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Rosanne Villemaire-Krajden

Concordia University, rosanne.villemaire@gmail.com

Erin Barker

Concordia University - Montreal, erin.barker@concordia.ca

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Curbing the Campus Mental Health Crisis: The Role of Extracurricular Activity Participation

Rosanne Villemare-Krajden, Concordia University

Erin T. Barker, Concordia University

Introduction

Worldwide trends suggest we are witnessing a global “campus mental health crisis” (Andersen, Holm, & Côté, 2021). According to the most recent US National College Health Assessment, over the course of a typical month, 29% of students chronically experience high levels of stress, 42% experience stress that negatively impacts their performance or progress towards their degree, and 66% feel hopeless (National College Health Assessment, 2022a). Study reviews in various countries indicate that the prevalence of students meeting criteria for a mental health disorder is alarmingly high (e.g., 25% depressive disorder, Sheldon et al., 2021). Accordingly, students’ demand for mental health services has reached new heights (Xiao et al., 2017). While this rise in psychological distress and help-seeking behavior is likely in part due to decreased mental health stigma (Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2019), postsecondary students are also believed to be facing unprecedented challenges. Ensuring that colleges and universities procure learning environments that prioritize emerging adults’ wellbeing has thus become necessary.

Concomitant Challenges

Most postsecondary students are simultaneously navigating higher education while undergoing a critical and challenging period of development. While conducive to flourishing, emerging adulthood—roughly spanning the ages of 18–25—is also a time of dramatic biological and psychosocial changes associated with the onset of mental health problems (Solmi et al., 2021; Berry, 2004). From a psychosocial perspective, emerging adults are expected to achieve major milestones within the realms of education, work, and relationships (Arnett, 2000). Through processes

of exploration and commitment, emerging adults undertake the difficult task of achieving a clear and cohesive identity (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2011). As exciting as this developmental period can be, it also implies a sense of responsibility and self-direction amid uncertainty and instability (Schwartz, 2016).

This period of in-betweens may be particularly challenging for youth pursuing postsecondary education in the twenty-first century. University student life is undeniably a privileged time of self-focus and discovery, but it also comes with its share of stressors (Linden & Stuart, 2020). It often implies a loss of social support, as many students move away from their neighborhood and childhood friends. Students face a sharp increase in academic expectations and classroom competition. Many experience chronic financial instability. And, by pursuing a postsecondary degree, students inevitably delay career commitments. This prolonged state of uncertainty risks slowing down and complicating the resolution of questions related to one's identity and life direction (Auerbach et al., 2018).

While these challenges may not be entirely new, societal changes in recent decades are suspected to have added strain. Undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the current challenges faced by students thus requires discussing broader contextual factors. Indeed, from an ecological systems perspective, shifts in cultural beliefs, norms, and public policies are indissociable from youth's developmental trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In the past decades, several economic changes have transformed and likely compromised higher education experiences. The class stratification resulting from the 1970s economic downturn widened the gap between unskilled labor and the professional elite (Jury et al., 2017). The value and appeal of white-collar labor grew dramatically, enticing many towards the pursuit of postsecondary education (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Paradoxically, while postsecondary education was becoming more necessary, it was also becoming less affordable. The cost of education increased as a result of the 1990s recession, amplified by a conflict between expanding enrollments and shrinking government funding (Barr & Turner, 2013). These economic changes created intense labor competition, which is believed to have led to shifts in the policy focus of higher education, from one providing a context for human flourishing to one mainly serving economic growth (Kromydas, 2017; Musselin, 2018; Dickinson, Griffiths, & Bredice, 2021). Students' motivations appear to have shifted in tandem, reflecting an increasingly strong desire to obtain a degree mostly to secure a higher socioeconomic status (Dalton & Crosby, 2007). The increasingly economic focus of educational institutions and its attendees has doubtlessly been partly achieved at the profit of young adults' development and wellbeing. Such profound changes in academic culture are presumed to have made the university experience increasingly stressful, impersonal, and unfulfilling, rendering students particularly susceptible to declines in mental health (Ozer & Schwartz, 2020; Johnston & Lester, 2021).

