
2022-23

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

MENTAL HEALTH POLICY INITIATIVE



Policy Analysts:

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Mental Health
Policy Initiative

Trigger Warning

MHPI would like to let readers know that the content of this report could be triggering. This report deals with sensitive and serious topics, such as mental illness and suicide.

If you are in crisis, please visit your local emergency department or call 911

If you are in distress the following are CAMH's 24 hour resources:

Toronto Distress Centres: 416 408-4357 or 408-HELP

Gerstein Centre: 416 929-5200

Spectra Helpline: 416 920-0497 or 905 459-7777 for Brampton and Mississauga residents

TTY: 905 278-4890; *Languages: English, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Spanish, Portuguese*

Assaulted Women's Helpline: 416 863-0511; Toll-free: 1 866 863-0511

Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668-6868; Languages: English and French

Community Crisis Line Scarborough and Rouge Hospital: 416 495-2891 for 24/7 telephone crisis support.

Service borders: south to the lake, north to Steeles Avenue, east to Port Union Road, and west to Victoria Park

Durham Crisis and Mental Health Line: 905 666-0483

Distress Centre Halton: *For Residents of the Halton Region (Burlington, Halton Hills, Milton, and Oakville). Oakville: 905-849-4541; Burlington: 905-681-1488; Milton/Halton Hills: 905-877-1211*

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Introduction

The Mental Health Policy Initiative (MHPI) is a student-leadership initiative (SLI) at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy professional graduate program. This SLI focuses on mental health policy, advocacy and research within the school and explores methods to improve and support the mental health of students. MHPI is in its second year of operation, and this Impact Assessment 2022-23 is the second iteration of such a project.

What is an Impact Assessment?

An Impact Assessment (IA) is a decision making or planning tool that is used to evaluate and predict the potential positive or negative outcomes of a project. MHPI developed an IA team that has worked cohesively throughout the semester to collect qualitative and quantitative data on the mental health status of Munk students throughout the 2022-2023 school year. The team has also asked their fellow classmates to share their ideas for ways that the school can aid in the improvement of their mental health.

The IA team gathered information from classmates through surveys and focus groups. Surveys were created through Google Forms and sent through Slack channels for both MPPs and MGAs to ensure each student had an opportunity to respond. Focus groups were advertised through Slack channels and took place over Zoom calls.

Goals of the Impact Assessment

1

Increase discussion and generate community

Unite students and spread awareness by vocalizing mental health issues in both the MPP & MGA programs.

2

Advocate for students' mental health needs

Create a safe environment to allow students to share mental health concerns and potential solutions.

3

Collect data for future initiatives

Provide data to make informed decisions about gaps in MHPI initiatives and in the Munk School curriculum or resources.

Background



The Mental Health Crisis in Canada

Canada is in the midst of a mental health crisis, evidenced by an alarming increase in the rates of depression, anxiety and suicides among young people. The pandemic has exacerbated this crisis.

As per the findings of a survey conducted by Angus Reid Institute, 54% of Canadians reported that their mental health had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Korzinski, 2022). Further, suicide has become the second leading cause of death among Canadians aged 15-34 years old. Despite these alarming statistics, there are numerous barriers to accessing mental health services in Canada. There is a shortage of mental health professionals, a lack of funding and persistent stigma surrounding mental illness. These barriers diminish the efficacy of mental health interventions (Miller, 2022).

Background

Lessons Learned



The Mental Health Policy Initiative (MHPI) is dedicated to promoting mental health awareness and support among the students at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy.

In 2021-2022, MHPI conducted the first Impact Assessment, which produced recommendations to enhance these objectives. Of the proposed recommendations, several were implemented this past year. Such as, promoting engagement with students, particularly MGA students who had a limited involvement in the first report. Further, MHPI held various event nights to reduce stress and encourage mental health discussion.

