



Learning to Bounce:

Bridging the gap between mental health and academic support for university students

YEAR IN REVIEW 2022 / 2023

Melissa Beacom

OT Reg. (Ont.)

Tara Embrey

OT Reg. (Ont.)

Joelle Chandler

Student Occupational Therapist

Learning to
bounce

Special thanks to our co-creators: the dedicated students who put their whole hearts and efforts into Learning to Bounce and truly shaped the program alongside us.



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Origin Story	2
Program Design	3
• Group Sessions	
• Study Hall	
• Drop-in Support	
• Yoga and Arboretum Walks	
• Round Two	
• Referrals: Who and How	
• Graduate Student Cohort	
• Content Development	
• Creating a Safe and Authentic Community	
Research Design	7
• Research Partners	
• Research Methods	
• Data Analysis	
Research Findings: Impact on Students' Academic Functioning and Wellness	9
• Developing Awareness	
• Cultivating Self-Compassion	
• Tackling Avoidance	
• Moving from Perfectionism to Healthy Striving	
• Improving Mental Health	
• Sense of Community	
• Overall Improved Wellness and Academic Experience	
• Impact on Student Wellness Staff	
• Research and Program Limitations	
Conclusion and Recommendations	23
References	25

Executive Summary

Academic distress is a significant source of mental health concern for university students, leading to a call for increased resiliency skills-building to help students manage school stress, improve mental health, and optimize academic success (Lisnyj et. al, 2021). Learning to Bounce (LTB) is an academic resilience program designed by two occupational therapists (OTs) and piloted for students experiencing mental health concerns within Student Wellness at the University of Guelph (UofG) in 2022/23. Innovation was at the heart of the design, utilizing research from a variety of fields to create a curriculum that applies mental health education to the academic context and provides opportunities to apply skills in real time.

Creating a community was essential to bust shame and isolation and for students to support each other in making change. This design and content have shown exciting results in improving student mental health and academic functioning. LTB program outcomes were researched using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Research outcomes demonstrated a profound shift in how students approached academics with statistically significant improvements in school avoidance, perfectionism, self-compassion, academic resilience factors, connection with peers and stress management. Upon completion of the program many students highlighted improved mental health and ability to attend lectures, write tests and exams even when feeling under-prepared, and get started on assignments earlier or with more ease.

Staff who referred students reported a reduction in workload in supporting participants and an improvement in students' mental health. The potential to expand the benefits of LTB to a broader campus community as part of a whole university approach to mental health is explored.

Origin Story

Being a university student is incredibly vulnerable and can take a toll on one's mental health. There is a lot riding on academics that can make each task terrifying and often paralyzing: putting work out there to be evaluated, trusting your knowledge in new content areas, facing uncertainty about assignment expectations, carrying the weight of childhood labels, feeling pressure to perform, and aiming for post-graduate programs that require near perfect achievement. Combine these pressures with the current Canadian crisis in youth mental health and it is no surprise that students are suffering (Statistics Canada, 2020). Students with mental health disabilities often experience exacerbation of symptoms when engaging in academic tasks leading to extensions, missed tests, deferral of work, dropped courses and withdrawal from university (Auerbach et al., 2016; Lipson & Eisenburg, 2018).

Innovation in service delivery is essential to improve mental health and academic outcomes for students.

UofG Student Wellness navigator appointments — the first stop for mental health support on campus — rose by 32% from 2019/20 to 2022/23 (Schmidt, 2023). Student Accessibility Services (SAS) registrants with mental health disabilities are increasing by 8% each year and 44% of students registered identify mental health as their primary disability with many more as a secondary one (Praamsma-Townshend, 2021). Faced with this new landscape, innovation in service delivery is essential to improve mental health and academic outcomes for students. Enter Learning to Bounce (LTB), a program designed to bridge the gap between mental health support and academics. LTB was created, implemented, and researched over two semesters through funding from UofG's Learning Enhancement Fund and with support from Student Wellness. LTB combines an occupational therapy lens with evidence-based approaches from a variety of fields such as neuroscience, psychology, cognitive science and education.

Anxiety, perfectionism, and procrastination are not signs that they are broken — they are signs that they are human.

The vision is to help students move forward with academics while bolstering their mental health, seeing their gifts more clearly, and equipping them with tangible tools to bounce back from academic adversity. LTB aims to provide students with a safe and supportive community where they can recognize that they are not alone in their struggles and that anxiety, perfectionism, and procrastination are not signs that they are broken — they are signs that they are human.

Program Design

Group Sessions

Two OTs facilitated six 1.5-hour weekly group sessions exploring the emotional demands of schoolwork. There were 6 cohorts over two semesters, with around 12 students per group. There were also two 'round two' cohorts for those that finished LTB and wanted to maintain and deepen their skills the following semester. Topics included mindfulness, stress awareness, perfectionism, shame, self-compassion, motivation, habits and procrastination.

Study Hall

It takes practice to shift entrenched habits. Students needed space and time to practice with support when it got hard. Study halls were built into the program, running two days per week throughout the semester and ramping up to three days during exam season. Mint tea and snacks were often provided to foster a welcoming environment. All program graduates from the previous semester were welcome to attend study hall in the winter.

PROGRAM FEATURES

- 2 OTs at 3 days per week for 8 months
- 6 weekly group sessions (1 virtual cohort, 7 in-person)
- Study Hall 2-3 times per week for 12 weeks (with mint tea)
- 1-on-1 Drop-in support
- Mindful Arboretum walks
- 50-minutes Yoga classes (with guest yoga instructor)

Drop-in Support

If students got stuck or overwhelmed in study hall they had access to 1-to-1 drop-in with facilitators to apply new tools to current academic challenges. Facilitators would assist with problem-solving and planning such as sending a difficult email, structuring their week when facing multiple demands, breaking an assignment down, or managing difficult thoughts related to schoolwork.

Yoga and Arboretum Walks

Optional yoga classes and mindful arboretum walks were offered to practice mindful awareness. The yoga instructor was trauma aware, and students were invited to engage only in movements that felt safe for them.

Round Two

Most students who completed the fall LTB program were interested in continuing in the winter. 'Round two' answered that call, going deeper with content and adding new concepts.

Referrals: Who and How

The target audience for LTB was students experiencing barriers to academic progress due to mental health symptoms. Students needed to be ready for change and well enough to engage consistently in the program. Students came to LTB through self-referral, UofG counsellors, SAS advisors, health services physicians, or psychiatrists. By not focusing on diagnosis, students with a wide variety of needs were welcomed into the program and experienced positive change.

Cohort	Enrolled	Completed
Fall Undergraduate (3)	36	30
Winter Undergraduate (2)	21	14
Winter Graduate (1)	13	11
Winter Round Two (2)	19 (completed fall LTB)	19
Total:	89	74

Graduate Student Cohort

Graduate work can be gruelling. There are often large swaths of unstructured time, self-directed work, and vague deadlines. It can be hard to maintain motivation and stay on track and it can be lonely. Facilitators added a graduate group in the winter semester to create a community for graduate students to share and normalize these struggles and build new skills to cope with these challenging conditions.

Content Development

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) was used to provide practical tools to help students make room for difficult emotions instead of avoiding them, helping students face scary tasks and thus decrease procrastination (Wang et. al, 2017). LTB paired an evolutionary lens (Hanson & Hanson, 2018) and polyvagal theory (Dana, 2018) with habit research (Clear, 2018) to help students understand their stress response and how to work with it in the face of academic challenge.

By recognizing that our brain is trying to help us, we can reduce the shame and blame of avoidance and procrastination patterns. This opens the door to a more self-compassionate stance towards our struggles, which helps with motivation (Kotera, et. al, 2023), engagement and perseverance (Babenco et. al, 2018). Self-compassion also buffers against academic stress (Zhang et. al, 2016), supports coping with failure and setbacks, and improves mental health (Trompetter et al., 2017). Given this strong benefit to academic functioning and wellness, self-compassion was modelled and practiced throughout LTB.

“If your brain is perceiving a threat, it will put your system in a state of hyperarousal or shutdown, and we call that procrastination and lack of motivation. There is no such thing as true lack of motivation.”