A Need for Holistic, Socio-Ecological Approaches to Postsecondary Education

Despite ongoing discussion on the potential factors contributing to students' distress, the issue is complex and remains unresolved (Evans et al., 2018). To this day, most research has focused on describing trends in symptom severity and in the use of mental health services. While such a deficits-based approach is necessary for alerting us to the significance of a problem, it is less effective for curbing it. A growing body of evidence is highlighting the need for systemic changes to foster learning environments better aligned with emerging adults' various needs (e.g., Stallman, 2011; Usher, 2020; Abelson, Lipson, & Eisenberg, 2022). Indeed, students report that their wellbeing could be largely improved if postsecondary institutions prioritized their development as a whole by addressing their personal, intellectual, and social needs (Stanton et al., 2013; Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker, 2019).

In the United States and in Canada, national guidelines and standards were recently developed to encourage higher education institutions to promote student health and wellbeing through "holistic" or "socio-ecological" approaches. These approaches view education as a multifaceted, student-centered process embedded within supportive contexts. Academic institutions are held responsible for creating learning environments in which students can thrive. The US report *Mental Health, Substance Use, and Wellbeing in Higher Education: Supporting the Whole Student* (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021) highlights the importance of nurturing a holistic health encompassing intellectual, psychological, physical, spiritual, and social dimensions. The report indicates the need for creating campus and community environments that stimulate personal growth, foster health, and help students manage stressors. Similarly, in Canada, the *National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary*

Students (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020) proposes a socio-ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) that targets students' psychosocial and physical wellbeing via supportive proximal and distal environments. At the core of this model lies individual targets (e.g., students' knowledge and skill development; self-esteem; ability to manage stress), surrounded by interpersonal (e.g., social network and support), institutional (e.g., school environments promoting safety, diversity, and inclusion), community (e.g., cultural and identity group exchanges), and societal targets (e.g., public health policies). As part of their recommendations, the US report and Canadian standard briefly mention enabling and encouraging participation in student-life programs and student-led activities, as well as in community group activities. Such participation is proposed to strengthen students' coping mechanisms via social support and a sense of belonging, and an engagement in health behaviors. The report and standard also suggest that student-led and community activities can provide students with opportunities to develop skills aligned with personal aspirations and identities.

Most colleges and universities offer student-life programs and student-led activities—in other words, extracurricular activities. However, little is known about the extent of emerging adults' participation and its potential contribution to critical aspects of their development and wellbeing. This is particularly the case in the context of holistic, socio-ecological approaches to student health. Expansive positive youth development literature shows robust associations between adolescent extracurricular activity participation (ECAP) and various concurrent and future positive outcomes, whether academic, psychological, or social (e.g., Feldman & Matjasko, 2007; Denault & Poulin, 2016; Oberle et al., 2019). There is support for the proposition that such benefits extend across emerging adulthood for those who continue to participate (e.g., Forgeard & Benson, 2019; Ramey, Lawford, & Rose-Krasnor, 2019). In college and university, ECAP has been found to facilitate emerging adults' social adaptation (Bonhert et al., 2007), identity development (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011), and adaptive pursuing of life goals (Guilmette et al., 2019). Alumni who reflected on the significance of their participation during university also reported that it helped them develop core qualities (e.g., leadership or organizational skills) that enhanced their self-esteem and wellbeing, and contributed to their life successes years later (Stuart et al., 2011; Clark et al., 2015). Yet, despite apparent benefits to participation in emerging adulthood, rates of ECAP tend to decrease in postsecondary settings (e.g., 86% of Canadian youth aged 6–17 (Guèvremont, Findlay, & Kohen, 2014) vs. ~40% of students in Canadian universities (King, McQuarrie, & Brigham, 2020)). Postsecondary students are reporting barriers to participation, including time limitations and concerns that adding extracurricular activities to their schedules might affect their academic performance (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Dickinson, Griffiths, & Bredice, 2021).

Current Study

Research on the contribution of ECAP to emerging adulthood is in its early stages. And, to our knowledge, no study has sought to discuss this contribution in the context of holistic, socio-ecological approaches to postsecondary education. The current mixed-method study attempts to bridge this gap by describing university students' patterns of participation and the developmental and wellbeing benefits derived from ECAP. Advancing knowledge in this area has important implications for programming efforts aimed at creating contexts that foster flourishing in emerging adulthood. Promoting wellbeing at this critical juncture is important: emerging adults' subjective and academic wellbeing are highly predictive of future mental health, and of life and career satisfaction (Howard, Galambos, & Krahn, 2010).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In light of the characteristics and hallmarks of the emerging adulthood population, the following research questions guided our study: (1) How many students engage in ECAP during their university studies? (2) What are the activities in which students engage? (3) How does ECAP contribute to emerging adults' holistic development