The 2021-22 Impact Assessment highlighted a significant gap in intersectionality among mental health discussions at Munk and recommended that MHPI collaborate with the Munk School Black Student Association (MSBSA), Equity, Diversity and Public Policy Initiative (EDPP), Indigenous Policy Initiative (IPI), Spectrum, and Master of Public Policy Student Association (MPPSA) to evaluate current mental health offerings for students and support existing initiatives or collaborate to create new ones. In 2022-23, MHPI collaborated with various associations to advance this objective and will continue to do so in following years.

Background

Lessons Learned

However, despite MHPI's best efforts, some of the recommendations from last year's Impact Assessment Report could not be accomplished as a result of time constraints and limited resource allocation. These recommendations include the following:

- Investigate the impact of the University of Toronto Mental Health Action Plan (UMLAP) on Munk students by conducting UX interviews to determine how accessible online mental health resources are to students.
- Conducting interviews with professors and engage with the Munk Community Mental Health Conversation Committee.
- Creating an online hub for mental health resources at Munk, compiling both on and off-campus resources.

MHPI remains committed to advancing these objectives in the future.

Methodology

Stage 1

The first survey was a pulse survey containing three questions. The survey was released twice, on December 2nd, 2022 and January 18th, 2023. At first distribution, the survey garnered 64 responses and at second distribution 37 responses. Respondents included students from both MPP and MGA programs. Surveys were released across the first and second term to account for varying stress levels, curriculum changes and exam periods.

Stage 2

The second survey was released on March 6th, 2023. The survey included four multiple choice and two open-ended questions to assess how hybrid learning and workload affected the mental health of students. Open-ended questions solicited recommendations for improving the mental health of students and assessing use of mental health resources. The survey garnered 37 responses from students in the MPP and MGA programs.

Surveys were distributed through Google Form and circulated through Slack and Facebook. The Impact Assessment Team developed surveys questions, which were reviewed by Prof. James Radner, Assistant Professor at Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto.

Methodology

Stage 3

The third stage of data collection involved conducting focus groups with students across MPP and MGA programs. Focus groups occurred between February 27 and March 10. To participate, students had to sign up for a time slot through Calendly, whose link was distributed through Slack and Facebook. These efforts led to the participation of 6 students.

Focus groups were conducted remotely via **Zoom** and each session lasted **approximately 35 minutes**. Focus groups were semi-structured, with a set list of 5 questions. Analysts posed follow-up questions as needed to stimulate discussion.

Prior to the focus groups, participants were required to submit a **consent form**, which detailed the nature and aims of the Impact Assessment report (*Appendix 4*). Before focus groups commenced, analysts verbally confirmed consent and invited participants to pose questions. Focus groups were recorded, following written and verbal consent from participants. Analysts transcribed recordings, and transcripts were reviewed to identify common themes.



Quantitative Analysis:

Key Findings from Surveys

Survey 1

Results

The first survey was a pulse survey containing three questions. The survey was released twice, on December 2nd, 2022, and January 18th, 2023. The survey questioned the mental health impact of attending the Munk School and probed for specific factors which may have influenced students' mental health. Respondents could choose from a gradient of answers that ranged from 'major negative impact' to 'major positive impact', where 'no impact' acted as the middle ground (Appendix 1). To assess mental health by term, pulse surveys were sent out once in each term.

Across both distributions, the survey received 101 responses, with 64 respondents after the first release and 37 respondents after the second. The majority of respondents were MPP students. It is important to note that there was likely overlap in respondents, where participants contributed twice over both terms. At the first rollout 46/64 of respondents were MPP students and at the second 25/37 were MPP students (Appendix 1; Appendix 2).

During the first survey roll-out, over two-thirds (47/64) of respondents reported that Munk had a major, moderate, or minor negative impact on their mental health throughout the semester. Of these, 18 reported a minor negative impact, 23 had a moderate negative impact and 6 had a major negative impact. Of the respondents, 1/64 reported that Munk had a major positive impact on their mental health over the semester. However, 6 respondents reported a minor positive impact, and 7 had a moderately positive impact. Only 3 respondents reported no impact (Appendix 1).

