making accessing support clear and easy, and equipping instructors with relevant resources, IoHE can help students to flourish and thus reduce mental ill-health crises on their campuses (Mick & Frabutt, 2017; Seppälä et al., 2020).

Further, although institutions often do provide such resources for students participating in international SL (Larsen, 2017; Liou, 2020), this is seldom the case for those pursuing local placements. Yet, experiences closer to home can also have beneficial and detrimental impacts on students’ mental health (Brogly et al., 2021). Indeed, we contend that local SL can positively impact students’ mental health through meaningful community engagement and by helping them to develop skills they can use to pursue the life they wish to lead (Leshner & Scherer, 2021). We also recognize that SL can negatively impact students’ mental health, especially if they struggle to productively manage difficult encounters and emotions. With this knowledge, SL instructors and coordinators, along with IoHE administrations, must “recognize, understand, and manage the impact that emotions have on those students who engage in service learning activities,” regardless of whether they take place at home or abroad (Priesmeyer et al., 2016, p. 55; Langstraat & Bowdon, 2011).

The need to proactively address students’ mental health was illustrated in a pre-pandemic (January 2020) interview we conducted with a staff member from a centralized, university-level SL office. This individual commented that some of the faculty members who coordinate and supervise local SL courses at their institution have expressed reservations about the necessity of addressing issues of power, privilege, and social justice with their students: “faculty get why they need to talk about serious issues that students deal with when they go abroad... but they don’t see it being that serious when students are only going ‘down the street’ for their placement.” Although this interviewee emphasized that faculty members who hold this opinion are in the minority, their actions (or lack thereof) could have potentially long-term and adverse effects on students, on community partners, and on other instructors trying to facilitate ethical SL practices closer to home or further afield. A “critical hope” framework (Grain & Lund, 2018), a discussion to which we now turn, provides us with an entrée into this process.

## Critical Hope

As part of an outward-facing public relations campaign to shore up a “positive public image,” and as a means to attract funders and students, SL can serve a utilitarian function for academic programs and their home institutions (Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 141). Indeed, the assumption built into most higher education promotional materials is that participating in SL activities will be personally transformational and will lead to a better future, including greater employability. While we hope that students’ SL experiences do, in fact, have a powerful impact on their personal, academic, and professional lives, we encourage readers to not only celebrate success stories of community engagement, but to also be willing to acknowledge challenges and unfavourable (even adverse) outcomes of this pedagogical practice. Schutter (2018) best captures our perspective: “The continuous sharing of positive stories and problems with pleasant endings seems to reduce the meaning and gravity of our service. If positivity is the ethos of service-learners, students lose the opportunity to express the entirety of their experience” (p. 9). Moreover, we are not giving students the space, support, and permission they may need to grapple with difficult emotional experiences. In other words, although we want students to have an overall positive SL experience, that does not mean it needs to be frictionless, sanitized, or devoid of difficulty. Rather, our desire is for students to possess the tools they need to productively work through difficult emotions stemming from their SL encounters; tools that will help them now and, in the future, as they transition into their lives post-graduation.

To achieve the twinned mental health objectives of facilitating positive experiences and helping students to productively manage difficult ones, we contend that IoHE must foster in students the belief that – individually and collectively – they can help to create a more just and equitable society. Nurturing participants’ agency in this way is, we believe, paramount to our shared future. However, this hopefulness needs to be paired with a critical understanding of why, how, and to what extent others seek to maintain political, economic, and socio-cultural status quos through hegemonic, overt, and systematic mechanisms. Grain and Lund (2018) refer to such realistic optimism as “critical hope,” a deep and committed belief that a better world can be created by and through our actions. Instead of allowing the injustices students may encounter in their SL activities to “comprise grounds for despair,” a critical hope approach can inspire them to use their experiences as fuel to engage “in political action toward social and economic justice” (p. 5). This approach is therefore born of a “tension between criticality – of privilege, charity, hegemony, representation, history, and inequality – along with a hope that is neither naïve nor idealistic, but that remains committed to ideals of justice, reflexivity, and solidarity” (Grain & Lund, 2018, p. 14; see also Latta et al., 2018).

Importantly, we are not suggesting that all SL participants necessarily encounter injustice that heightens their despair, nor that all placements have an overtly social justice orientation. For example, in our Media and the Public Interest program at Western University, there is a wide spectrum of the kinds of organizations fourth-year SL students work with, from youth justice agencies to arts councils to environmental networks. The point is that the relationship between hope and despair is contingent on a multitude of factors, including a student’s experiences, positionality, and capabilities, as well as on the type, form, and content of their SL program and the institution supporting it. For these reasons, the ability to embrace critical hope requires students to reflect upon their own subjectivities vis-à-vis systems of privilege and inequality.

## The Impetus for the Research and Methodology

The principal motivation for conducting the primary research described here comes from comments made by students during such reflection exercises in our Media and the Public Interest’s SL course. Conversation topics have included the anxiety students feel before they embark on their placement regarding what the process will entail, how they will perform, and if they possess or can learn the relevant skill sets. Many students also express feeling excited about the opportunity to engage in “real life” pursuits geared towards the public good. During their placement, some students describe the emotional toll of bearing witness to suffering and marginalization, are worried that they are not making a big enough impact or are frustrated that their experience was not what they had expected. Conversely, some students talk about the powerful,

positive impact of the placement on their personal and professional lives, and that “making a difference” has benefitted their mental health. Still others relay concerns after their SL draws to a close about how they can sustain their service commitments or how they can use their experiences in the job market post-graduation. Many students also convey that their placement was the most personally rewarding part of their academic program. These varied expressions of positive and negative feelings are not incongruous. In fact, students often comment in our reflection sessions that their SL experiences have been both beneficial and detrimental to their emotional well-being, just in differing amounts at different points before, during, and after their placement.

This continuum of emotional responses to SL experiences highlights the importance of authentic and in-depth reflection exercises, which are the foundation for all forms of EL (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Sanders et al., 2016). Reflection activities, which are already geared towards understanding service on a deeper level, can also play an important role in providing students with constructive, empathetic spaces to engage with peers and collectively talk through the intersection of SL and mental health (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Smeltzer et al., 2020). Additionally, these activities offer instructors an opportunity to introduce additional mental health resources and pathways for students to seek assistance both on and off campus (Ogrodniczuk et al., 2021).