and wellbeing, especially as it relates to their sense of self, identity, and life direction? Although exploratory in nature, we hypothesized results in line with those of the literature; that is, that ECAP rates would drop from prior to during university attendance. Likewise, we hypothesized that ECAP would help orient emerging adults' identity development, in addition to providing other broad social, intellectual, and psychological benefits.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected at a large urban public university in Quebec, Canada. Undergraduate students aged 18–25 were recruited from courses across years of study. Invitations to participate were distributed to members of student associations and clubs, and through advertisements on social media groups and through the Department of Psychology participant pool. Students were invited to complete an online survey aimed at understanding links between their extracurricular participation and wellbeing. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Those recruited through the participant pool were compensated with course credits; the remaining were compensated with a fifteen dollar gift e-card. In addition, all participants were entered in a drawing to win one of four fifty-dollar gift e-cards. The study was approved by the university's Research Ethics Board.

Study Design

A mixed method, concurrent triangulation design was employed, in which quantitative and qualitative data were simultaneously collected and analyzed (Cresswell, 2006).

Measures

Quantitative

Data were collected on the type and number of extracurricular activities, and on the location of participation (school or community-based), both prior to and during students' current university attendance. ECAP prior to students' current university attendance could have taken place at a school or outside of it, when participants were attending high school, college, or another university.

Qualitative

Participants were asked two open-ended questions about the influence of ECAP on their development: (1) "How has participation shaped your current sense of self and identity, including how you define yourself, how you behave and express yourself, and how you relate to others?" and (2) "How has participation helped you explore who you want to be in the future, for example by testing or experimenting with future possible selves?" These questions did not specify a time frame of participation; responses could relate to activities in which students engaged prior to or during their current university attendance. Thematic analysis was used to extract conceptual patterns (i.e., themes) from student's accounts (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Braun and Clarke's (2008) framework oriented the thematic analysis process. The interpreters were familiarised with the research questions and provided with basic knowledge on mixed methods and thematic analysis. They then independently read the qualitative entries and systematically searched for conceptual patterns. Key segments in each entry were extracted and coded with a label (e.g., emotional coping; friendships); related codes were then collated into overarching themes. The final themes and subthemes were defined by broad consensus during group discussions.

Results

Quantitative Data

Survey data was obtained from 302 undergraduates aged 18–26 ($M = 21.3$; $SD = 1.7$). Table 1 presents their demographic information.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Gender identity (n (%))	
Female	220 (73.0)
Male	75 (25.0)
Other (e.g., transgender, non-binary, two-spirit, questioning)	6 (2.0)
Race/Ethnicity (n (%))	
White/Caucasian	192 (65.3)
Black, Indigenous, People of Colour	102 (34.7)
Degree sought (n (%))	
Bachelor of Arts	138 (45.7)
Bachelor of Science	88 (29.1)
Bachelor of Commerce	31 (10.3)
Other Bachelor	45 (14.9)
Year of study (n (%))	
1 st year	65 (21.5)
2 nd year	79 (26.2)
3 rd year	89 (29.5)
4+ year	69 (22.8)
Employment status (n (%))	
Unemployed	124 (41.1)
Part-time	160 (53.0)
Full-time	18 (6.0)
Living arrangements (n (%))	
With parents or legal guardian	220 (72.8)
With romantic partner	23 (7.6)
With roommate(s)	28 (9.2)
Alone	21 (7.0)
Other (e.g., relative)	10 (3.3)
Parental education level (n (%))	
First parent	
Less than a high school degree	8 (2.7)
High school degree	43 (14.5)
College diploma	82 (27.6)
University degree	164 (55.2)
Second parent	
Less than a high school degree	14 (4.8)
High school degree	52 (17.7)
College diploma	60 (20.4)
University degree	168 (57.1)

Rates and Types of Participation

As hypothesized, rates of ECAP dropped from prior to during students' current university attendance. Table 2 shows that the majority of students (73%) had engaged in at least one extracurricular activity at some point during their current university attendance, whether on campus or in the community. There was a significant gender difference in this participation rate ($\chi^2 (2, N = 299) = 9.60, p < .05$). Students identifying with the female gender were more likely to have engaged in ECAP than those identifying with the male gender ($\chi^2 (1, N = 294) = 7.08, p < .05$). However, given the large unbalance in the ratio of females-to-males/other gender in our sample, caution should be taken when interpreting this difference. Participation also differed according to students' year of study ($\chi^2 (3, N = 301) = 9.50, p < .05$). Second ($\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = 6.74, p < .05$) and fourth years ($\chi^2 (1, N = 39) = 5.36, p < .05$) were more likely to have engaged in ECAP than first years. Participation rates did not differ according to students' race/ethnicity ($\chi^2 (1, N = 293) = .05, p > .05$) or to their employment status ($\chi^2 (2, N = 301) = 4.28, p > .05$).