Survey 1

Results

During the second rollout of the survey, over half (23/37) of respondents reported that Munk had a major, moderate, or minor negative impact on their mental health in the second semester. Of these, 14 reported a minor negative impact, 4 reported a moderate negative impact and 5 had a major negative impact. Of the respondents, 3/37 reported that Munk had a minor positive impact and 3/37 reported that Munk had a moderate positive impact on their mental health (Appendix 2).

The final question of the pulse survey asked participants to choose which factor, from a range of options, had the most significant negative impact on their mental health. During the first rollout, over half (37/64) of participants reported the workload as the most significant factor. This trend persisted at the second rollout, where just under half (17/37) of respondents cited workload as the most significant factor for generating a negative impact on mental health. Across both rollouts, other notable factors included a lack of community and personal life (Appendix 2).

Participants could also input their own factors. During the first term, 2 participants cited a lack of empathy from the microeconomics professor and 2 participants cited being employed part-time as a significant stressor. During the second term, participants cited negative mental health effects related to finding a summer internship, racist comments, lack of support for students with disabilities, and lack of sunlight (Appendix 2).

Survey 2

Results

The second survey garnered 37 responses from students across the MPP and MGA programs. Of the participants, 23/37 belonged to the MPP program (Appendix 3).

Survey responses highlight that over two-thirds (29/37) of participants preferred hybrid learning, which allows students to attend lectures from home. Of the respondents, 27/37 reported that access to hybrid learning would positively affect their mental health (Appendix 3). This survey also assessed the effect of the workload on mental health among students, with 17/37 respondents citing a negative impact on mental health. Notably, the majority of respondents (19/37) cited the current workload as having neither a positive or negative effect on their mental health (Appendix 3).



Survey 2

Results

The survey included two open-ended questions on mental health resource use and mental health recommendations, which received 21 and 22 responses respectively. Common themes which arose across these responses are explored below:

Mental Health Resources

Several participants (15/21) had not accessed mental health resources at all over the second semester. Further, many participants reported alleviating stress through informal mechanisms (e.g. exercise) or formal mechanisms not affiliated with the university (e.g. external counseling, CBT sessions).

Hybrid Learning

Participants favoured hybrid learning. Respondents (5/22) noted that access to hybrid learning alleviated stress when feeling poorly, or overwhelmed with school or commuting.

Communication

Recommendations from participants included improving communication with faculty, administration, and peers. Specifically, respondents (10/22) reported that further flexibility from administration and professors regarding deadlines, coursework, and examination formats as desired.

Summary of Findings

Key Takeaways



Survey findings reveal that students attending the MPP and MGA programs reported negative mental health impacts associated with attending Munk. The factor most commonly associated with negative mental health was workload, followed by personal life. Recommendations provided by students to assuage negative mental health impacts included access to hybrid learning and clearer communication channels between students and faculty or administration. Students cited further flexibility in setting deadlines, course load and exam formats as important to alleviating negative mental health impact.

Limitations

Survey findings were limited by a low participation rate and selection bias, diminishing external validity. Findings are constrained by the possible overlap between survey respondents and the limited sample size. It is possible that students who struggle more with mental health were more likely to answer the surveys. Despite increased efforts to engage with MGA students, participation from the cohort remained low. Although the rate of response remains low for both MPP and MGA students, there was an incremental change in the rate of participation rate of MGA students; 27% and 32.4% of respondents for the first survey and second survey were MGA students. Overall, the MPP participation rate was 73% for the first survey and 67.6% for the second. The survey was self-reported, and the estimates were based on the sample. Further, no demographic data was collected from participants. As a result, these findings are not generalizable to Munk as a whole and likely do not reflect the experience of students from racialized or marginalized groups. Finally, self-reported data is subject to bias which may skew results.

Survey findings did not undergo statistical analysis.

Qualitative Analysis:

Key Themes from Focus Groups

Focus Groups

Key Themes

Academic Pressure

All participants cited course load, or specific courses, as having negatively contributed to their mental health.

Community

All participants reported bonding with their peers as having a positive effect on their mental health.