Britt Frank, Science of Stuck (2022)

Mindful awareness is another key skill threaded throughout the program. Being present in our day-to-day life and noticing our thoughts and feelings allows us to respond with intention rather than being swept away (Fletcher, et.al, 2010). It can also help us zoom out to gain perspective when facing an academic hurdle. This awareness can help us break unhealthy patterns and develop positive coping strategies to promote academic perseverance (Teper et al., 2013). Combining mindfulness exercises with self-compassion has been shown to reduce the impairment caused by perfectionism in university students (James & Rimes, 2018). LTB explored the high costs of pursuing perfection and provided practical tools to help students shift towards healthy striving. Through this combination of ACT, an evolutionary lens, nervous system awareness, self-compassion and mindfulness, LTB aimed to normalize students’ experiences of struggle and decrease the self-blame and shame that can get people stuck.

“Perfectionism kills curiosity by telling us that we have to know everything or we risk looking 'less than'. Perfectionism tells us that our mistakes and failures are personal defects, so we either avoid trying new things or we barely recover every time we inevitably fall short.”

Brene Brown, Atlas of the Heart (2021)

Co-creation was at the heart of program design. Intake interviews were conducted with every student to better understand their academic journey and shape content to fit with concerns raised. Program design was iterative and changed week-to-week based on student feedback.

Creating a Safe and Authentic Community

One of the key resilience factors in the literature is social connection and support systems (Bhattarai et al, 2022). Conversely, isolation is a major risk factor for health and school difficulties (Freyhofer, et.al, 2021). To foster a supportive community, LTB was designed with cohorts that would complete the program together, instead of rolling admissions or pick-and-choose sessions.

The development of an authentic community requires vulnerability. LTB created a safe space to receive and honour student stories. Facilitators centred themselves as learners and modelled vulnerability and non-judgement in interactions with students and each other. Facilitators ensured students experienced genuine support regardless of what schoolwork they did or did not do that week. There was a strict come as you are policy and students were accepted in whatever state they arrived. If students missed sessions, facilitators emailed to welcome them back and made sure they knew they were missed. All activities were by invitation and students were encouraged to participate in whatever way felt safe for them.

CREATING SAFETY

- Group agreements
- Modelling vulnerability
- Non-judgmental stance
- Facilitators as learners
- Everything by invitation
- Reach outs when absent
- Come as you are, leave when you need

Research Design

Research Partners

A huge debt of gratitude is owed to Joelle Chandler, a student occupational therapist from McMaster University, who joined LTB for the winter semester to help run groups and then stayed on to research the program. Her support was invaluable in scoring the outcome measures, theming the qualitative data and compiling results into this report. Aron Fazekas, from the Office of Teaching and Learning, was instrumental in shaping the research design and assisting with data collection and analysis. His support was essential in completing this research.

Research Methods

LTB received ethics approval [REB #22-08-011] to research the program. Students were given the option to participate in the research and their decision did not affect their participation in LTB. A mixed methods approach was used to answer the following research question: **What impact did the LTB program have on students' academic functioning and wellness?**

Qualitative Data was gathered through exit interviews (n=38) and open-ended responses to an anonymous feedback survey (n=35). Exit interviews were 30 minutes in length, transcribed in real-time, and conducted by a facilitator of the program. Questions were asked to understand students' semester experience, how they were managing academic stressors post-program, and the role LTB may have played for them. The anonymous feedback survey asked two open-ended questions: "What learning from the LTB program was most impactful for you?" and "Please provide any other feedback or comments that you would like to share."

Quantitative data was gathered from consenting LTB participants who completed both the intake and exit surveys (n=23 undergraduate, n=7 graduate) and/or the anonymous feedback survey (n=35). Those surveys included the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) developed by Cassidy (2016), the Self-Compassion Scale - Short Form (SCS-SF) developed by Raes et al. (2011) and additional questions created for LTB.

The ARS-30 is a self-report scale designed to capture students' cognitive-affective, and behavioural responses to academic adversity, using a five-point Likert scale (Cassidy, 2016). The ARS-30 has demonstrated good internal consistency reliability for each factor it assesses (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.78$): perseverance, reflecting and adaptive help-seeking, and negative affect and emotional response. Some researchers have argued that this scale lacks empirical support for calculating a valid unidimensional resilience score and is best scored by measuring each separate sub-scale (Hunsu et al., 2022). Thus, researchers looked at each factor individually. While there are

no clinical norms to identify cutoffs for high or low resilience, the ARS-30 allowed for a pre- and post comparison of students' approaches to challenging academic situations. The ARS-30 is not applicable to graduate students, so it was only given to undergraduates.

Given LTB's emphasis on self-compassion, facilitators were interested in analyzing students' self-compassion scores pre and post program. The SCS-SF, a self-report measure, uses a five-point Likert scale to gauge respondents' level of self-compassion based on how they act toward themselves in difficult times (Raes et al., 2011). The scale was constructed and validated using two Dutch samples and further validated in an English-speaking sample of university students (Raes et al., 2011). In all samples, the SCS-SF has demonstrated good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.86) and strong correlation with the original long form SCS ($r \geq 0.97$) (Raes et al., 2011). There are no clinical norms or criterion associated with the SCS-SF to compare respondents' scores to indicate their level of self-compassion. The authors of the SCS-SF suggested an ad hoc rubric to interpret scores, wherein 1.0- 2.49 indicates low self-compassion, 2.5-3.5 indicates moderate self-compassion, and 3.51-5.0 indicates high self-compassion (Neff, 2021).

The additional questions analyzed in this report asked students to identify their response to statements on a five-point Likert scale. Questions covered topics such as managing academic stressors, procrastination, perfectionism, sense of community, and application of learning.

Data Analysis

Quirkos, an online qualitative data analysis software, was used to code interview transcripts and open-ended feedback responses and extract preliminary themes. Two researchers (J.C. and M.B.) coded data collaboratively to derive categories and themes, consulting a third researcher (T.E.) to resolve any disagreements. Quantitative data from the intake and exit surveys and anonymous student feedback surveys were extracted from Qualtrics to Microsoft Excel for scoring surveys and conducting statistical calculations. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test is a nonparametric statistical analysis that was used to assess for significant differences in pairwise data from students who completed both intake and exit surveys (Scheff, 2016).

Research Findings: Impact on Students' Academic Functioning and Wellness

The preliminary qualitative themes that emerged from the data include: developing awareness, cultivating self-compassion, tackling avoidance, moving from perfectionism to healthy striving, improving mental health, and sense of community. The quantitative data results are integrated within the reported themes below.

Developing Awareness

Within students' exit interviews, mindfulness was repeatedly referenced as a resource that helped them notice their thoughts and feelings, connect with the present moment, get intentional about approaching academic tasks, and respond skillfully to academic setbacks. As highlighted in the following students' words, mindfulness was a powerful tool to support students in managing academic stressors:

"[I'm] starting to be able to recognize the spirals that I can get into before I've gone all the way down — Sometimes I can pull myself back and focus on something else."

"I didn't do as well on [an assignment] as I thought. I initially didn't react well — was stressed and worried — but then after that initial moment, I thought about being more present. I took the lessons about being mindful and applied them to this situation and it helped."

Students shared how during times of stress and overwhelm, LTB grounding tools helped them to check in with themselves and get back on track:

"The [strategy] that really sticks out is the one to help get present in the space...it really helped with my avoidance. It lets me review the situation and what I'm feeling — If I'm avoiding for a silly reason, it redirects me."

"The grounding techniques have been helpful for me. I'm better about checking in about doing work/not doing work. I'd like to get better about checking in on when I need a break. I haven't fully engaged in the restoration activities, but I'm feeling good and am not as burnt out as I usually am."

Many students identified that LTB helped them shift their perspective on academic challenges and reframe setbacks, seeing their struggles in a new light. Students developed insight into their internal states and the root causes of procrastination and perfectionism. Instead of viewing patterns as character flaws, such as being lazy or unintelligent, students took their new learning on the evolutionary basis of stress to understand the natural reasons for avoiding work:

“I've not allowed things to be seen as character flaws. It's not because I'm not smart – it's because I'm scared that I can't do it. I'm not taking it to heart.”