Table 2. Extracurricular Activity Participation across all Types of Activities (*n* (%))

	Prior to students current university attendance (<i>n</i> = 302)	At any point during students' current university attendance		
		At University	Outside University	At/outside university
1 activity	31 (10.3)	85 (28.1)	86 (28.7)	60 (19.9)
2 activities	38 (12.6)	36 (11.9)	51 (16.9)	62 (20.5)
3+ activities	207 (68.5)	26 (8.6)	41 (13.7)	98 (32.5)
Total	276 (91.4)	147 (48.7)	178 (59.3)	220 (72.9)

A quarter of the sample (25.2%) had engaged in school-based community activities such as student governance, community service and outreach activities, or social or academic clubs and associations. A similar proportion (23.5%) had participated in self-improvement activities such as personal interest groups or hobbies on campus (e.g., personal creative projects or photography club). A quarter had been involved in campus sport activities, either competitively as part of a varsity, club team, or individual sport (16.9%) or recreationally, as part of an intramural team sport, fitness group activity, or lesson (9.5%).

Two-thirds of the sample (62.3%) had engaged in activities in the community, most frequently in competitive (26.0%) or recreational sports (36.3%). Some students were involved in civic engagement activities (16.7%), such as community-run government, newspapers, or services. A similar proportion had participated in self-improvement activities, such as continuing education courses, or individual hobbies and clubs (15.1%). A few students had been involved in art performance activities as part of a band, orchestra, choir, or theater club off campus (8.7%).

Qualitative Data—Thematic Analyses of Benefits

Question 1

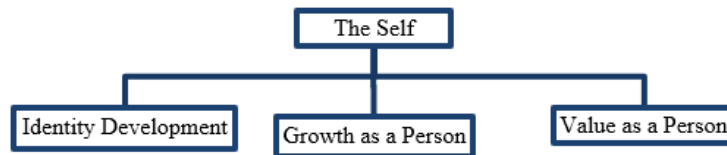
Four broad themes emerged from participants' response to:

How has participation shaped your current sense of self and identity, including how you define yourself, how you behave and express yourself, and how you relate to others?

From each of these themes emerged a set of subthemes, displayed in figures 1–4.

Theme 1: The Self

Figure 1. Theme of the Self



Subtheme: Identity Development

ECAP fostered a process of self-discovery through an exploration of various interests and values. For some participants, it is how fulfilling roles were defined: “Volunteering with multiple organizations . . . helped me realize that helping others . . . is a strong passion of mine.” One participant explained how ECAP helped them embrace an aspect of their identity at odds with gender stereotypes: “[Being] in a car club . . . shaped my identity in term of being a ‘car lady’, since this ‘role’ is less common in society.” Generally, ECAP helped participants clarify what was most important to them: “Being involved . . . in cultural clubs and hobby clubs . . . helped me become comfortable with . . . what I take interest in. [It] helped me paint a clearer picture of the type of person I am and what I stand for.”

Subtheme: Growth as a Person

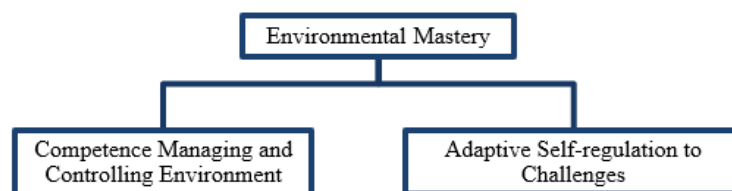
ECAP fostered introspection, self-awareness, and self-improvement. Participants clarified their limitations and envisioned strategies to transcend themselves: “Putting myself in different situations (by doing/being in many different activities) taught me many things—my strengths and weakness . . . to improve in different areas of my life.” Similarly, another participant reported that: “[Participating has given] time for self-reflection, to understand . . . situations that could have been handled differently, and what I need to do in the future to generate a different outcome.” Others found their involvement helped view evaluations adaptively: “[I learned to work well] under authority figures, [to] take criticisms and feedback quite well.”