Faculty Communication

Focus groups yielded mixed findings regarding faculty responsiveness to mental health concerns.

Academic Pressure

Insights from Focus Groups

Among participants, academic pressures proved a significant mental health stressor. All focus group participants reported that the rigorous academic workload, paired with intensive professional development goals, negatively affected their mental health.

There was a common trend among participants that these negative effects often stemmed from poorly spaced deadlines or particular courses, either due to the structure or time constraints. One participant stated, "I think there's been moments throughout the program as we have seen recently (prior to reading week) where assignments for different classes are all concentrated within a very limited time frame." Further, another participant commented on "econ and the first semester. Just the challenge of that course given the time pressure of testing. And the overall, I guess challenging topic matter of the course."



Academic Pressure

Insights from Focus Groups

Participants struggled to balance academics and other responsibilities. One participant discussed “being consumed” by the program and finding it difficult to either detach from or find the energy for other important aspects of life. This was echoed by another participant, who asserted that “the workload in both semesters at points got really crazy and intense... hearing from friends in the program they also felt their mental health deteriorated.”

Notably, balancing coursework and the internship search proved challenging. As one participant stated, they were overwhelmed by “the pressure instilled in trying to find an internship, while succeeding in the program and not failing particular courses.” Further, a second-year student highlighted the stress of securing employment post-graduation. They named the job search as a significant stressor, “that’s mainly because I am too busy or don’t have the bandwidth to job search. And there’s a lot of pressure to have secured a job already, but I am still trying to finish my degree.”



Community

Insights from Focus Groups

Half of the participants cited their peers or a sense of community within the cohort as beneficial to their mental health. These participants discussed how bonding with their peers and fostering meaningful relationships at Munk alleviate stress. One participant explained, "I think the peers in the program are exceptionally supportive."

Further, peers acted as an avenue for discussing mental health, concerns about coursework, and internship-related stress. As one participant discussed, "many of them (peers) go out of their way to help others. So that has been extremely helpful and positive to the mental health aspect of it."

Half of the participants reported that Munk sponsored or informal social events improved cohort morale. While many in the cohort attended informal outings, participants expressed a desire for coordinated, school-sponsored events. One participant elaborated on the positive impact of social gatherings, explaining that "whether they are formal or informal gatherings, I really enjoyed them. I felt like they were a nice break... they were a really big mood booster to get outside of the classroom." Further, another participant advocated for school sponsored events, saying "it would be nice if they were formally hosted. It was a general sentiment to have more things planned on occasion."

Faculty Communication

Insights from Focus Groups

Participants expressed mixed responses related to their willingness to discuss their mental health with faculty or administration. Across participants, responses varied depending on the faculty member, as some were more responsive to concerns than others. For example, one participant expressed that "there's some of the professors that I think have done a good job supporting students" However, further elaboration revealed that "obviously there are some faculty professors that do not, and when it comes to other faculty members, whether that be academic or you know, MPP directors, I feel like support there is exceptionally minimal."

The primary challenge students faced in terms of communicating concerns to faculty or administration was inaction. Participants discussed how faculty members or professors failed to act on some of the concerns voiced by students. As stated by one participant, "they (faculty) have failed to act on many things points students have brought to the table. They seem to listen but failed to act in most instances."

In contrast, half of the interviewed participants felt that the career resources staff and supports provided by Munk were effective in relieving stress and easing an individual's mental health. One participant explained that "MPP career resources have been a very solid support. I think it is one of the assets of this program. The individuals that work in that department are helpful, supportive and do I think go above and beyond to make themselves available for that particular facet of the program."

Summary of Findings

Key Takeaways

Focus group findings revealed that aspects of the program, specifically peers and Munk's career resources team, had positive impacts on students' mental health. These factors alleviated stress among participants.

In contrast, focus groups revealed that the academic pressures of competing deadlines and internship searches in conjunction with a poor understanding of mental health challenges from some faculty had negative impacts on students' mental health. Participants identified inaction following student complaints as a key concern.