The growing intensification of students’ remarks during the reflection components of our SL course led us to conduct qualitative research on this topic. To this end, the discussion that follows is informed by 27 anonymous, semi-structured interviews conducted between May 2019 and February 2020 with graduate students, faculty, staff, and community partners from seven Canadian universities located in two provinces<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, we facilitated two focus group discussions with a total of six undergraduate students who have completed placements at two Canadian universities. All of our interviewees and focus group participants are from social sciences, arts, and humanities disciplines, with 17 of the 27 interviewees from Communications and Media Studies. We contacted these individuals via publicly available email addresses and asked if they were interested in participating in the research (without remuneration). We recruited undergraduate students for the focus groups through general listservs, provided by colleagues from two universities, and offered a light lunch as compensation for their participation.

The 27 interviews ranged from 30 to 75 minutes in length and took place at a time and location of the interviewees’ choosing. The two focus group discussions with undergraduate students were approximately 60 minutes in length, and took place in an on-campus, accessible classroom. To ensure the privacy of these students, no one from their home institution was present during the discussions. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with permission of participants and transcribed by an outside third party. As per the approved ethics application, interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded only with participants’ consent and the recordings were transcribed by the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. For participants who wished not to be recorded, a member of the research team - the Principal Investigator (Smeltzer) or one of the two doctoral research assistants - took notes by hand with the participants’ consent. Upon completion of this qualitative face-to-face research, which was best-suited for the exploratory nature of our study, we analyzed the transcribed interviews and focus group discussions for repetitive themes and patterns via a qualitative triangulation of data. While this research was not geared solely towards capturing perspectives regarding mental health, the further into the study we proceeded, the more obvious it became that mental health and well-being has become increasingly important to our participants. We thus individually coded the data line-by-line and highlighted terms and phrases individuals used to describe mental health (e.g., “stressed,” “overwhelmed,” “emotionally fulfilling,” “positive impact,” “struggling”). This type of detailed coding is important because it enables “a contextual understanding of the experience of service-learning and an understanding of the participants’ perspectives... in their own words” (Selmo, 2015). From our coding, we developed separate sets of themes and patterns specifically related to mental health. We compared our respective findings upon reconvening to co-establish key themes and patterns, a process that occurred in several iterations. As Merriam and Grenier (2019) argue, this type of triangulation is an especially valuable strategy to ensure internal validity and credibility of a qualitative research study (p. 26; see also Denzin, 2005; Flick, 2018).

Two major trends emerged from this primary research that are relevant to our discussion here. First, participants had not thought about the impacts of engaging in SL specifically in terms of mental health. As one staff member commented

When the placements go really well... when you actually feel they've come away having learned something, having been kind of political or charged by something or found an area that they want to continue to work on... that's great... but I've never really tried to think about that in terms of their mental health.

Second, according to the majority of our staff and faculty interviewees, the approach taken in their academic home units to the mental health needs of SL participants is primarily reactionary and ad hoc in nature, rather than proactive and intentional. By and large, a staff or faculty member steps in when something “goes wrong” during a placement, and then refers the student to on-campus support. Our research, therefore, tells us that taking proactive mental health measures to promote the capacity of students to flourish, and to protect against their languishing, is critically important (Duffy et al., 2019; Monaghan et al., 2021; Seppälä et al., 2020). Primary research conducted recently by Lisnyj et al. (2021) at one Canadian university reflects our own: “undergraduate students typically seek services reactively to address their mental health concerns once they are already stressed, indicating a gap in proactive, resilience-focused, upstream efforts at post-secondary institutions to prevent the deleterious effects of stress from initially occurring” (p. 18).

### **Potential Benefits of SL: Mental Health as Flourishing**

The Canadian mental health data cited above paint a sobering picture of the extent of mental health concerns on and beyond our campuses. These statistics align with our interviews and focus group discussions. One staff member interviewee, for instance, argued quite strongly that “mental health is a huge, huge issue right now with our students,” while another said that although there are “obvious benefits” to participating in SL, it can also be “very stressful” for students. As these excerpts intimate, research participants referred to mental health almost exclusively in negative terms, as a problem that needed to be “fixed.” However, flourishing in life refers not only to a dearth of mental health issues (Keyes, 2007). Drawing on Keyes’ work, Mitchell et al. (2016) contend that mental health should also be viewed as including positive attributes “broadly conceptualized as happiness, optimal functioning, and the maximization of potential—including the ability to adapt to change, act on personal beliefs, manage emotions, develop meaningful relationships, and find a purpose in life...” (p. 41). We therefore draw on our primary research data to explore some of the beneficial impacts of SL participation on students’ mental well-being. While this research was conducted in diverse contexts of two Canadian provinces and at several universities, the key themes that emerged from the data are consistent with one another and extend beyond our national borders.

### **Giving Back and Fostering Agency**

For an SL student, the sense of giving back to a community and feeling that they are making a positive difference in the lives of others can play an important role in fostering their own mental health (Finley & Reason, 2016; Knapp et al., 2010). As Aristotle reasoned, “the good life aspired to something more than just the individual’s wellness. It aspired to the welfare of the community, the polis – for the ‘other’ and all ‘others’” (Sherman, 2020, p. 14). This philosophy is reflected in the words of one graduate student interviewee: “I think it’s really good for... student health, mental wellness to see that the work you’re doing matters.” SL can also help students build a stronger connection with communities in their city, which can be particularly powerful for individuals who may not often venture outside of delineated geographical areas around their home institution. During our program’s in-class reflection exercises, for example, students often disclose that they were unaware of the size of our city, its diversity, or the extent of its intersectional inequities prior to participating in their SL placements.

Additionally, an SL experience can bolster students’ personal and professional confidence, especially when they feel their contributions are valued within an organization and/or by the people it supports. As a

salient case in point from our focus group discussions, an undergraduate student commented that they “couldn’t believe that the people at *organization x* listened to me... they wanted to know what *I* had to say. It felt really good to be treated like an adult.” Likewise, for many students in our program, an SL placement is their first time working alongside others in a professional setting. While potentially daunting at first, this experience usually boosts students’ sense of accomplishment and agency.