Subtheme: Value as a Person

ECAP helped participants develop or recognize qualities and capacities that increased their self-worth and self-confidence. As explained by one participant: “[These] activities . . . shaped [my] accomplishments [and] allowed me to achieve things that I am proud of.” For some, ECAP led to the realization that they were likable: “I believe that experience allowed me to feel like I had a place where I belonged, and nobody would judge me . . . this increased my self-esteem and made me realize . . . people could like me.”

Theme 2: Environmental Mastery

Figure 2. Theme of Environmental Mastery



Subtheme: Competence Managing and Controlling One's Environment

ECAP fostered competence in managing and controlling one's environment and played a central role in instilling professional standards of behavior. One participant credited these competencies to sports: "Being a high performance athlete [helped me become] the organized, focused, determine[d] person that I am." ECAP provided several participants with a strong work ethic: "The work ethic the acting industry has instilled in me, through my failures here and there, has taught me specific values."

Subtheme: Adaptive Self-Regulation to Challenges

ECAP provided various contexts for surpassing oneself. This allowed the development of character strengths that help self-regulate in the face of challenges. Competitive environments seemed favorable to this self-regulation: "[My experience as a competitive figure skater] completely shaped many aspects of my personality and had a very large role in determining how I approach challenges." For some participants, the breadth of experiences fostered adaptability and resilience: "To have gained so much exposure in a variety of environments has made me increasingly adaptable, I feel as though I can fit in anywhere; it has broadened my horizons and expanded my comfort zone."

Theme 3: Wellbeing

Figure 3. Theme of Wellbeing



Subtheme: Experiencing Positive States

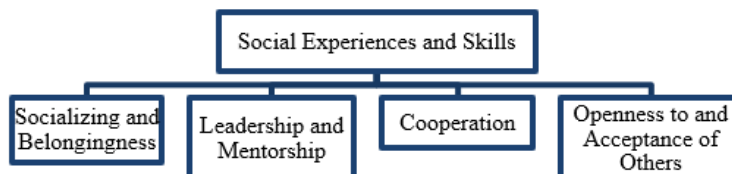
ECAP brought pleasure and joy, a sense of fulfillment, and physical wellbeing. For some participants, ECAP infused everyday experiences with delight: "Participation in various activities . . . fueled my happiness . . . I behave with an utter excitement for [these] life experiences." For others, it contributed to a holistic sense of wellbeing: "Working out . . . has made me feel better both physically and emotionally." Some seemed to view ECAP as an opportunity to practice mindfulness: "[I have been swimming] for about fifteen years at a very high level of competition. I try to be constant and intensive in every action . . . to take care of my mind and my body."

Subtheme: Managing Negative States

ECAP served as a coping mechanism by helping alleviate or adaptively channel distressing emotions. It helped many participants distract from stress: "[It] allows me to decompress and focus on other things." or cope with emotional experiences: "[It] helped me regulate my emotions, [especially] anxiety." Activities also served as outlets for releasing pent-up emotions: "My participation in activities . . . allowed me to release frustrations or anger."

Theme 4: Social Experiences and Skills

Figure 4. Theme of Social Experiences and Skills



Subtheme: Socializing and Belongingness

ECAP served as a gateway for meeting new people and building strong support systems. Friendships were forged: “Participating in an organization or association/club [allowed me to socialize] with the community and students/people my age. It is how I met new friends.” Many participants found a sense of belonging within a larger collective, including their educational institution: “Being part of the football team, I am proud to represent this university. I have a strong sense of belonging.”

Subtheme: Leadership and Mentorship

ECAP provided opportunities for learning how to manage teams, teach, guide, and inspire others. Some participants learned to maintain composure and provide direction: “I am able to take control . . . in a team/individual sport . . . to calm down players into proper set of minds, [I am] able to take lead and to motivate everyone.” Others practiced assuming authority: “It allowed me to realize how I handle being in a position of power.” ECAP also empowered participants to view themselves as agents of change, capable of positively influencing others: “Being involved has given me a sense of purpose in my community. I see myself as a leader and as capable to make an impact . . . I want to help others follow and reach their goals through learning from my experiences.”

Subtheme: Cooperation

ECAP fostered the development of interpersonal skills required for effective collaboration. For some participants, their exposure to a variety of contexts enabled communication abilities: “The range of activities has increased my interpersonal and communication skills . . . I can relate to other[s] more easily . . . and am good [at] working with other people.” Participants also reported acquiring a collective sense of responsibility towards common ideologies or goals: “I consider myself to be more of a ‘team player’ meaning I am more aware of the collective success of my community.”