Limitations

The focus group findings are constrained by a low rate of participation. Only 6 students participated, among which only 1 student was in the MGA program. As such, while findings provide more depth of understanding they may not accurately reflect the views and opinions of the entire student population. The generalizability and external validity of our results is significantly limited by this low participation rate.

Recommendations

1

Social Events

Participants cited connection to peers and developing a sense of belonging as crucial to bolstering their mental health. We propose to organize more mental health nights and roundtable discussions next year. The main aim would be to create a safe space for students to ensure that more students attend these events. We would also circulate feedback forms after these events to assess modifications required to improve outcomes.

2

Public Discourse

Increase the frequency with which mental health discussions occur in classrooms and with the administration to reduce stigma. Professors and administration must acknowledge the toll a rigorous academic curriculum takes on students through discussion, notices, and resource allocation. Among participants of surveys and focus groups, students reported that allowances for mental health varied wildly among faculty. Students expressed a desire for increased flexibility and understanding from administration and faculty.

Recommendations

3

Deadlines

The open-ended questions from our surveys allowed students to share their recommendations for improving their personal mental health. A series of students shared their concerns about the coordination of deadlines in their courses. We recommend that the administration ensures that professors share the deadline associated with assignments at the start of the semester and coordinate to ensure that certain weeks are not loaded with due dates while others have none. This will allow students to perform better by spreading out their workload effectively across the semester.

Students also mentioned the need to have a consolidated mental health week during both the fall and winter semester. Throughout the first semester, students were told that their professors would offer them a week off of deadlines but this was not coordinated across different courses and so it was not executed effectively. Having this week halfway through the semester will allow students to catch up on work and maybe even get ahead in order to take on the second half of the semester successfully.

Recommendations

4

Resources

Our surveys indicated that most students were unable to access any mental health resources due to a lack of awareness and accessibility. It was also identified that having Munk-specific mental health resources would be helpful in enabling students to communicate better and share their stressors. The assigned counselors would be able to draw from the experiences of other students within Munk and understand the similarities in the issues faced by most students. Additionally, the resources have to be clearly highlighted and made available to the students so that they can access them easily. Furthermore, there should be sessions and workshops organized specifically to address the stress related to internships and job searches. This is because most students face an exacerbated form of anxiety during the winter semester, primarily driven by the stress of internship and job searches.

Next Steps



Next year, MHPI is committed to creating an environment that promotes conversations around mental health and work alongside other SLIs to further mental health at the Munk School. We are committed to the following steps:

1. **Liaise with MPPSA to develop a channel for voicing concerns.** We will ensure that students are given the opportunity to speak about their mental health concerns through MPPSA office hours and round tables. Concerns that arise will be brought to administration to ensure that students do not go unheard.
2. **Changes in the Impact Assessment.** We will promote our surveys in classrooms and through Slack channels to gain a larger sample size with a more diverse response rate. MHPI will focus on receiving responses from upper-year students and students in the MGA program.
3. **Intersection of data.** We will speak with directors of different SLIs such as EDPP/ Spectrum/ Black Student Union to have promote intersectional data collection and provide better insight into mental health concerns among all groups.
4. **Getting feedback on the events in survey form.** Following MHPI events, surveys will be sent out to collect feedback. This will allow MHPI to better understand how to improve mental health nights.
5. **Exploring options for hybrid classes for next year.** Speak with the administration about extending a hybrid option for students with long commutes and mental health challenges to ensure they can still attend class.

Conclusion

The 2022-23 Impact Assessment, despite previously noted limitations, provides insight into the mental health of students at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto. Across mixed-methods data collection, findings reveal that students mental health was jeopardized by heavy course loads and poor communication with faculty and administration. Notably, access to school affiliated mental health resources was uncommon among cohorts. However, students cited access to hybrid learning and a sense of community as beneficial to alleviating stress.

This Impact Assessment acts as a preliminary step in MHPI's goal to collect data, reduce stigma, and advocate for students. This assessment sheds light on key concerns among the student body, however, further insight will be gleaned through the 2023-24 Impact Assessment. It is vital that MHPI promote consistent data collection and foster conversations among students, faculty and administration to promote positive mental health outcomes at the Munk School.

