

What's in a rank? Universities and Student Satisfaction

The role of student services practitioners in creating successful students

Abstract

Increasingly, students attending post-secondary education are not pursuing higher academic knowledge. Instead, the experience of University, including gaining new friends, relationships, memories, and prospective careers has become paramount. This is reflected in provincial, national, and international ranking systems that are widely accepted by our audit society and are a critical source of information informing prospective students' decisions about post-secondary education. Using the University of Toronto as a site of inquiry, this paper explores the practices that universities have developed as a result of the focus on student testimonies about their experience and satisfaction at their institutions. I argue that Student Life programs and services have expanded to become a crucial part of the assemblage directed towards student "success". The student experience is largely crafted by staff in the department of Student Life in an earnest, positive way to serve the development and success of students. Ethnographic interviews and practices of autoethnography reveal that student success is variably defined by University administrators and Student Life Practitioners. Hierarchical power dynamics have inspired the growing professional field of Student Services to search for legitimacy within the institution.

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Ethnographic Practicum: The University

Shannon McKechnie

998870057

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In high school, I often heard that University was going to be the best four years of my life. The allure of this University *experience* was enough to get my classmates and I through the final few months in our small town. Soon, our parents packed the car with our belongings and we were off to universities and colleges across the province ready for four years of new friends, independence, red cups, and long nights.

Before I could even begin to think about residence, tuition, classes, or my future major, I first had to apply to University. The key to selecting the best school in Canada to complete your undergraduate degree seemed to lie within the pages of the Maclean's Annual University Rankings¹. My copy of this Canadian University bible had been flipped through front to back, back to front, and front to back again in the months leading up to the application deadlines. Colour coded highlights and sticky notes could be found throughout the magazine representing the following categories: location, best residence rooms, diversity of programs, tuition, overall reputation, and prestige. Without even visiting a single University campus (though this was highly recommended, accompanied by the cliché: "you will know where you belong because it will just *feel* right"), I had narrowed down my selections to what I believed, based on the extensive ranking system provided by Maclean's, were the best schools in

¹ The Maclean's Annual University rankings have been published since 1991. The first year of rankings included statistics on 46 publicly funded Canadian institutions. The 2015 rankings include over 150 schools, and includes new ranking categories such as "Student Satisfaction" (Honey 2015)

Canada. If the next four years were going to be the best (and most expensive) of my life, I had to make sure they happened at the best school too.

The Maclean's Annual University Rankings issue is not the only place prospective University students can look for the answers to their application quandaries. In Ontario, The Council of Ontario Universities publishes data each year revealing admission rates, entering averages, residence space offers, campus activities, student satisfaction, and graduate employment rates dating back to 2006. The QS World University Rankings were first published in 2004, and use a variety of measures to reveal how institutions across the globe stack up against each other. The National Survey of Student Engagement, developed in 2000 at Indiana University, is based solely on student testimony of their experiences at institutions across the United States and Canada, and provides information schools need in their efforts to improve the student experience (Kuh 2001).

Within the assessment structures used by Maclean's, the COU, the QS World rankings, and the NSSE, 'student satisfaction' or the 'student experience' has become increasingly important. These ranking systems, amongst many, many, others, hold great power over the institutions subject to their measurements. With enrolment rates² increasing each year, the Universities must maintain a competitive level of student satisfaction, even as faculty to

² Over four hundred thousand students applied to the twenty-one universities in Ontario in 2014 (Council of Ontario Universities 2015). Since 2000, universities in Ontario have seen a 69% increase in enrolment (Council of Ontario Universities 2015). The University of Toronto alone has expanded enrolment by twenty-three thousand students in the last twelve years (Johnpulle, Student-to-faculty ratio consistently high at U of T 2015) (Knibbutat 2014).

student ratios increase, to retain an impressive ranking. The students pursuing post-secondary education, and arguably, their families as well rely on rankings to inform their decision to enrol and invest in an education, the cost of which is also increasing each year³. Given rising enrolment and tuition rates, magnified focus on the student experience on campus and prospective student access to various ranking systems, how has the University adjusted and redeveloped to remain a highly ranked institution that provides a desirable student experience?