“I've started to realize that there are triggers that pull me into fight/flight - realizing that my nervous system is actually trying to help makes it easier to give love to myself when I struggle. I am not the enemy.”

“For me, learning to understand the reasoning for why we do certain impractical things and how we can get around them has been the most impactful. For example, procrastinating because the task doesn't feel safe so you avoid it as you would with any other danger.”

Cultivating Self-Compassion

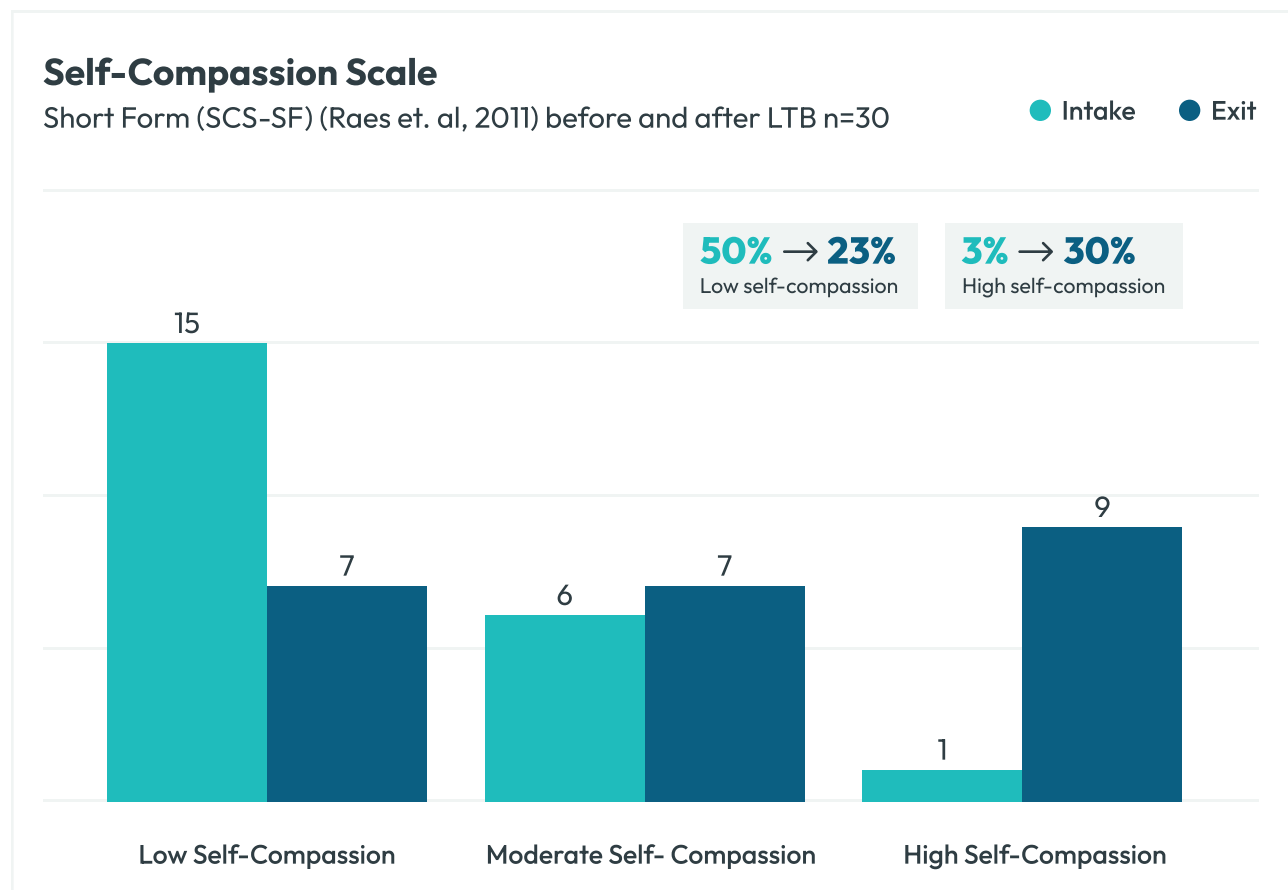
Self-compassion was identified by students as a key skill cultivated during their time in the LTB program. Many students shared the profound impact of trying to be kinder to themselves. Instead of beating themselves up for failing to meet preconceived expectations for academic performance, students started to shift their self-talk toward a more accepting and gentle tone. In line with the scholarly research, many students in LTB reported that self-compassion helped them to manage academic stressors and support themselves when tired or overwhelmed:

“We talked about self-compassion and I have started using that. Last week, I had a big assignment and didn't have a lot of time for it. I used to over-work and burn out and get tired. Now I take breaks and take care of myself. After I would hand assignments in, I would get stuck thinking about things I forgot or did wrong. This time, I woke up and did think of something I forgot, but instead of beating myself up and saying 'You're stupid. You messed up, you idiot,' I was able to let it go and say, 'It happens'.”

“I have learned how self-compassion creates space for me to adjust my expectations when things don't go as planned and to do as best as I can given the circumstances, even if it is not as perfect as I'd like it to be.”

“Not all of my tests went super well, but I did not beat myself up. I accepted it for what it was and moved on.”

This meaningful shift in self-compassion was also reflected in the quantitative data. There was a statistically significant difference ($\alpha=0.001$) in scores on the SCS-SF from intake (mean score: 2.19; low) to exit (mean score: 2.88; moderate). Notably, the number of students scoring low on self-compassion decreased from 15 at intake to 7 at exit. **While only 1 student had a high self-compassion score at intake, 9 did by exit.**



Tackling Avoidance

Many students in LTB applied new strategies and mindsets to approach academic tasks that they avoided in the past. Students discussed a profound shift in how they approached academics, including attending lectures more frequently, writing tests and exams even when feeling under-prepared, getting started on assignments earlier or with more ease, handing in assignments more consistently, and requesting less deferrals:

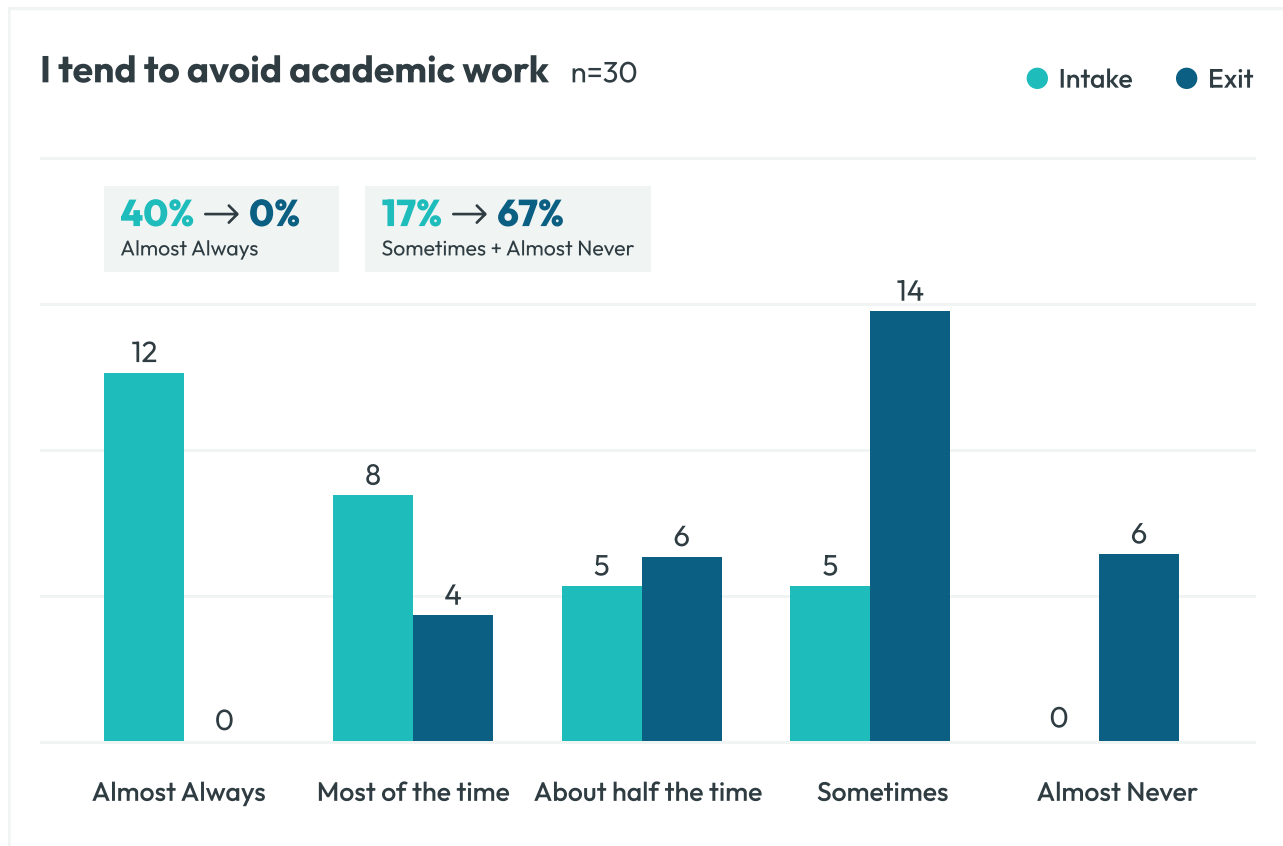
“In the past, I would have not written a test if I didn’t feel prepared enough. I would find the experience too scary, so would sleep through it. Then, I would start the exhausting process of trying to solve the situation - reaching out to the professor and SAS. So exhausting.”