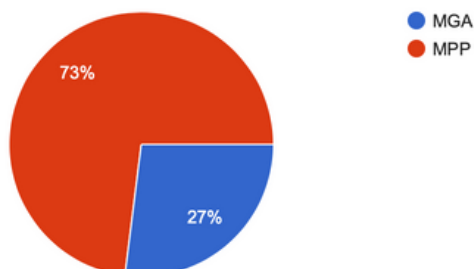
On behalf of all of MHPI and the IA team, thank you to all participants for their open and honest discussions. For all individuals within the Munk community MHPI's doors are always open.

Appendix 1: Survey 1

1st Send Out

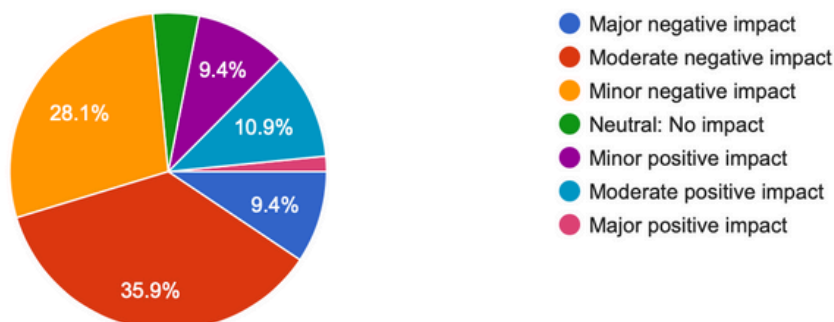
What Munk Program are you in?

63 responses



To what extent has life at Munk impacted your mental health **this** semester?

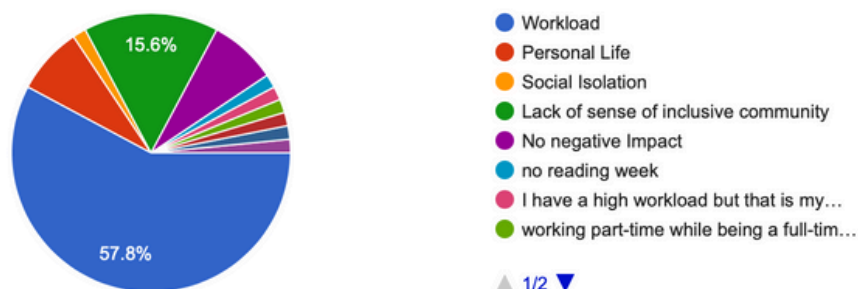
64 responses



If there has been any kind of negative impact on your mental health **this** semester, please indicate ONE factor that was MOST important in generating that negative impact:

Copy

64 responses

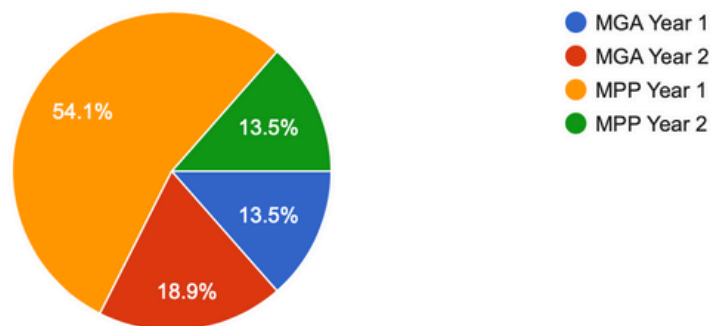


Appendix 2: Survey 1

2nd Send Out

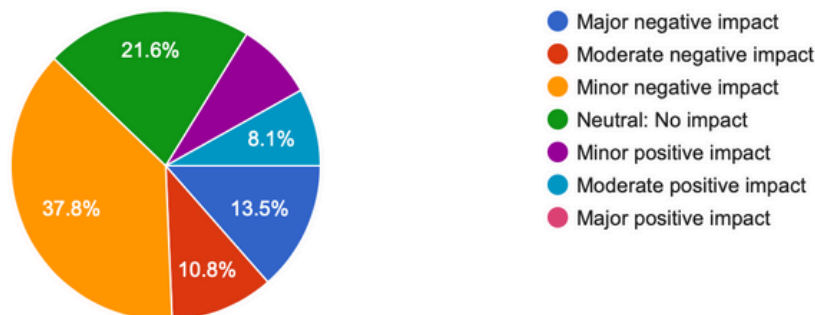
What Munk Program are you in?