Subtheme: Openness to and Acceptance of Others

By bringing together people from various backgrounds, ECAP fostered interpersonal sensitivity. Participants learned the importance of inclusivity and giving everyone a voice: “Participating in the student association . . . allowed me to become more open-minded and accepting of others’ differences. It also challenged me to . . . learn how to equally include everyone and give everyone a chance to be heard. This experience has helped shaped, and continues to shape me into a respectful, open-minded, and empathetic person.” ECAP led to a greater understanding and appreciation of diversity: “I am more appreciative, open-minded and curious about different cultures and . . . minority groups whether racial, professional, sexual, [or] cultural.”

Question 2

Three broad themes emerged from participants’ response to:

How has participation helped you explore who you want to be in the future, for example by testing or experimenting with future possible selves?

A set of subthemes emerged from the first two broad themes.

Theme 1: Self-Discovery

Figure 5. Theme of Self-Discovery



Campus Mental Health Crisis

Subtheme: Interests and Aspirations

ECAP allowed students to refine interests: “I’ve been able to eliminate fields that disinterest me and find resources to help me explore fields that do.” It provided clarity and direction for both leisure and endeavors: “Through testing out various activities, I was able to discover hobbies and interests that cemented my goals and aspirations.”

Subtheme: Knowledge and Skill Development

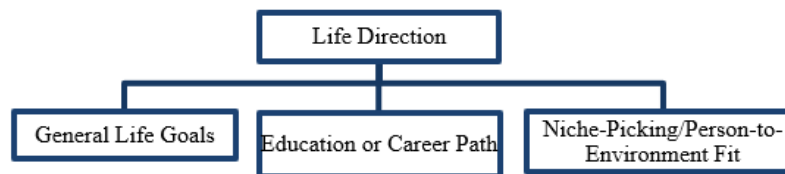
ECAP helped to discover one’s potential, and to hone and acquire new knowledge and competencies. For some participants, ECAP served as a firsthand professional experience: “I’ve been able to experience what a career in my chosen field might be like. This allows me to develop the necessary skills and traits for becoming who I really want to be in the future.” ECAP also fostered skills that translated into tangible progress towards ambitions: “Through participation in different nonprofit organizations, I have learned I enjoy taking initiative and care a lot about various causes. I am now running my own nonprofit organization.”

Subtheme: Transformative experiences and Personal Development

ECAP provided learning experiences that encouraged students to assess strengths and limitations: “Participation helped me see the potential I have as an individual and . . . explore my capabilities and different versions of myself.” For some participants, this process helped them gain the self-assurance required to reach new heights: “It has given me confidence to set new goals I would not have previously set.”

Theme 2: Life Direction

Figure 6. Theme of Life Direction



Subtheme: General Life Goals

ECAP served as a beacon to long-term personal commitments and objectives. For some participants, this meant nurturing their physical wellbeing: “[ECAP] makes me realize I want to stay fit and stay strong as I get older.” For others, the illumination of a journey towards openness and acceptance: “My engagement in these activities has made me want to make long-term commitments to loving myself more, and cultivating curiosity and kindness.” ECAP inspired a freedom to explore life and oneself:

“I want to be someone who does not feel constricted to one specific activity or thing in my life rather, I want to be able to freely try new hobbies and activities and not be tied down to a specific version of myself.”

Subtheme: Education or Career Path

By providing opportunities for exploring various abilities and aspirations, ECAP shaped one’s progress towards education or career paths. As one participant explained: “Competing in several robotics challenges . . . fueled my desire to pursue a degree in Engineering . . . I enjoyed the prospect of building new things and creating something from scratch.” ECAP helped envision how natural abilities might be translated into professional pursuits: “I . . . considered teaching as I have been told I am good at explaining difficult concepts while staying calm and patient.” And, for many participants, ECAP provided opportunities for professional networking: “With the association, I am in close . . . contact with many representatives of companies and firms, which greatly help me get an internship for

my non-studying semesters. This has also allowed me to see all the possibilities available to me once I graduate.”