Some students cited LTB study hall as a catalyst for changing academic habits:

“I came to study hall for support and got started on the things that I was worried about. Once starting, I would often find it was not as hard an assignment as anticipated, so I was able to work through it once I started. In the past I would avoid it...I cried, spiralled, had mental breakdowns, isolated from friends, avoided schoolwork.”

“When I’m studying and get overwhelmed, my brain is loud, not sure where to start. [In the past] I would typically leave the study space, but by having drop-in in study hall, I can speak to you when feeling that way instead of running away. Then I can return to the same space and tackle the thing that was overwhelming.”

The quantitative results reflect the significant reduction in avoidance that students spoke about qualitatively after LTB. Before LTB, the majority of students (67%) were avoiding work most of the time or almost always. At exit, the majority of students (67%) had shifted to sometimes or almost never avoiding. **Remarkably, at intake 12 of 30 students almost always avoided academic work, and by exit that dropped to zero students.** Results from the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test indicate there was a statistically significant reduction in students’ tendency to avoid academic work at $\alpha=0.001$ from intake to exit.



Moving from Perfectionism to Healthy Striving

For many students, perfectionism has been a constant companion for years, significantly impacting mental health and academic progress. After LTB, perfectionism started to loosen its hold on many students, freeing them up to engage in learning and pursue excellence with less fear:

“I only deferred one midterm and one project [this semester]. In the past, I couldn't even write midterms and couldn't write assignments because perfectionism paralyzed me. Yesterday I didn't feel good going into the exam...it went rough, but I didn't have a mental breakdown after that experience.”

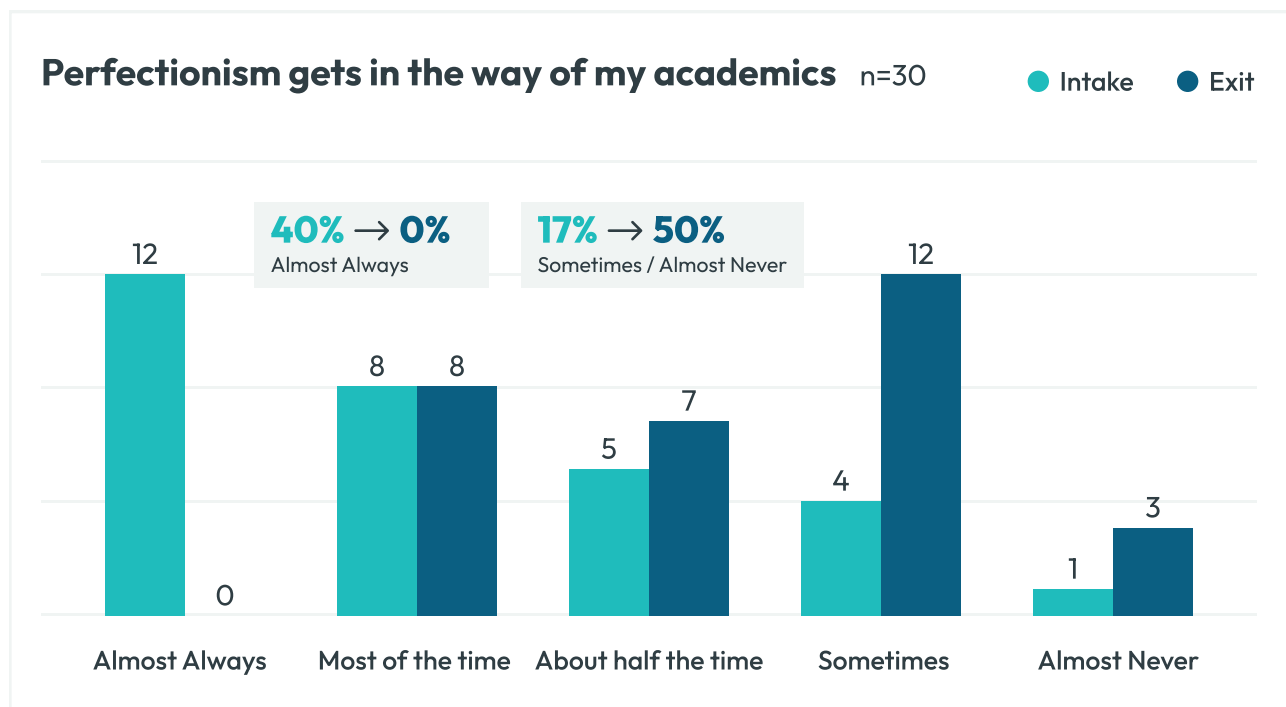
Some students started to separate their self-worth from performance, placing more value on the process of learning than on the outcome of their academic work.

“After [my] nutrition midterm, I left and felt calm for the first time. Didn't even check what I got right or wrong. Didn't care what mark I would get — it was such a foreign thing to say for me. I did my best and put it out there. I've been able to focus more on the learning than the outcome.”

Perfectionism is closely linked with the theme of tackling avoidance as students identified that perfectionism used to hold them back from starting or submitting assignments or showing up for evaluations. Many are now allowing themselves to be vulnerable in sharing their imperfect work:

“Before, I looked at schoolwork with fear and intimidation, that it wouldn't go well or be too much for me to do. In reality, I'll be able to do this. I don't have to do it perfectly.”

In a pre and post-comparison, students identified a marked and statistically significant reduction ($\alpha=0.001$) in how much perfectionism was impeding their academics. **Before LTB, 12/30 (40%) of students were ‘almost always’ impacted by perfectionism and at exit that dropped to zero students.**



Improving Mental Health

Many students explained that following LTB they have been more accepting of difficult thoughts and emotions that arise in the academic context and are managing their mental health symptoms better than in the past.

“I'm starting to be attuned to my mental health. I have that harsh voice in my head and it's there but I'm just going to do my thing.”

“I've felt surprised about how consistent I've felt throughout the semester. Been more engaged, gone to more lectures. Felt more comfortable and confident. Learning to Bounce has really helped and had a positive impact....Feels like less of a rollercoaster than in past semesters. Has been weird how stable it has been.”

“[LTB] has played a big role in keeping me healthy and on track and in a more positive headspace. Less feelings of being overwhelmed and that is because I have a space that I can come...when things get scary. Without LTB I would talk to a counsellor once per month - or wait to reach out to help until I have been struggling for 6 weeks and am about to fail a class.”

Students have noted that LTB helped them feel less stressed in school or handle stress better than before. Students described being able to ride the wave and make space for challenging emotions rather than push them away. Feelings of stress, anxiety, and shame still impacted students; however, many students described these feelings as lesser in severity and felt more confident in their ability to handle setbacks:

“I was more like ‘that kind of sucks! What are my options?’ In the past I would freak out that the world was over.”