### **Bridging Theory and Practice**

SL can play a critical role in helping students manage emotional and cognitive dissonance stemming from curricula that grapple with the ills of contemporary society. Canadian Communications and Media Studies, for example, is political, interventionist, and committed to advancing the public good. At the same time, the majority of programs are heavily theoretical with relatively little in the way of hands-on components (Smeltzer & Shade, 2017). Consequently, upper-year undergraduate students in our program often comment that their degree has become disheartening and taken a toll on their psyche. Additionally, many of them want to volunteer – or volunteer more – with a non-profit organization but cannot commit the time with a full course load, and scholastic obligations are often compounded by part-time jobs and family responsibilities. Further, students may not know how best to approach an organization, how to request a placement, or how to connect their academic work with community-based activities. Facilitated, curricular SL experiences can help fill these lacunae. As an undergraduate student commented in one of our focus group discussions, their SL placement afforded them an opportunity to “finally get to *do* something with what I had been learning... it was really what I needed to do... emotionally.”

### **Post-Graduation Preparedness**

For many students, an SL placement offers practical experience they can include on their résumé or curriculum vitae, as well as an opportunity to hone skill sets, to acquire professional experience, and (as noted above) to gain insight into a “real world” workplace environment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Sen et al., 2016). Additionally, SL may provide students with a preview of future employment prospects, access to reference letters, and networking connections. Any of these possibilities can help reduce students’ anxiety about job preparedness, post-graduation trajectories, and the financial impact of amassed student loans, all of which can positively impact their mental health (Bartholomae, 2019). As a staff member said in our interview, interest in SL has grown dramatically over the last five years at their institution because, “from a mental health perspective, I think they’re [undergraduate students] all just really stressed about what they’re going to be able to do when they graduate.” Likewise, a faculty member interviewee relayed the sense of stress and anxiety that students feel in terms of, “‘Am I going to make it out there?’ ... so I feel like that it’s [EL] an offering that gives them comfort in thinking that, ‘OK, well, they can get some real-world experience’.”

While attention is usually focused on undergraduate SL, the mental health benefits of engaging in community-oriented praxis also pertain to graduate students. Numerous faculty member interviewees lamented the dwindling availability of stable academic positions and the need to provide graduate students with other forms of professionalization, including SL opportunities. For example, one faculty member said, “I think we have a moral obligation for Ph.D. students... to show them other career paths as well because the marketplace is crazy.” Relatedly, there can be mental health benefits associated with students finding out what they do *not* want to do in terms of future volunteering or employment. A graduate student offered an apposite example: “The main takeaway is, I think, from my internship with *x organization*, was that I learned what I absolutely never want to do again.” Likewise, a staff member described a common conversation they have with students who realize part-way through or after their placement that they do not want to work in the non-profit sector, for a specific organization, and/or in a particular type of position:

I always say, ‘that’s just as valuable to find out about.’ To me, that’s not a failure. That’s just learning... Those are good things to start figuring out, like, ‘the people I’m surrounded by is more important than the money or the environment or the cause.’ I always look at it as this is the only way you’re going to



find out.. by trying something. ‘And aren’t you glad you don’t have to quit a permanent job? This is just a four-month trial.’

As this “mental health as flourishing” section underscores, and those of us who are immersed in SL are well aware, engaging in these types of community-oriented pedagogical practices can be beneficial to students’ overall well-being. However, these impacts may not always be positive. In keeping with our call to move beyond telling only “success stories,” we now draw attention to some of the possible detrimental impacts of SL on students’ mental health if appropriate mechanisms are not in place to proactively support them through every part of the process.

## **Potential Detriments of SL: Mental Health as Languishing**

### **Emotionally Fraught and “Wicked” Experiences**

Some students feel that their SL experience reveals that the “problem” they hoped to address is too “wicked” (Van Meter et al., 2012, p. 31), too complicated, and/or too entrenched for them to make a discernible difference, especially within the condensed time frame of an academic semester (Mitchell, 2008). A former student of Smeltzer’s, for instance, commented that while their local and international SL placements made them realize they have “responsibilities in this world,” the extent of the problems both at home and abroad made them feel “almost paralyzed by it all” (Smeltzer, 2015, p. 515). Students may also intrinsically feel that they should provide answers to help solve a community problem. This is not only unfair to the student, but it also serves to foster a deficit model of SL, which suggests that the flow of knowledge, labour, experience, and expertise is unidirectional from IoHE to community partners (Bruce, 2018; Hartman et al., 2018).

Students’ mental health may also be affected if they witness up-close various forms of inequity and injustice. For many, this kind of placement is the first time they have seen the adverse effects of systemic and systematic oppression, and often express surprise at how emotionally difficult they find the experience. Some students describe the pain they feel upon realizing that they have held prejudice against particular groups of people in their communities. For instance, a graduate student interviewee openly talked about their preconceived notions regarding homelessness in their city: “I didn’t know that I thought that way about people experiencing homelessness. I always thought it was their fault. I feel terrible thinking that... I thought that way for so long.” As Grain and Lund (2018) touch upon, SL can be emotionally fraught when participants find themselves questioning “their own ontologies, ethics, and ways of knowing” (p. 12). Indeed, when students “come to realize that they have behaved in oppressive ways or have unfairly benefited from – or been disadvantaged by – an inequitable system,” it can be quite distressing (Grain & Lund, 2018, p. 13). In terms of the former, a faculty member interviewee said that during their program’s self-reflection exercises, students often divulge pivotal moments in their SL placement where they find themselves saying

something like ‘wow, you know, sitting there, I was the only white person in the room. This person comes in with a delivery and they immediately walk over to me because they think I’m the manager of the program... I’m just a student here visiting. You know, *there’s* the manager,’ ... just little moments of white privilege that they might not have reflected on as deeply.

In terms of the latter, for students who have been disadvantaged by an inequitable system, their SL experience may be painful for its familiarity with their own life histories. A different faculty member relayed a story of a student who chose to fulfil their placement at an organization dedicated to supporting youth coping with a specific issue that the student in question had also grappled with in the past. The placement started out positively and the student seemed to be flourishing; however, part-way through the semester, they needed additional support to navigate the emotional impact of reliving their own past traumas. The faculty member said that not only were they initially unaware of the student’s past (for privacy reasons), but the student themselves did not expect the placement would be so emotionally fraught. More concerning, the student did not know where to turn to seek the support they needed and thus did not reach

out for help until they were almost at a crisis point. This is just one of many stories emerging from our primary research that serves to remind us that “not all students have the same support networks, access to resources, or confidence to seek out mentors for guidance” (Finley, 2016, p. 19).