Subtheme: Niche-Picking/Person-to-Environment Fit

ECAP helped discover the types of social and work environments that best matches or complements one’s personality, capabilities, or values. For some participants, this meant realizing a preference for calm settings: “I am not competitive or . . . extraverted . . . I like environments that are soft, not too hectic, and . . . easy going.” Some participants reported that exploring activities paved the way for informed decisions regarding career aspirations: “Participation . . . allowed me to see different job perspectives that can fit with my character as well, it allows to incorporate different . . . ‘job styles’ and really understand what I truly want.”

Theme 3: Interpersonal Development

Figure 7. Theme of Interpersonal Development



ECAP allowed students to discover and improve oneself through relationships. For some participants, it provided the support and motivation needed to strive for personal excellence: “It has given me the opportunity to work and be around like-minded individuals who push me to be the best version of myself.” ECAP also facilitated exchanges through which insights were gained: “Participation helped me explore who I want to be based on learning off of and communicating with others in discussion. When we talk about our future and pasts, we discuss our mistakes and our aspirations and any potential roadblocks on the way.”

Reasons and Drawbacks For Non-participation

Some students who did not engage in activities spontaneously commented on their lack of involvement. The reasons provided were largely attributable to personal characteristics, scheduling conflicts, or financial constraints. Some reflected on the consequences of their lack of involvement: “I feel albeit too disappointed for myself not being too involved, therefore I want to become an active participant as a result. I feel more standoffish and reclusive as a result. I am rather hesitant and careful of risks.” Some seemed to regret not participating: “Since I have never participated in any extracurricular activities, I only really define myself by academic accomplishments. All I really know how to do and am objectively good at is studying. I feel like I am lacking other useful skills that could have been learned during these activities. I am shy and introverted and work better alone possibly because I’ve never participated in group activities.”

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory mixed-method study was twofold: first, to quantify university students’ rates and types of extracurricular activity participation (ECAP), and second, to describe its role in shaping emerging adults’ holistic development and wellbeing. Our qualitative questions aimed to mainly capture the contributions of ECAP to students’ sense of self, identity development, and life direction. We also anticipated that participants’ answers would reveal broad social and psychological benefits to ECAP in emerging adulthood, as abundant literature had previously revealed among adolescent populations (e.g., Feldman & Matjasko, 2007; Denault & Poulin, 2016; Oberle et al., 2019). We contextualize our findings within discussions of holistic, socio-ecological approaches to education aimed at curbing soaring rates of distress among postsecondary students.

As hypothesized, ECAP rates dropped from prior to during students’ current university attendance (from 91% to 73%). Students who participated during university engaged in a wide range of activities, both on campus and in the larger community. For certain types of activities, the proportion of participants approximated those reported

in the Canadian Reference Group of the latest American College Health Assessment (2022b, see pp. 4–5). Among over 11,000 students surveyed across sixteen universities, in a typical week 28% participated in student clubs or organizations, and 35% in community service or volunteer activities. A much larger proportion (73%) engaged in physical exercise, team sports, recreational sports, or physically active hobbies.

Similar to another Canadian study, (King et al., 2020) we found that more students in our study engaged in activities in the community than on campus. Certainly, emerging adults have autonomy in choosing and leading activities beyond school grounds. A large proportion of our participants were still living at home and might also have chosen to continue participating in community activities in which they were previously involved. The relatively smaller proportion of students partaking in activities on campus nonetheless suggests obstacles to accessing ECAP on school grounds.

Benefits of ECAP

As hypothesized, our qualitative results indicate that ECAP supports critical aspects of emerging adults' holistic development and wellbeing. Our thematic analyses suggest extracurricular activities can create supportive environments that benefit postsecondary students via two overarching roles: (1) by facilitating adaptive identity development processes critical for successful transitions to adulthood, and (2) by providing psychological and social assets that can serve as coping resources. These benefits were corroborated by students who did not engage in activities, but spontaneously emphasized what they believed they had missed out on.

ECAP and Identity Development Processes

Our participants' qualitative responses offer support for the role of ECAP in emerging adults' adaptive identity exploration and consolidation. ECAP provided postsecondary students with opportunities to (re)define themselves by testing various skills, roles, and environments that transcended the narrow focus of their academic pursuits. This process of self-exploration helped clarify intrinsic interests, values, and goals of both personal and vocational value. Our results align with those of Stevenson and Clegg's (2011), who found that ECAP plays a central role in university students' exploration of possible selves towards which to gravitate or avoid. These are important findings, as emerging adults who have a synthesized sense of self in college and university tend to report better mental health, including lower levels of anxiety and depression, and higher levels of self-esteem (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2011; Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013).