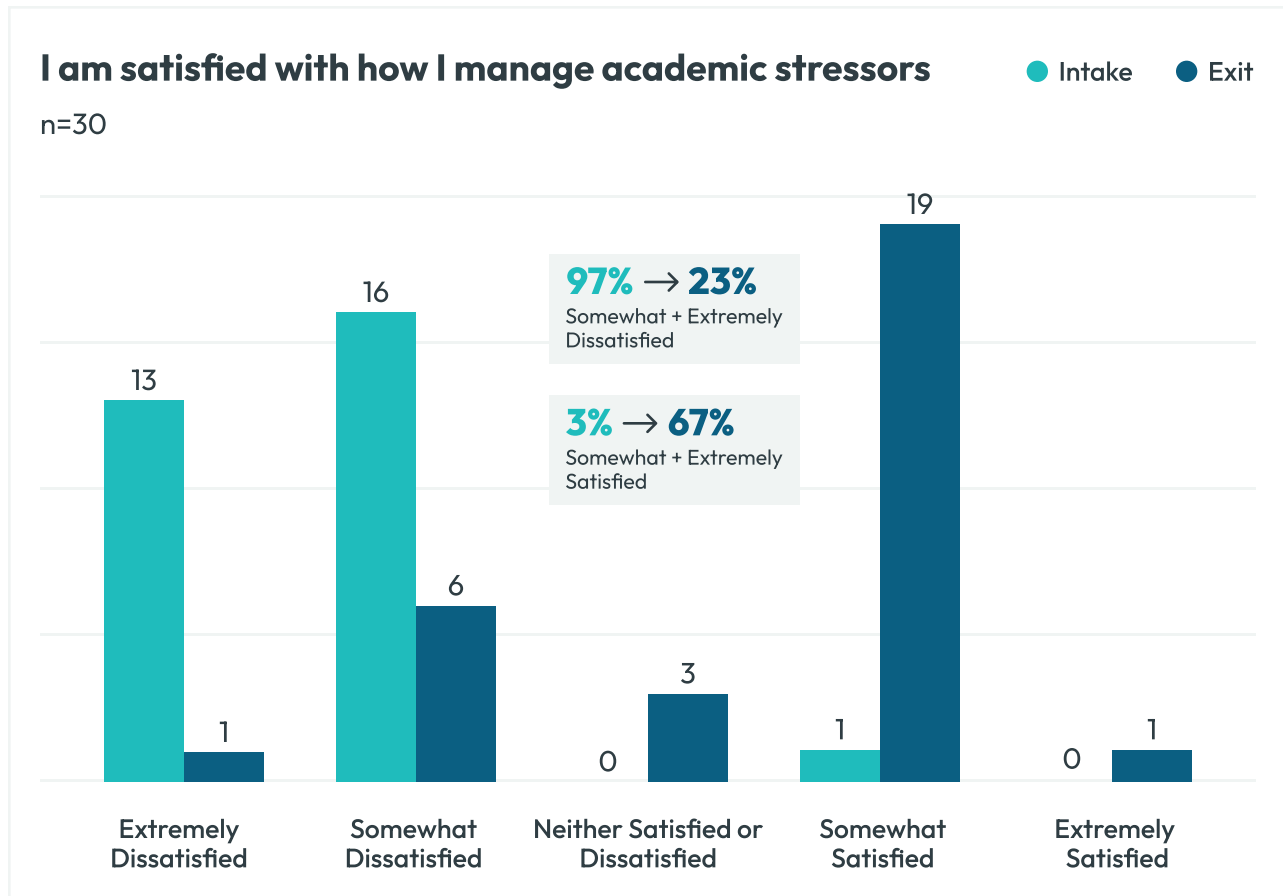
“The emotional wave has been better...The problem with the waves was it used to be paralyzing and this semester it wasn't that way...my tolerance for the waves has gone up.”

“I was stressed out about final projects, but handled them well...The weekly meetings and strategies learned [in LTB] did help. I was better able to handle emotions and complete work and not get stuck in own head.”

It can be incredibly challenging to make change when facing complex life challenges and mental health symptoms. Some students reported that they had a hard time applying skills learned due to personal situations and mental health flare-ups:

“Quite a hard semester last semester. I felt I had access to resources, but I didn't access them because of where I was at. Weekly grounding sessions with LTB was helpful but I wasn't in a place to apply a lot of the skills.”

In the intake and exit survey, students were asked how satisfied they were with how they manage academic stressors. Notably, the majority of students (97%) were dissatisfied with how they managed academic stressors at intake and **by exit the majority of students (67%) were satisfied with how they managed academic stressors**. This change represents a statistically significant improvement at $\alpha=0.001$.



Sense of Community

The community that formed within LTB helped students feel validated, decreased feelings of shame and fostered new friendships:

“[The group] helped me recognize I’m not alone in feeling like this. There are a lot of people in similar situations to me. Seeing people reach out to those resources helped me gain the confidence to reach out too.”

“Learning that I was not alone in my academic challenges allowed me to accept that my struggles are real and valid. From there, I could shift towards making an action plan, instead of being stuck in shame.”

Within graduate students’ responses, the power of community was a particularly salient theme. Unique struggles highlighted by graduate students included a sense of isolation, imposter syndrome and stress around meeting with their advisors. Being in a community with other graduate students where they openly discussed their challenges and noticed commonalities helped to decrease students’ isolation:

“It was really nice to have the community and sit in a room with other people who are struggling with doing this. In grad school it is very isolating and there's the assumption that everyone has it together.”

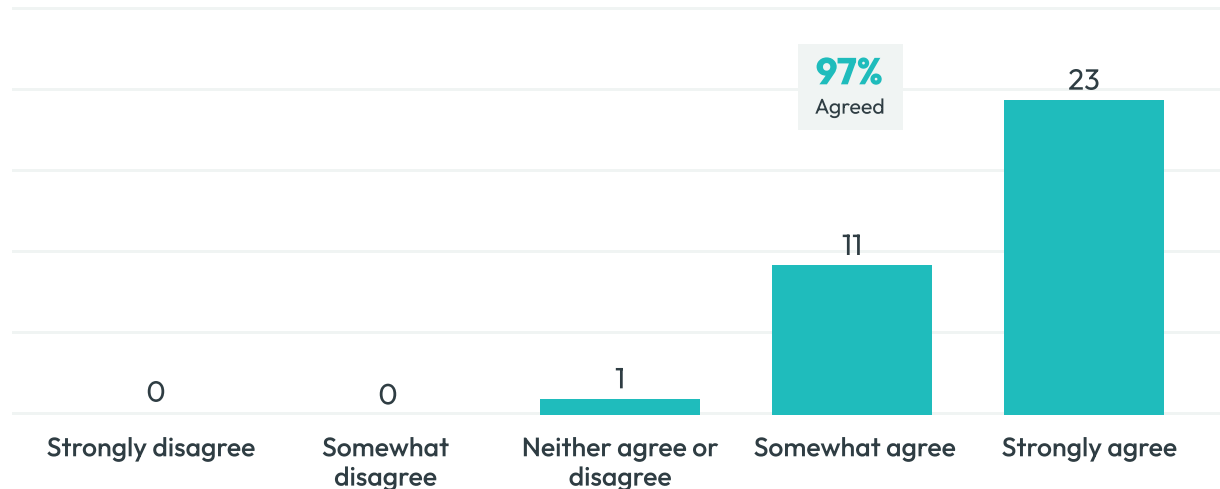
“It helped a lot to understand that other grad students have the same fears and are struggling in the same ways. Before the program I thought, ‘If I were meant to be here, I wouldn’t be so insecure, and it wouldn’t be so hard. I wouldn’t be struggling so much.’ Through the LTB group I realized that is part of the graduate student experience.”

“It just made me feel so understood and heard and truly that I wasn't alone. It sounds cliché but all I have around me are people that are succeeding and thriving. When people shared their vulnerability and struggles in group I didn't feel so alone.”

Ninety-seven percent of the students who completed the anonymous feedback survey somewhat or strongly agreed that LTB provided a sense of community. 97% of students also agreed with the statement: “During LTB I felt safe and welcome to express myself within group.”