37 responses



To what extent has life at Munk impacted your mental health **so far this winter** semester?

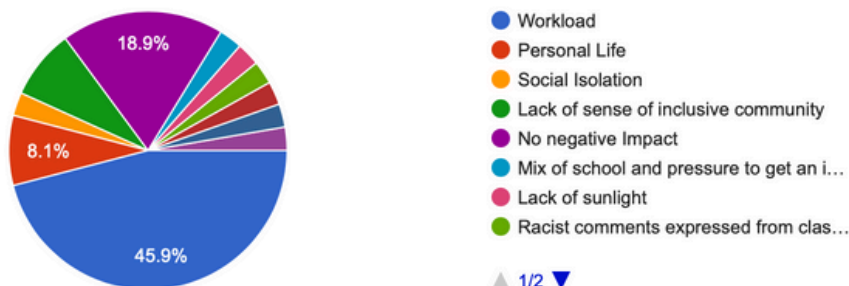
37 responses



If there has been any kind of negative impact on your mental health **so far this winter** semester, please indicate ONE factor that was MOST important in generating that negative impact:

[Copy](#)

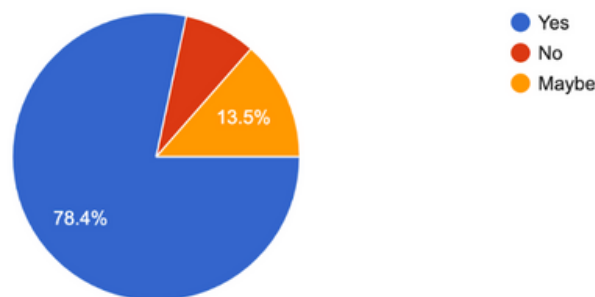
37 responses



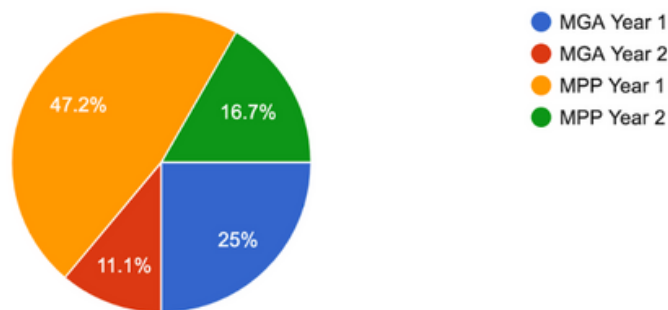
1/2

Appendix 3: Survey 2

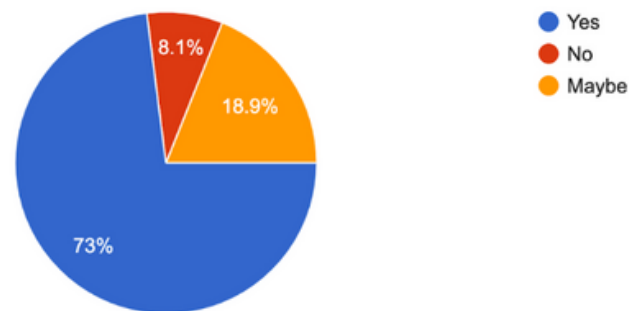
Do you prefer the hybrid system of learning? (Having the option to login to class from home)
37 responses