ECAP was also found to benefit participants by presenting intellectual, social, and emotional challenges that allowed to assess and develop areas for growth. This suggests ECAP might contribute to the development of a "growth mindset", according to which qualities and abilities are viewed as amenable to change through effort and persistence (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2015). The positive reappraisals on which growth mindsets rest are known to promote self-regulation strategies, including the capacity to persevere and bounce back from difficulties (e.g., Schroder et al., 2017). This potential link between ECAP and growth mindsets could be related to findings such as those of Guilmette and colleagues' (2019), who showed that ECAP promotes university students' adaptive goal regulation. In their study, compared to students who had only engaged in ECAP in high school, students who continued participating in university were more likely to persevere through obstacles and setbacks, and to reappraise challenging situations in a positive light.

ECAP and Psychological and Social Assets

Equally importantly, our findings show that ECAP supports affect regulation by helping students manage negative states and foster positive ones. ECAP also helped students meaningfully connect through socializing and mentoring networks. Many students emphasized the role of ECAP in strengthening their sense of belonging to their school and wider community. Our findings also indicate that ECAP can contribute to creating a socially accepting and unprejudiced campus climate by bringing together individuals who have similar interests and aspirations but come from varied backgrounds. These rich sociocultural exchanges fostered openness, curiosity, empathy, acceptance, and civility. Such prosocial attitudes and behaviors are critical for promoting campus safety and inclusivity. The diversification of postsecondary populations has not been met with commensurable inclusion, putting minorities at risk for feeling out-of-place, marginalized, and unworthy of persisting (Chattopadhyay, 2022). By facilitating bonding with "the other", ECAP might be an effective avenue for challenging out-group stereotypes and widening

institutional belongingness. In university, strong social support networks and feelings of belongingness are known to greatly enhance students' psychological wellbeing and to reduce the risk for burnout and dropout (e.g., Dopmeijer et al., 2022).

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

Worldwide, postsecondary students are reporting increasingly high levels of distress and mental health service utilization. While providing a rich context for self-exploration, the collegiate and university context undeniably comes with stressors. Students are simultaneously exposed to academic, financial, social, and career-related demands (Lisnyj et al., 2021) as they attempt to construct their identity and plan for their future in increasingly impersonal and competitive learning environments (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Establishing campus and community climates that support emerging adults' holistic development and wellbeing is vital.

Our results suggest that ECAP can significantly contribute to holistic, socio-ecological initiatives aimed at targeting student wellbeing at individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal levels. Participants in our study reported engaging in a wide variety of activities both on campus and off campus, ranging from more formal club and group activities to less formal activities aimed at self-improvement. Unfortunately, about 20% of students who previously engaged in ECAP prior to entering university reported not participating at all in university. Some of these participants acknowledge missed benefits. Taken together, our quantitative and qualitative findings have important implications for practice. As stated by Lisnyj and colleagues (2021), while a growing number of public health initiatives are calling for the development of student-centred mental health guidelines and standards, postsecondary institutions need to be more proactive in implementing existing recommendations. Highlighting the role of ECAP and actively promoting and facilitating its access on campuses could help bridge theory to practice. This might be particularly important on large, urban campuses predominantly serving commuter-based student populations like ours. These students might be more at risk of feeling like a number among others and less connected to the university, making activities on campus less enticing. Requiring universities to provide information sessions on ECAP opportunities and benefits, and to implement a daily campus-wide break during which academic activities would be suspended and extracurricular activities offered could help mitigate this risk.

Despite our findings' important implications for youth transitioning to adulthood within the broader educational systems that serve them, some study limitations need be recognized. First, our study design was purely descriptive and as such prevented the positing of directional inferences regarding the role of ECAP on developmental and wellbeing outcomes. Second, given that our qualitative questions did not ask participants to reflect solely on their ECAP experiences during their current university attendance, the benefits of ECAP cannot be bound to activities undertaken during that time. Finally, most of our sample did not reside on campus, which may affect the generalizability of our findings. Our results nonetheless provide a strong rationale for further investigating the association between postsecondary students' ECAP, their identity development, and indicators of positive adjustment. Future studies should link various aspects of ECAP, including the type (e.g., arts, sports, or civic/community engagement), breadth (i.e., variety), intensity (time), and localization of activities (on campus vs. in the community) in shaping adaptive and maladaptive identity exploration processes, and in predicting mental health and wellbeing in the context of holistic, socio-ecological approaches to higher education.

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Campus Mental Health Crisis

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