### **Labour Concerns and Reorienting Perceptions of Success**

As noted at the outset of this article, the overarching goal of SL is to create a mutually beneficial experience for students and community partners that builds solidarity. However, prior to commencing their placement, some students in our program have expressed apprehension that their host organization and/or our university may view them as free labour. Concerns regarding the exploitation of student labour run deep for many scholars who worry that SL helps train students to view themselves as precarious and un(der)paid workers, which can negatively impact their sense of self-worth. They are also concerned about potentially burdening already stretched-to-the-limit community partners and, if not facilitated ethically, SL can cannibalize entry-level, paid positions in the non-profit sector (Bodinger de Uriarte & Jacobson, 2018; Cai & Majumdar, 2018; Cohen & de Peuter, 2019; Van Styvendale et al., 2018).

Relatedly, every year in our program, students express both surprise and concern that their SL placement requires a greater outlay of time and energy than they originally anticipated (see Fraustino et al., 2019). A staff member interviewee at a different institution concurred, saying that students regularly convey that “they didn’t realize how much work it was going to be... to balance kind of their [SL] workload with other jobs or their other coursework.” Further, numerous interviewees commented that many students find it difficult to embrace SL as a process and experience - students have been taught throughout their scholastic lives that if they spend more time and energy on a task, they will have material “proof” of their achievement, an end product to be graded (Clifford, 2017; Schutter, 2018, pp. 7-8). Understandably, they are often anxious to demonstrate the same with their SL placements and, in lieu of a discernible product, want to enumerate the number of hours they commit to their respective organization. In our program we try, with varying degrees of success, to shift students’ mindsets away from products produced or hours spent to instead focus on impact – on themselves, on their organization, and on the community/ies they support. We emphasize that our overarching goal is for their SL experience to afford them the space to learn, grow, contribute, and even falter. In so doing, they are encouraged to embrace the process rather than a hoped-for end result. For some students, being able to focus on the process is liberating and helps them to flourish, whereas others find the unfamiliar *modus operandi* disorienting and stressful.

From the community side of the labour equation, university public relations campaigns presuppose that non-profit partners necessarily want more students working with them. Expectations that local organizations are capable of accommodating additional students is, more often than not, presumptuous. One of our community partner interviewees commented that, given the sensitive nature of their work with a vulnerable population, they could only adequately mentor a very small number of students each semester because there “just isn’t enough time to give them the emotional support they need... and should have.” Thus, as community partners are asked to facilitate swelling numbers of students and their multivariate needs (Soutter et al., 2012), IoHE must commit to ensuring that the time, energy, and expertise of these co-educators are fully respected (Aujla & Hamm, 2018; Clifford, 2017; Kepkiewicz et al., 2018).

### **The Cost of Participation**

For some students, it may be financially taxing for them to participate in certain types of SL, especially if they must extend their degree program, forgo paid employment, and/or travel domestically or internationally (Fraustino et al., 2019; Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2017). A staff member interviewee told us that they meet regularly with struggling students

whose paycheque is going to the parent and having so much responsibility at such a young age... the desperation... and if they don’t get paid work experience, how are they going to continue in school? The pressure can really hurt our students’ mental health... there’s no doubt.

Likewise, an undergraduate student shared in our focus group discussion that several of their friends are foreign students who “simply can’t work for free because their tuition is so high.” Consequently, they have chosen to only seek paid internships with the private sector “even when they want to work with a not-for-profit.” It has been well-documented that these types of financial strain can negatively impact students’ mental health (Adams et al., 2016; Reid et al., 2019).

### **Embracing the Mundane and Managing Disappointment**

Understandably, students usually want – and often expect – an exciting placement where they are on the front lines of doing important work that makes a demonstrable difference in the lives of others. This expectation is a positive reflection of their personalities, desire to foment change, and to be of service to a given community. The often-slow-paced nature of political change and the behind-the-scenes work required to keep an organization operational may, therefore, not be what students hoped for when they signed up. Indeed, local SL

might seem mundane to students because it does not need to extend to exotic locales or dramatic causes that snag news headlines. More often, service-learning remains embedded in the everyday struggle to improve the lives of people close to home. (Schwartzman, 2007, p. 11)

Yet, as Seitz (2018) contends and with which we agree, students can benefit greatly from engaging in more tedious SL activities because tedium is part and parcel of sustainability in the non-profit sector. It is thus more ethical to be honest with students from the outset and tell them that they might be disappointed if they expect to fundamentally transform the non-profit sector or solve a “wicked” problem. Seitz’s call for candidness resonates with comments made by one of our staff member interviewees:

It’s [SL] not always awesome for everyone. And it’s not always the most amazing thing. I know they’re going to have a great experience. I know they’re going to grow and learn from it. But we have to be a little careful with... how much you promote it... you can’t oversell.

Students may also be disillusioned by how some non-profit and community-based organizations operate. In our program, for example, students have voiced genuine surprise if their host organization does not have a dedicated office for them to work in, if it is hierarchical with internal politics, and/or if it is struggling financially to make ends meet. These examples tell us that, along with positive experiences, students can also have challenging ones, especially given the “under-structured and under-resourced nature of many service-learning environments” (Schwartzman, 2007, p. 9).