The LTB group provided me with a sense of community

Anonymous feedback survey n=35



Overall Improved Wellness and Academic Experience

Following LTB, many students became more flexible in their framing of challenges, more self-compassionate, and more accepting of their emotions, culminating in an improved ability to approach schoolwork, persevere through challenges, and remain hopeful for future semesters:

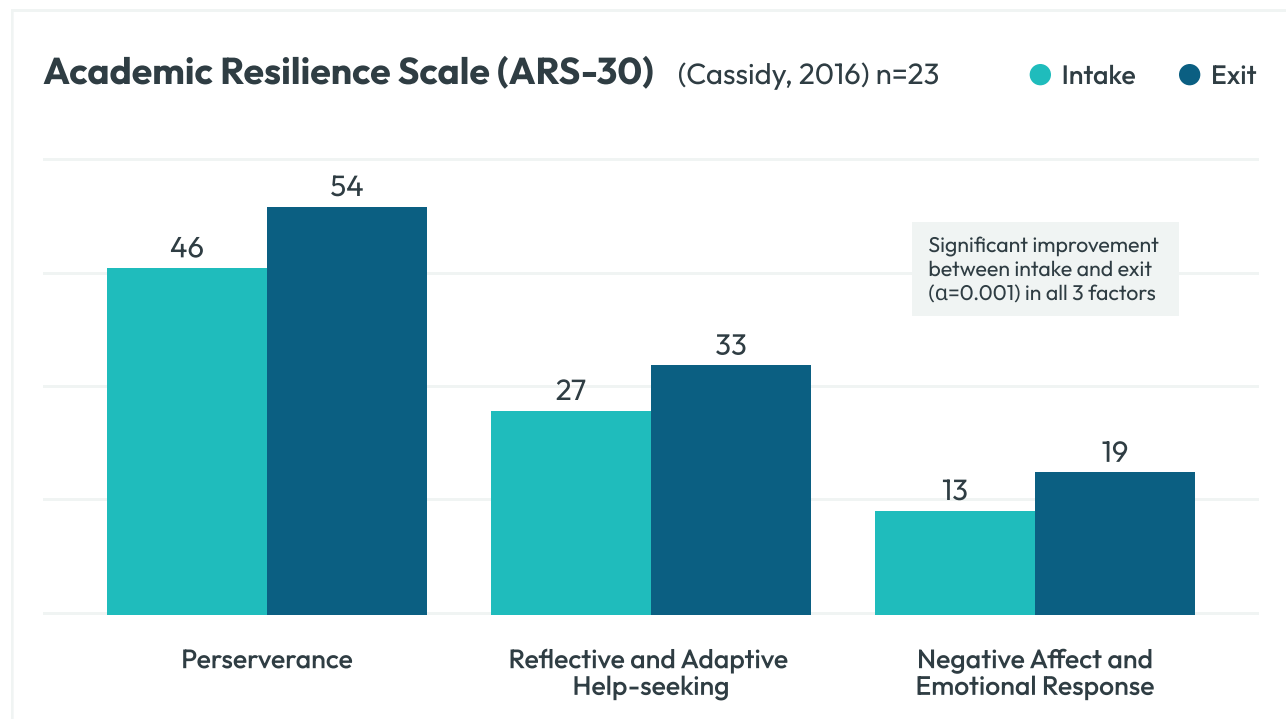
“I can’t describe how much better this semester has gone for me in comparison to the last few years. Maybe not a super huge change in terms of grades, but certainly in my ability to cope with challenges, remain hopeful, and to pull myself up again if I fall down.”

“I think it was by far one of my best semesters in a long time. I didn't meet every deadline but I was able to hand things in, and in the past, I wouldn't hand things in and have to drop [courses] ... I'm handing in my chapters and showing up for presentations, in the past I just wouldn't go. Looking back, I'm thinking practice really does make me more comfortable.”

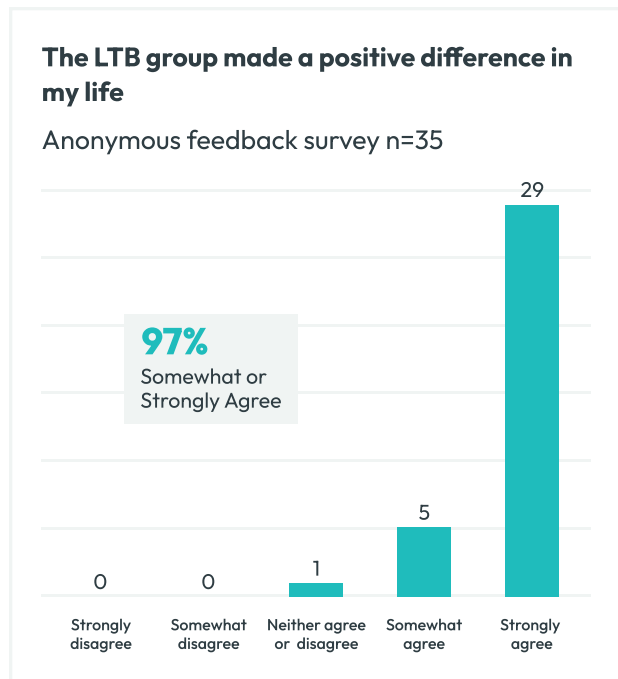
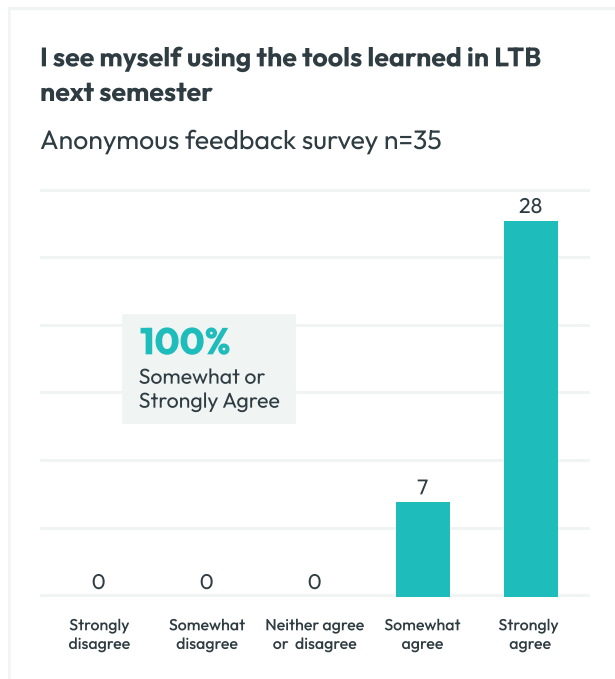
“I really do believe that LTB had a huge impact on my ability to feel safe to try this whole school thing again. I'm really happy with my grades from last semester, but I'm more happy with the way I handled everything. In the past I felt like my mental health was getting in the way of my ability to find the value in the courses I took, and I felt like I wasn't meant to be here. I still have lots of work to do, but you've helped me find a brighter outlook.”

“I feel like it just changed my life.”

Quantitative data mirrored the qualitative resilience findings. Twenty-three undergraduate students completed the ARS-30 at both intake and exit. Results from the statistical analysis indicated that all factors were significantly higher at exit at $\alpha=0.001$, which indicates more adaptive responses to academic stress (Cassidy, 2016). While the magnitude of change cannot be calculated, the statistically significant changes suggest that after LTB students may be more likely to persevere, reflect on their academic challenges, seek support, and be better able to manage negative emotional responses when faced with academic adversity (Cassidy, 2016).