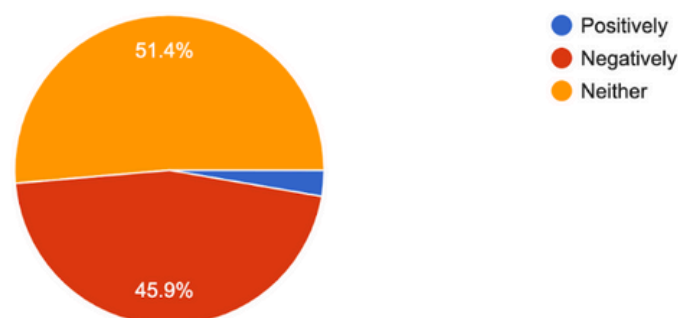
What program are you in
36 responses



Would having this option of a hybrid system positively affect your mental health?
37 responses



How is your current workload affecting your mental health?
37 responses



Appendix 4: MHPI Consent Form 2023 Focus Groups

MENTAL HEALTH POLICY INITIATIVE MHPI 2023 FOCUS GROUP CHAT

WHAT IS THE REASON FOR THIS FOCUS GROUP CHAT?

This focus group is running to gather in-depth information about Mental Health resources, culture and communication within the Munk School for Global Affairs and Public Policy. The responses will be used to support the Impact Assessment report and presentation for students and faculty.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ANY OF THE INFORMATION I SHARE?

All conversations will be kept completely confidential. The Impact Assessment team will be deleting all recordings of after the completion of the final report and presentation.

Only the MHPI Impact Assessment analysts will have access to this information. You will be kept completely anonymous within the report and presentation. We will ask you and others in the chat to avoid sharing the questions or information individuals within your group have shared to ensure a safe space for all focus groups.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE FINDINGS OF THESE CHATS?

The findings of this conversations will be used in producing the Impact Assessment report and presentation for the Munk School directors and board members. The final report will be published and accessible for all students and faculty.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS?

There are no known risks associated with participation in this focus group interview. If a question, or the discussion, makes you uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer.

CONTACT DETAILS

If you have any questions regarding this chat or would like additional information please contact the Impact Assessment team by email, any of the team members below, or respective MHPI directors.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT TEAM AND MHPI DIRECTORS:

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Thank you for taking the time to read and review this document. Please complete the consent form on the next page and email to eliana.sinicropi@utoronto.ca before the focus group chat starts.

Appendix 5: MHPI Consent Form 2023 Focus Groups

CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF THE STUDY: MHPI 2023 FOCUS GROUP CHAT

I have read the information presented in the information letter about the focus group chat conducted by the Mental Health Policy Initiative (MHPI) Impact Assessment Team, under the supervision of Emma Hull. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the conservations and have received complete answers to my questions and any additional details.

☐ I am aware the focus group will be audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

☐ I give permission for the use of anonymous quotations in any presentation that comes from this research.

☐ I agree to participate in the focus group.

☐ I agree to supporting the efforts of the Impact Assessment team in making my chat a safe space.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 6: Focus Group Questions

1. Which components of the Munk program have impacted your mental health (e.g. workload, administration, job search, *commuting*, etc.)?
 - How could the administration help alleviate associated stressors?
2. How do you feel about the amount of coursework? How does the level of coursework affect other aspects of your life (e.g. clubs, self-care, social activities)?
 - How could administration/professors help alleviate associated stressors?
3. Do you feel supported by the administration or professors regarding your mental health? Are professors sensitive to the balance between academic responsibilities and career development?
 - If yes, can you elaborate? If not, what could they do better to support you?

References

Miller , A. (2022, March 12). 2 years into the pandemic, Canada's mental-health system is at a crisis point | CBC news. CBCnews. Retrieved April 9, 2023, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/canada-mental-health-crisis-covid-19-pandemic-1.6382378>

Korzinski, D. (2022, March 23). Two years of covid-19: Half of Canadians say their mental health has worsened; women under 55 hit hardest. Angus Reid Institute. Retrieved April 9, 2023, from <https://angusreid.org/covid-19-pandemic-anniversary-mental-health/>