### **Recommendations to Proactively Promote and Protect Participants’ Mental Health**

We are living through an exceptional time in modern history due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only are the needs of students expected to increase now and into the future, but the needs of our community partners will also intensify immeasurably as they continue working to serve our fellow citizens (Strub, 2020). Unfortunately, and despite financial support from the Canadian federal government, many non-profit and charity organizations throughout our country will significantly reduce or completely shutter their operations (Lancione, 2020; Imagine Canada, 2020). Given strained resources, we expect that many of the organizations capable of remaining operational will welcome the assistance of SL participants. Recognizing this need, and the toll that the pandemic has taken on the most vulnerable members of society, our academic program has received increased interest from students wanting to engage in SL activities. While this growth may be welcomed, it poses three problems. First, many other students are limited in their ability to participate in SL for a range of emotional, physical, and/or financial reasons resulting from the pandemic. Second, several partner organizations have indicated to us that their capacity to mentor and support these students has diminished. According to a study conducted in late May 2020, approximately one-third of Canadian student respondents said, “that the pandemic resulted in the cancellation or postponement of their work-integrated learning,” and that more than half “of students who had their work placement delayed or

cancelled were very or extremely concerned that their credentials would be considered less valuable” (StatsCan, 2020b). Third, IoHE may not have the capacity to facilitate swelling numbers of students and attend to their mental health needs. Thus, for those students who can participate, what can IoHE do to proactively facilitate for them meaningful SL experiences while also assisting, rather than burdening, community partners? Importantly, what mental health measures do IoHE need to establish, expand, and/or maintain to help students flourish in the lives they choose to lead? As we continue to navigate the impacts of the pandemic, we have suggestions on how to move forward accounting for what we know and also for what remains unknown.

### **Create Clear Pathways to and for Support**

We first recommend that IoHE create EL-specific pathways to ensure that mental health resources are easy for students to find and access (Lisnyj et al., 2021). As an undergraduate student made very clear in one of our discussions, “there may be various resources for mental health on our campus, but the noise surrounding this... can be overwhelming for students. Students need resources that are specifically catered toward EL and immediately available to help ease anxiety.” Similarly, a staff member said that although “there are supports that exist for students” at their institution, “there’s just sort of a lack of awareness of how to access those, or that they exist, or that there is someone to talk to.” These quotes illustrate what we heard repeatedly during our primary research – that mental health supports tend to be provided in a reactionary manner with the onus on students to seek out pertinent resources.

To address our objective of helping students productively manage the range of emotions stemming from their SL experiences, we offer two recommendations. First, we propose collating and packaging mental health materials to create easily accessible resources specifically geared to supporting the mental health of students participating in local SL. While mental health issues relating to SL are obviously not one-size-fits-all, on-campus wellness services often do not include resources that focus on off-campus experiences with community partners (Council of Ontario Universities, 2017).

Second, depending on the size of the IoHE and the amount of EL it facilitates, we recommend creating a mental health ombudsperson trained in ethical SL principles for students to contact for support. This individual would be the point person to assist students wanting to access institutional mental health resources regarding their SL experiences and would be available to facilitate conversations between students, instructors, and/or staff members about mental health issues. We see tremendous value in this kind of position because, as Schutter (2018) points out, “[w]hen problems enter into conversation, it is implied that students will work out these issues on their own, ultimately coming to a place of growth, resolution, or success” (p. 7). The benefit of such an ombudsperson was made clear by two undergraduate students who, in their focus group discussion, said that they “trusted” their academic supervisor and felt they could go to them if they were uncomfortable in their placement or if their mental health was suffering as a result of their SL experience. However, both students also said they were unsure of what they would do if something went awry in their placements but found it awkward or distressing to seek help in their academic program. One of these students surmised, “I guess I’d just have to figure it out on my own,” which we worry would lead them to the languishing end of Keyes’ continuum. An ombudsperson can thus provide SL students with a sense of extra security, knowing that someone at their institution is dedicated to working in their best interest and can help them through the process of engaging in difficult discussions both on and off campus.

### **Provide Training and Recognize SL Care Work**

Although we have argued the importance of working proactively to foster students’ flourishing, responsibility cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of instructors or coordinators to independently “see” students’ needs or to know how to bolster their mental health. We therefore recommend that IoHE preemptively equip individuals who manage the logistical and/or academic aspects of SL programs with robust tools, training, and resources to address students’ needs appropriately and effectively. IoHE must also make a commitment to protecting our mental health needs, recognizing that intersectional factors,

including (but not limited to) gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, Indigeneity, disability, and labour precarity can impact one's capacity to engage in SL-oriented care work (Misra et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2010; Victorino et al., 2018). As discussed in this article, the emotional labour required to coordinate and facilitate SL, including attending to students' mental health, is significant. It includes "demonstrations of sympathy and empathy, one-on-one attention, supportive communication, counseling, general development of personal relationships, and making a person 'feel good'" (Lawless, 2018, p. 86; see also Constanti & Gibbs, 2004). In addition to being tremendously time-consuming and emotionally draining, attending to this care work often requires training to which few of us have been exposed (Lawless, 2018). As one of our faculty member interviewees described, SL is

all emotional, unpaid emotional labour... helping students through all of these difficult concepts and working through white guilt or working through social class kind of guilt where they're out in communities and... struggling with their own identity and all of that, that can be really difficult to talk them through it as, you know, professors.

These concerns are heightened for precariously employed faculty, staff members, and graduate students who are increasingly responsible for SL activities and usually bring significant expertise and experience to the process. These individuals may not have the job security that many others enjoy and if they are first-time instructors, if they struggle with mental health themselves, and/or are members of one or more demographics suffering oppression, their mental health can also languish instead of flourish. As an apropos example, one part-time faculty member we interviewed commented that, although they enjoyed coordinating SL placements, they found the "care work" expectations of students and their administration quite stressful. Unfortunately, they did not have the "resources, of time and energy and will" to meet these expectations at a level they wished they could achieve (see Berg et al., 2016; Ivancheva et al., 2019).

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Trajectories**

There are several strengths of this article. In particular, we have moved the discussion of mental health and SL, which are usually looked at separately, beyond anecdotal information to also include primary research. By amplifying the voices of various members of the SL community - students, faculty, staff, and community partners - we gain first-hand insight into how participants themselves view the relationship between SL and mental health. The timing of this article is also acutely relevant given the rise of mental health concerns on our campuses, combined with the growth of EL in post-secondary institutions.

Notwithstanding these benefits, we would have liked to have extended our research beyond the social sciences, arts, and humanities to include more undergraduate students from other disciplinary backgrounds in our focus group discussions. We are continuing this primary research now that face-to-face interactions are once again possible; additional interviews and focus group discussions will help us to better understand if and how the relationship between mental health and SL has shifted as a result of COVID-19. Future research could also delve more deeply into understanding students' motivation(s) for engaging in this form of community-oriented pedagogy during and/or after COVID-19 and how the experience has affected their overall well-being (Grenier et al., 2020).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Given that we have now been living and working under the shadow of COVID-19 for close to three years, we have seen the multitude of ways in which the pandemic has impacted students, instructors, facilitators, and community partners. We can expect, and are already witnessing, shifts in the gendered nature of the labour force, dwindling resources for the non-profit sector, greater needs within our communities, growing labour precarity in higher education, and intensifying pressure on citizens' mental health. For these reasons, we believe that critical hope provides a useful framework for SL participants to recognize injustices, nurture empathy, and actively seek social justice in productive ways. As a key component of this process, IoHE should commit to promoting and protecting the mental health of students by helping them to understand the extent of needs in our communities while also encouraging confidence in their agency to address those needs now and in the future.