Of the 35 students who responded to the anonymous feedback survey, 34 students (97%) agreed that the LTB group has made a positive difference in their life. **100% of respondents agreed somewhat or strongly that they see themselves using the tools learned in LTB next semester.**



While not part of the research, the impact of LTB also came through in emails received from students, a sample of which are shared here with permission:

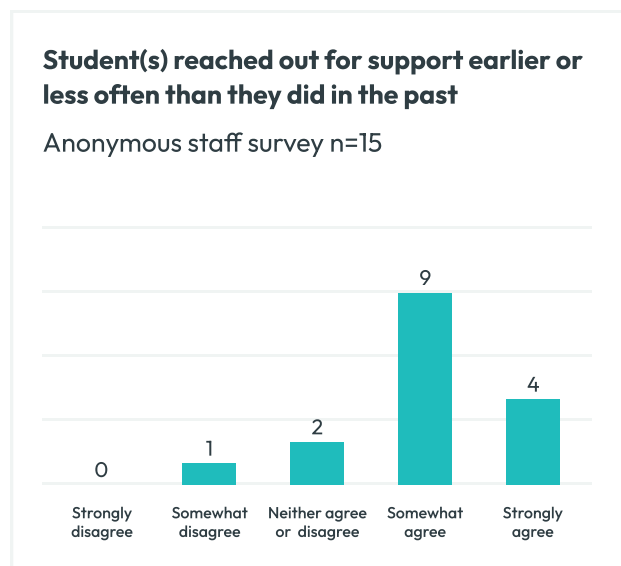
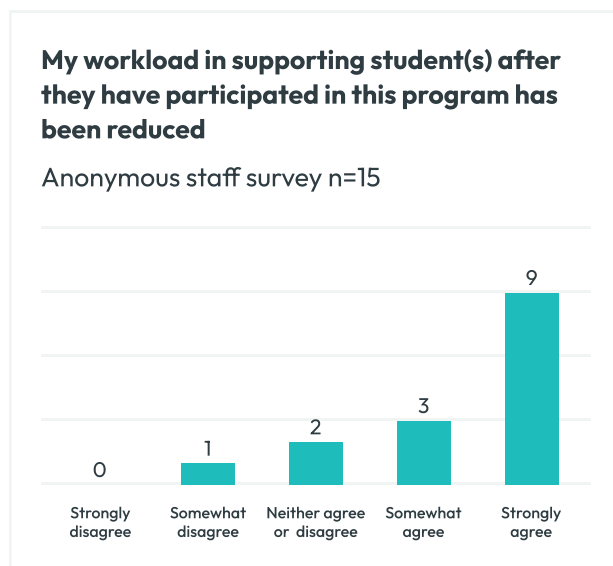
“I can’t say enough just how much the program has changed everything for me in my student experience. I’m excited to go to class, and I’ve met the first friend I’ve had in university... Learning to Bounce has changed so much for me that I actually see the possibility of mental wellness in my future.”

“I can't thank you enough for the difference this program has made in my life. I'm more confident, I speak my truth, I share my thoughts because I feel like I have thoughts worth sharing. I'm funny, smart, and insightful. The people I have met and stories shared in the safe space you created helped me unlock a new me, and I'm so grateful.”

Impact on Student Wellness Staff

Student Wellness staff who referred students to LTB were asked to complete an anonymous feedback survey with both Likert scale and open-ended questions. Sixteen staff completed the survey. Changes were noticed in student wellness, help-seeking and staff workload. Some staff commented on a decrease or shift in support needs following the program:

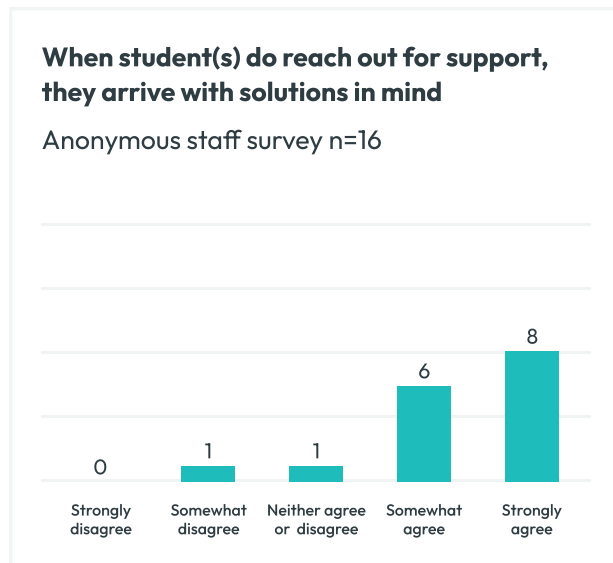
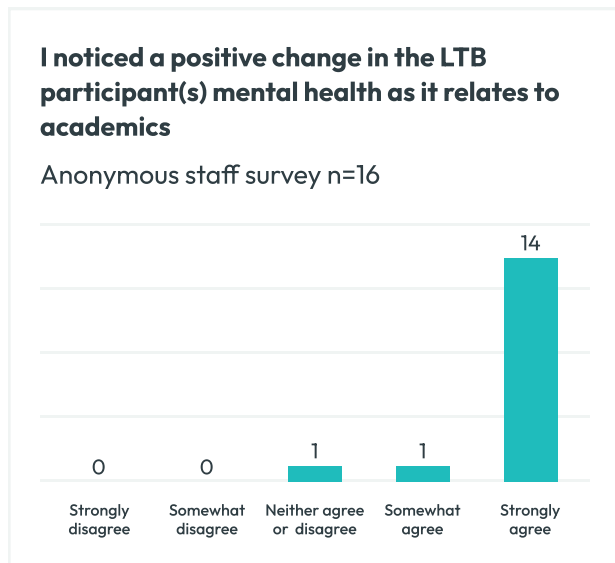
“I have noticed a significant change in the level of support needed for my students who have participated. This has been a great resource that I hope can continue for future semesters and be accessible to a larger group of students.”



Some staff commented that students were better able to seek help and problem-solve academic situations more confidently following LTB:

“Students' approach to help-seeking has changed significantly. Where students used to come with apologies for needing help, and seemed to feel overwhelmed by needing to ask, they now seem more comfortable with asking for the support, and more able to participate in problem-solving and planning. There is a marked decrease in shame and self-blame around help-seeking.”

“My student described feeling more confident...about managing academics; this made room for them to work on other issues in their life that also needed attention.”



Research and Program Limitations

The findings within this report are limited to the experiences of students who agreed to research and completed the surveys and/or exit interview. Several students completed only the intake or exit survey, but not both, and thus their results could not be included in the quantitative data. The impact of volunteer bias could influence the results, which may not be representative of the experiences of other students who enrolled in LTB. Since LTB facilitators conducted the exit interviews, there is also the potential that social desirability bias may have influenced responses. To limit the likelihood of this bias students were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality of personal information, and were told that there was no pressure to answer questions in a certain way as researchers were interested in students’ lived experience (Bispo Júnior, 2022).

These results do not differentiate between the impact of LTB on undergraduate and graduate students or address the differences between virtual and in-person groups. Further research may isolate the results to inform the model of program delivery and content for future groups. Data from LTB round two was not analyzed due to time constraints but may be reported on in the future.

Some students withdrew from the program due to mental health symptoms, life circumstances or program fit for them. There were others who did attend but struggled to make change.

LTB is currently only available to students connected with SAS, counselling or health services. There are likely many students on campus who would benefit from support, that were not aware of the resource.

A virtual option was only offered once in the fall and there were barriers to community development in this format. There were students eager to participate in the winter program that were unable to attend in-person and so missed out on the opportunity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Factors such as social connection, self-compassion, mindfulness and stress awareness have been shown to contribute to resilience (Cheng & Catling, 2015). The LTB program was carefully designed with these skills in mind, to loosen the hold of procrastination and perfectionism, help students manage academic hurdles and improve student mental health. Research on LTB found that many participants became more flexible in the face of setbacks, less avoidant and perfectionistic, more self-compassionate, and more accepting of difficult emotions, culminating in an improved ability to approach schoolwork, persevere through challenges and manage mental health symptoms. The following recommendations aim to further develop LTB into the future.

Growing LTB Programming within Student Wellness

Learning to Bounce has shown exciting outcomes and offers an innovative response to the growing mental health needs on campus. LTB has been funded for nine additional months, through the generous support of alumni donations. A long-term funding plan is needed to ensure program availability in the future. Program development within Student Wellness could include:

- ✔ **Post-Program Student Leaders** – LTB would like to introduce a model whereby graduates of LTB, supported by an honorarium, could run study groups to facilitate and expand community after program completion. There is also potential to collaborate with existing graduate student support circles after LTB.
- ✔ **Deepening Co-Creation** – Further consultation with LTB graduates, through focus groups and analysis of feedback surveys would help to ensure the program is designed in collaboration with students and meets their needs.
- ✔ **ADHD-Specific Support** – ADHD can have significant impact on academic functioning and mental health. There is no specific support for students with ADHD on campus other than SAS accommodations. To address this gap, there is a LTB pilot planned for fall 2023, with content geared to ADHD-specific academic struggles.
- ✔ **Meeting Diverse Needs** – Engagement and co-facilitation with equity-seeking groups would help provide a program that is safe and applicable to all our student body.