## References

- Adams, D. R., Meyers, S. A., & Beidas, R. S. (2016). The relationship between financial strain, perceived stress, psychological symptoms, and academic and social integration in undergraduate students. *Journal of American College Health, 64*(5), 362-370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2016.1154559>
- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning to Higher Education, 1*, 25-48. <https://hdl.handle.net/1805/4579>
- Aujla, W., & Hamm, Z. (2018). Establishing the roots of community service-learning in Canada: Advocating for a community first approach. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning, 4*(1), 19-37. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v4i1.306>
- Bartholomae, S. (2019). Introduction to the special issue on student loan debt. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues, 40*(1), 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-019-09608-4>
- Berg, L. D., Huijbens, E. H., & Larsen, H. G. (2016). Producing anxiety in the neoliberal university. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien, 60*(2), 168-180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12261>
- Bodinger de Uriarte, J. J., & Jacobson, S. R. (2018). Dirty work: The carnival of service. In B. Urciuoli (Ed.), *The experience of neoliberal education* (pp. 73–105). Berghahn Books.
- Boutros, G., & Marchak, K. A. (2021). Factors impacting the mental health of Canadian university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *University of Toronto Medical Journal, 98*(3), 50–56. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=151417605&site=ehost-live>
- Brabazon, H., Esmail, J., Locklin, R., & Stirling, A. (2019). Beyond Employability: Defamiliarizing Work-Integrated Learning with Community-Engaged Learning. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching and Learning, 5*(3), 21-41. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v5i3.70364>
- Brogly, C., Bauer, M. A., Lizotte, D. J., Press, M. L., MacDougall, A., Speechley, M., Huner, E., Mitchell, M., Anderson, K. K., & Pila, E. (2021). An app-based surveillance system for undergraduate students' mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic: Protocol for a prospective cohort study. *JMIR Research Protocols, 10*(9), e30504–e30504. <https://doi.org/10.2196/30504>
- Bruce, J. (2018). Postcritical service-learning: Interruptions to ethnocentric and salvationist discourses. In D. E. Lund (Ed.), *The Wiley international handbook of service-learning for social justice* (pp. 203-223). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Butterwick, S. (2018). Community as teacher: Who's learning? Who's teaching? In D. E. Lund (Ed.), *The Wiley international handbook of service-learning for social justice* (pp. 299-317). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cai, C., & Majumdar, U. (2018). Moral entanglements in service-learning. In B. Urciuoli (Ed.), *The Experience of Neoliberal Education* (pp. 171-184). Berghahn Books.
- Clifford, J. (2017). Talking about service-learning: Product or process? Reciprocity or solidarity? *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 21*(4), 1-13. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1357>
- Cohen, N. S., & de Peuter, G. (2019). Interns talk back: Disrupting media narratives about unpaid work. *The Political Economy of Communication, 6*(2), 3–24. <http://www.polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/view/96>

- Constanti, P., & Gibbs, P. (2004). Higher education teachers and emotional labour. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 18(4), 243-249. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540410538822>
- Council of Ontario Universities (2017). *In it together: Taking action on student mental health*. <https://cou.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/In-It-Together-PSE-Mental-Health-ActionPlan.pdf>
- Denzin, N. K. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1-32). SAGE Publications.
- Duffy, A., Saunders, K. E., Malhi, G. S., Patten, S., Cipriani, A., McNevin, S. H., & Geddes, J. (2019). Mental health care for university students: A way forward? *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(11), 885-887. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30275-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30275-5)
- Finley, A. (2016). Well-being: An essential outcome for higher education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 48(2), 14-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2016.1163163>
- Finley, L. L., & Bowen, G. A. (Eds.). (2021). *Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Issues, Ideas, and Challenges for Promoting Peace and Justice*. Information Age Publishing.
- Finley, A., & Reason, R. D. (2016). Community-engaged signature work: How a high-impact practice may support student well-being. *Diversity and Democracy*, 19(4).
- Flick, U. (2018). *Doing triangulation and mixed methods* (Vol. 8). SAGE Publications.
- Fraustino, J., Pressgrove, G., & Colistra, R. (2019). Extending understanding of service-learning projects: Implementing place-based branding for capstone courses. *Communication Teacher*, 33(1), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2017.1372609>
- Goemans, M., Levkoe, C. Z., Andrée, P., Changfoot, N., & Christopherson-Cote, C. (2018). Learning to “walk the talk”: Reflexive evaluation in community-first engaged research. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, 4(2), 61-84. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v4i2.61748>
- Grain, K. & Lund, D. (2018). Introduction - The social justice turn: Cultivating critical hope and engaging with despair. In D. E. Lund (Ed.), *The International handbook of service-learning for social justice* (pp. 3-25). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119144397.ch0>  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119144397.ch0>
- Grant-Smith, D., & McDonald, P. (2018). Planning to work for free: Building the graduate employability of planners through unpaid work. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(2), 161-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1357804>
- Grenier, L., Robinson, E., & Harkins, D. A. (2020). Service-learning in the COVID19 era: Learning in the midst of crisis. *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, 7(1), 1-10. <https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/phs/vol7/iss1/5>
- Groulx, M., Nowak, N., Levy, K., & Booth, A. (2020). Community needs and interests in university–community partnerships for sustainable development. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-03-2020-0086>
- Hartman, E., Kiely, R. C., Friedrichs, J., & Boettcher, C. (2018). *Community-based global learning: The theory and practice of ethical engagement at home and abroad*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Imagine Canada (2020). *COVID-19 Resource Hub*. <https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/covid19>
- Ivancheva, M., Lynch, K., & Keating, K. (2019). Precarity, gender and care in the neoliberal academy. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(4), 448-462. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12350>

- Kennett, D. J., Quinn-Nilas, C., & Carty, T. (2020). The indirect effects of academic stress on student outcomes through resourcefulness and perceived control of stress. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(11), 2460-2472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1723532>
- Kepkiewicz, L., Levkoe, C. Z., & Brynne, A. (2018). "Community first" for whom? Reflections on the possibilities and challenges of community-campus engagement from the community food sovereignty hub. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, 4(2), 43-60. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v4i2.61747>
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2002). The mental health continuum: From languishing to flourishing in life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43(2), 207-222. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3090197>
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2007). Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health. *American Psychologist*, 62, 95-108. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.2.95>
- King, N., Pickett, W., McNevin, S. H., Bowie, C. R., Rivera, D., Keown-Stoneman, C., ... & U-Flourish Student Well-Being and Academic Success Research Group. (2021). Mental health need of students at entry to university: baseline findings from the U-Flourish Student Well-Being and academic success study. *Early intervention in psychiatry*, 15(2), 286-295. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eip.12939>
- Knapp, T., Fisher, B., & Levesque-Bristol, C. (2010). Service-learning's impact on college students' commitment to future civic engagement, self-efficacy, and social empowerment. *Journal of Community Practice*, 18(2-3), 233-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2010.490152>
- Lancione, A. (2020, August 24). Non-profits at risk because of pandemic, survey finds. *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/non-profits-at-risk-because-of-pandemic-survey-finds-1.5695497> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/non-profits-at-risk-because-of-pandemic-survey-finds-1.5695497>
- Langstraat, L., & Bowdon, M. (2011). Service-learning and critical emotion studies: On the perils of empathy and the politics of compassion. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 17(2), 5-14. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0017.201>
- Larsen, M. A. (2017). International service-learning: Rethinking the role of emotions. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 40(3), 279-294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825917706379>
- Latta, M., Kruger, T. M., Payne, L., Weaver, L., & VanSickle, J. L. (2018). Approaching critical service-learning: A model for reflection on positionality and possibility. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 22(2), 31-55. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1386>
- Lawless, B. (2018). Documenting a labor of love: Emotional labor as academic labor. *Review of Communication*, 18(2), 85-97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2018.1438644>
- Leshner, A. I., & Scherer, L. A. (Eds.). (2021). Mental health, substance use, and wellbeing in higher education: Supporting the whole student. National Academies Press.
- Liou, C. P. (2020). Launch out into the deep: A psychotherapist's view of an international service-learning experience. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2019.1707168>
- Lisnyj, K. T., Pearl, D. L., McWhirter, J. E., & Papadopoulos, A. (2021). Targeting components of social capital on campus to alleviate Canadian post-secondary students' academic stress. *Current Psychology*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01376-5>



- Massey, K. D. (2019). Student affairs and services in Canadian higher education. In W. Archer & H. G. Schuetze (Eds.), *Preparing Students for Life and Work* (pp. 78-97). Brill Sense.
- McQuarrie, J. (2019). *Monitoring Trends in Academic Programs*. Higher Education Strategy Associations. <http://higheredstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/HESA-MTAP-vol.1-no.1.pdf>
- Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2019, March). *Catalyst - March 2019 - Getting mental health up to standard on post-secondary campuses*. <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/catalyst-march-2019-getting-mental-health-standard-post-secondary-campuses>
- Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (Eds.). (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mick, C. S., & Frabutt, J. M. (2017). Service-learning in higher education: Teaching about poverty and mental health. In S. Lavery, D. Chambers, & G. Cain (Eds.), *Service-learning: International Perspectives on Inclusive Education Vol. 12* (pp. 215-240). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-363620170000012014>
- Misra, J., Lundquist, J. H., & Templer, A. (2012). Gender, work time, and care responsibilities among faculty. *Sociological Forum*, 27(2), 300-323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2012.01319.x>
- Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 50-65. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0014.205>
- Mitchell, J. J., Reason, R. D., Hemer, K. M., & Finley, A. (2016). Perceptions of campus climates for civic learning as predictors of college students' mental health. *Journal of College and Character*, 17(1), 40-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2015.1125367>
- Monaghan, C., Linden, B., & Stuart, H. (2021). Postsecondary mental health policy in Canada: A scoping review of the grey literature / Politique de santé mentale post-secondaire au Canada: Un examen de la portée de la littérature grise. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry/ Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie*, 66(7), 603-615. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743720961733>
- Moore, H. A., Acosta, K., Perry, G., & Edwards, C. (2010). Splitting the academy: The emotions of intersectionality at work. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 51(2), 179-204. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20697938>
- Mushquash, A. R., & Grassia, E. (2020). Coping during COVID-19: examining student stress and depressive symptoms. *Journal of American College Health*, 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1865379>
- Porter, S. (2019). A descriptive study of post-secondary student mental health crises. *College Quarterly*, 22(1). Retrieved from <http://collegequarterly.ca/2019-vol22-num01-winter/descriptive-study-of-post-secondary-student-mental-health-crises.html>
- Priesmeyer, H. R., Mudge, S. D., & Ward, S. G. (2016). Emotional responses to service learning: An exploratory study. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*, 12(2), 55-61. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1139805>
- Ogrodniczuk, J. S., Kealy, D., & Laverdière, O. (2021). Who is coming through the door? A national survey of self-reported problems among post-secondary school students who have attended campus mental health services in Canada. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(4), 837-845. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12439>