Whole University Approach to Mental Health: Extending Outcomes Across Campus

The emotional demands of learning are not specific to students with a mental health diagnosis. LTB content has the potential to help meet growing mental health concerns and benefit students across campus, beyond those registered with SAS or Counselling Services. The content can be adapted to a variety of contexts and formats to help students manage the distress that can come with academic pressures:

- ✔ **Residence** - Embedding the LTB program in residence could help ease the transition to university and support more emotional balance and positive engagement in learning. Equipping students early on with skills to cope with academic ups and downs promotes academic progress and mental wellness down the road (Ayala & Manzano, 2018).
- ✔ **Teaching and Learning** - There is great potential to collaborate with professors and teaching and learning staff to ease the pressure felt by faculty in the face of increasing student mental health needs. Consultation and pilot programming in the classroom could help enhance student confidence in taking leaps, investing in learning versus grades, completing work with less paralysis, meeting deadlines more consistently and reducing support requests to faculty.
- ✔ **Learning Commons** - LTB facilitators have developed relationships with the learning commons and have hosted two learning commons workshops for LTB students. There is an opportunity to further build this relationship and share skills and resources.
- ✔ **Athletics** - The research on the benefits of movement to support mental wellness is overwhelming (Ashdown-Franks et al, 2020). Facilitators have been in consultation with Athletics to discuss ways to tap into their programming and help get the word out to LTB students about offerings such as Gryphon's Empowered by Movement (GEM).

References

Ashdown-Franks, G., Firth, J., Carney, R., Carvalho, A. F., Hallgren, M., Koyanagi, A., Rosenbaum, S., Schuch, F. B., Smith, L., Solmi, M., Vancampfort, D., & Stubbs, B. (2020). Exercise as Medicine for Mental and Substance Use Disorders: A Meta-review of the Benefits for Neuropsychiatric and Cognitive Outcomes. *Sports Medicine (Auckland)*, 50(1), 151–170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-019-01187-6>

Auerbach, R. P., Alonso, J., Axinn, W. G., Cuijpers, P., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., Hwang, I., Kessler, R. C., Liu, H., Mortier, P., Nock, M. K., Pinder-Amaker, S., Sampson, N. A., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Al-Hamzawi, A., Andrade, L. H., Benjet, C., Caldas-de-Almeida, J. M., Demyttenaere, K., Bruffaerts, R. (2016). Mental disorders among college students in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys. *Psychological Medicine*, 46(14), 2955–2970. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291716001665>

Ayala, J. C., & Manzano, G. (2018). Academic Performance of First-Year University Students: The Influence of Resilience and Engagement. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(7), 1321–1335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1502258>

Babenko, O., Mosewich, A., Abraham, J., & Lai, H. (2018). Contributions of psychological needs, self-compassion, leisure-time exercise, and achievement goals to academic engagement and exhaustion in Canadian medical students. *Journal of Educational Evaluation for Health Professions*, 15, 2–2. <https://doi.org/10.3352/jeehp.2018.15.2>

Bhattarai A, King N, Adhikari K, et al. Childhood Adversity and Mental Health Outcomes Among University Students: A Longitudinal Study. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 2022;0(0). doi:10.1177/07067437221111368

Bispo Júnior, J. P. (2022). Social desirability bias in qualitative health research. *Revista de Saude Publica*, 56, 101. <https://doi.org/10.11606/s1518-8787.2022056004164>

Brown, B. (2021). *Atlas of the heart: mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience* (First edition.). Random House. p. 142

Cassidy S. (2016). The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A new multidimensional construct measure. *Frontiers in psychology*, 7, 1787. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01787>

Cheng, V. and Catling, J. C. (2015). The role of resilience, delayed gratification and stress in predicting academic performance. *Psychol. Teach. Rev.* 21, 13-24. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1146513.pdf>

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: tiny changes, remarkable results: an easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones*. Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

Dana, D., & Porges, S. W. (2018). *The polyvagal theory in therapy: engaging the rhythm of regulation* (First edition.). W.W. Norton & Company.

Fletcher, L. B., Schoendorff, B., & Hayes, S. C. (2010). Searching for Mindfulness in the Brain: A Process-Oriented Approach to Examining the Neural Correlates of Mindfulness. *Mindfulness*, 1(1), 41-63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-010-0006-5>

Frank, B. (2022). *The Science of Stuck: breaking through inertia to find your path forward*. The Next Big Idea Magazine. <https://nextbigideaclub.com/magazine/science-stuck-breaking-inertia-find-path-forward-bookbite/33443/>

Freyhofer Alarcon, S., Ziegler, N., de Jong, E. M., & Schippers, M. C. (2021). Depression and Anxiety in Times of COVID-19: How Coping Strategies and Loneliness Relate to Mental Health Outcomes and Academic Performance. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 682684-682684. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.682684>

Hanson, R., & Hanson, F. (2018). *Resilient: how to grow an unshakable core of calm, strength, and happiness* (First edition.). Harmony.

Hunsu, N. J., Kehinde, O. J., Oje, A. V., & Yli-Piipari, S. (2022). Single versus multiple resilience factors: An investigation of the dimensionality of the Academic Resilience Scale. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 40(3), 346-359. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829211056391>

James, K., & Rimes, K. A. (2018). Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy Versus Pure Cognitive Behavioural Self-Help for Perfectionism: a Pilot Randomized Study. *Mindfulness*, 9(3), 801-814. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0817-8>

Kotera, Y., Taylor, E., Fido, D., Williams, D., & Tsuda-McCaie, F. (2023). Motivation of UK graduate students in education: self-compassion moderates pathway from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. *Current Psychology* (New Brunswick, N.J.), 42(12), 10163-10176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02301-6>

Lipson, S. & Eisenberg, D. (2018). Mental health and academic attitudes and expectations in university populations: results from the healthy minds study. *Journal of Mental Health* (Abingdon, England), 27(3), 205 -213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2017.1417567>

Lisnyj, K.T., Pearl, D.L., McWhirter, J.E., & Papadopoulos, A. (2021). Exploration of factors affecting post-secondary students' stress and academic success: Application of the socio-ecological model for health promotion. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(7), 3779. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073779>

Neff, K. (2021, March). Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS-SF) information. <https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SCS-SF-information.pdf>

Praamsma-Townshend, B. (2021). SAS Demand For Service: Statistical Report 2020-2021. Unpublished report.

Raes, F., Pommier, E., Neff, K. D., & Van Gucht, D. (2011). Construction and factorial validation of a short form of the Self-Compassion Scale. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 18(3), 250–255. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.702>

Schmidt, T. (2023). Counselling and Mental Health Services Team Summary 2022-23. Unpublished report.

Scheff, S.W. (2016). Chapter 8 - Nonparametric statistics. In *Fundamental statistical principles for the neurobiologist*. (pp. 157-182). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-804753-8.00008-7>

Statistics Canada (2020), Impacts on Mental Health <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/2020004/s3-eng.htm>

Teper, R., & Inzlicht, M. (2013). Meditation, mindfulness and executive control: the importance of emotional acceptance and brain-based performance monitoring. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 8(1), 85 -92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nss045>

Trompetter, H.R., de Kleine, E. & Bohlmeijer, E.T. Why Does Positive Mental Health Buffer Against Psychopathology? An Exploratory Study on Self-Compassion as a Resilience Mechanism and Adaptive Emotion Regulation Strategy. *Cogn Ther Res* 41, 459 -468 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-016-9774-0>

Wang, S., Zhou, Y., Yu, S., Ran, L.-W., Liu, X.-P., & Chen, Y.-F. (2017). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Cognitive–Behavioral Therapy as Treatments for Academic Procrastination: A Randomized Controlled Group Session. *Research on Social Work Practice, 27*(1), 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515577890>

Zhang, Y., Luo, X., Che, X., & Duan, W. (2016). Protective Effect of Self-Compassion to Emotional Response among Students with Chronic Academic Stress. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 1802–1802. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01802>