- Raddon, M. B., & Harrison, B. (2015). Is service-learning the kind face of the neo-liberal university? *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 45(2), 134–153. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v45i2.184393>
- Reid, M., Jessop, D. C., & Miles, E. (2019). Explaining the negative impact of financial concern on undergraduates' academic outcomes: Evidence for stress and belonging as mediators. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(9), 1157-1187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1664732>
- Rowe, A. D., & Zegwaard, K. E. (2017). Developing graduate employability skills and attributes: Curriculum enhancement through work-integrated learning. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 18(2), 87-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1664732>
- Sanders, M. J., Van Oss, T., & McGeary, S. (2016). Analyzing reflections in service learning to promote personal growth and community self-efficacy. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 39(1), 73–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825915608872>
- Schutter, C. M. (2018). Moving beyond great expectations: Expressing discontinuity in institutionalized service-learning. *VA Engage Journal*, 6(1), 1-17. Retrieved from <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/vaej/vol6/iss1/5>
- Schwartz, K. D., Exner-Cortens, D., McMorris, C. A., Makarenko, E., Arnold, P., Van Bavel, M., Williams, S., & Canfield, R. (2021). COVID-19 and student well-being: Stress and mental health during return-to-school. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 36(2), 166-185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735211001653>
- Schwartzman, R. (2007). Service-learning pathologies and prognoses. *Online Submission*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED499084.pdf>
- Seitz, D. K. (2020). “It’s not about you”: Disappointment as queer pedagogy in community-engaged service-learning. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67(3), 305-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1528078>
- Selmo, L. (2015). The narrative approach in service-learning methodology: A case study. *The International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.21566>
- Sen, S., Umemoto, K., Koh, A., & Zambonelli, V. (2017). Diversity and social justice in planning education: A synthesis of topics, pedagogical approaches, and educational goals in planning syllabi. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 37(3), 347–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X16657393>
- Seppälä, E. M., Bradley, C., Moeller, J., Harouni, L., Nandamudi, D., & Brackett, M. A. (2020). Promoting mental health and psychological thriving in university students: A randomized controlled trial of three well-being interventions. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11, 590. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00590>
- Sherman, G. L. (2020). Existentialism and higher education: A renewed intersection in well-being. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820917231>
- Smeltzer, S. (2015). Interrogating course-related public interest internships in communications. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 13(2), 509-525. <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v13i2.621>
- Smeltzer, S. (2020). Wearing multiple reflexive hats: The ethical complexities of media-oriented community engaged learning. In *Media Activist Research Ethics* (pp. 131-154). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

- Smeltzer, S., & Shade, L. R. (2017). Guest editorial: Activism and communication scholarship in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 42(1). <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2017v42n1a3247>  
<https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2017v42n1a3247>
- Smeltzer, S., Leon, C., & Sperduti, V. (2020). You can't throw snowballs over Zoom: The challenges of service-learning reflection via online platforms. *RIDAS. Revista Iberoamericana de Aprendizaje-Servicio*, 10, 101-112. <https://doi.org/10.1344/RIDAS2020.10.9>
- Soutter, A., O'Steen, B., & Gilmore, A. (2014). The student well-being model: A conceptual framework for the development of student well-being indicators. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 19(4), 496–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2012.754362>
- Sperduti, V.R. & Smeltzer, S. (2022). Community-oriented Experiential Learning: Fostering Ethical High-Impact Practices for the Future. *Taking Stock 2.0: Transforming Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Edited by J.C. Hughes, J. Mighty, and D. Stockley (Eds.) (pp. 325-345).
- StatsCan (2020a, May 12) How are postsecondary students in Canada impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020032-eng.htm>
- StatsCan (2020b, May 25). *Study: Work-integrated learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*. [https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200525/dq200525a-eng.htm?utm\\_source=Academica+Top+Ten&utm\\_campaign=e590ba993b-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2020\\_05\\_27\\_04\\_43&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b4928536cf-e590ba993b-51604849](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200525/dq200525a-eng.htm?utm_source=Academica+Top+Ten&utm_campaign=e590ba993b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_05_27_04_43&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b4928536cf-e590ba993b-51604849)
- Strub, C. (2020, May 25). Survey: 44% of nonprofits anticipate further staff cuts due to Coronavirus. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chrisstrub/2020/05/25/layoffs/#75a1c93c50d4>
- Universities Canada (2017). Universities/facts and stats. <https://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/>
- Van Meter, K., Blair, E., Swift, A., Colvin, C., & Just, C. (2012). An introduction to sustainability service-learning course for the creation of sustainable citizens to engage wicked problems. *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, 1, 30-49. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jslhe/index.php/jslhe/article/view/16>
- Van Styvendale, N., McDonald, J., & Buhler, S. (2018). Community service-learning in Canada: Emerging conversations. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, 4(1), i-xiii. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v4i1.303>
- Victorino, C., Nylund-Gibson, K., & Conley, S. (2018). Prosocial behavior in the professoriate: A multi-level analysis of pretenured faculty collegiality and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 32(5), 783-798. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-09-2017-0258>
- Waddell, J., Robinson, P., & Wehbi, S. (2018). Bridging the theory/practice divide in professional programs. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 11(1), 1-17. <https://td.journals.psu.edu/td/article/view/789>
- Westerhof, G. J., & Keyes, C. L. (2010). Mental illness and mental health: The two continua model across the lifespan. *Journal of Adult Development*, 17(2), 110-119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-009-9082-y>
- Western University (2018). "Western's Student Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Plan." Western University. March 8, 2018. [http://studentexperience.uwo.ca/student\\_experience/strategic\\_planning/mental\\_health\\_strategic\\_plan/MH\\_Stratplan\\_DRAFT.pdf](http://studentexperience.uwo.ca/student_experience/strategic_planning/mental_health_strategic_plan/MH_Stratplan_DRAFT.pdf)

Western University (2019). Experiential Learning. Western Student Experience.  
[http://experience.uwo.ca/about/principles\\_and\\_definitions.html](http://experience.uwo.ca/about/principles_and_definitions.html)

Western University (2021). Towards Western at 150: Western University Strategic Plan  
<https://strategicplan.uwo.ca/>

---

### Notes

This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grant. The primary research described in this article adhered to the guidelines as outlined by Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB). Ethics approval was granted by the Board in Fall, 2018 through a delegated process because the research was deemed low-risk. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study. The general guide for both the interviews and the focus group discussions were approved in the ethics application and specific questions were honed during the research process to respond to participants' answers. Given that the interviews were semi-structured and the focus groups allowed students to introduce new issues or focus more heavily on certain topics, discussions revolving around certain aspects of mental health were more prominent than originally expected. As per the study's Letters of Information and Consent, participation was voluntary and individuals had the right not to answer specific questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. We thank the excellent research support provided by Darryl Pieber and Mason Brooks.

---

### About the Authors

**Sandra Smeltzer, Ph.D.**, is an associate professor and assistant dean, research. Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University.

**Vanessa R. Sperduti, OCT, Ph.D.**, completed her doctorate in Education at Western University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sandra Smeltzer at [ssmeltze@uwo.ca](mailto:ssmeltze@uwo.ca)