Ethnographic Practicum: The University

This question, amongst many others, was posed in an Anthropology seminar I enrolled in during the Fall semester of 2015. Designed to provide an opportunity for upper-year Anthropology undergraduates to conduct original ethnographic research, the course gave us an opportunity to explore a site we were extremely familiar with: the institution at which we were enrolled, the University of Toronto. The goal was to explore power at the University. Where is it? Who has it? Can we trace it? How does it affect the students who attend the University? Studying the University using a lens of power forced us to (re)consider our surroundings and think critically of the ways that we engage with the University's structures and processes.

As students of the University, we realize that we hold very little, if any decision-making power. The difficulties we face in attempts to navigate the bureaucracy of the University are just one reminder. We also know that in an

³ Tuition at the University of Toronto has tripled since 1993, and is expected to rise above \$9,000 a year by 2018 (Haq 2015).

institution as large as the University of Toronto, finding a sole source of power would be incredibly unlikely. Recognizing that each participant in this class came to the discussion with very different experiences at the University, we were given the freedom to explore our own interests within the University, to trace power as it impacts various areas of campus life. As a result, larger questions about power in the University started to become unpacked through our individual explorations across campus. While our individual projects progressed, we returned to the class collective for feedback and review. Class was a space where common theoretical threads tied our topically different projects together.

To begin our work, our discussions were honest, critical, and cathartic. We found that the UofT student experience is, for many students, quite negative. Students feel unable to navigate the academic and administrative policies that govern their enrolment. Mental health issues on campus have come to the forefront of conversations on student health, and students continue to lament about a culture of disconnection on campus (Koranne, 2015; Owens, 2015). The negative impositions of power on campus were glaringly obvious, based on our own testimonies, and through a general understanding of the campus culture. I found myself wanting to identify a space - a process, an office, a program – something, that provided University of Toronto students with a positive experience. Instead of an overbearing, repressive power, I was in search of a positive, associational, productive power (Allen 2003).

My own struggles at University led me to programs that were categorized as 'Student Life'. In this division of the University, I found individuals that wanted

to learn about me, both as a student, and as a person. I started to learn about concepts like leadership, personal values and mentorship that engaged my mind in a way I hadn't found in my academic life yet. It was in these programs that I found a positive manifestation of power, in that I felt *empowered* by the content, the people, and ultimately, myself. Inspired by my own experiences, my project became an exploration of Student Life programs and the practitioners who develop and facilitate them. In this paper, I explore the history of Student Life programs on Canadian post-secondary campuses. I propose that the proliferation of these programs is a response to the rise of assessments, ranking and audit culture in the University. I use qualitative data collected through ethnographic research to investigate perceptions of student life practitioners regarding the development and professionalization of their field.

Methods

My choice of research site, the programs, resources, and employees that fall under the umbrella of Student Life, is as previously suggested, deeply personal. I have not only participated in these programs as a client, I am also employed in the field, holding paid student-staff positions in leadership and mentorship programs, and residence life. I endeavoured to approach this site with auto ethnographic sensibilities, aware and reflexive of my role as both the researcher and a member, or subject, of the research site, and a consumer of university services (Anderson 2006). This practice was challenging and

enlightening, encouraging me to think critically about the work I am involved in and hope to pursue in the future.

Qualitative research methods in post-colonial anthropology are inherently reflexive, in that the researcher is immersed in the site of interest as a participant-observer (Anderson 2006), and aims to reflect upon this experience through anthropological analysis. However, as David Mosse explores, the process of anthropological writing also creates boundaries, as the researcher removes themselves from the site for solitary periods of analysis and writing. Mosse calls this anti-social anthropology (Mosse 2006). Conducting ethnography in a site in which one is a member of the organization and interlocutors are professional colleagues supposes an ongoing relationship between researcher and subject before, during, and after writing. Mosse says, “When desk collapses into field, something important has changed in the structure of ethnographic practice. We are starkly confronted with the essentially relational nature of anthropological knowledge, no longer an object in our possession. That is to say, what anthropologists know is inseparable from their relationship with those they study” (Mosse 2006: 937). My knowledge and analysis of the field of Student Life continues to be informed and enriched by my professional relationships. For this project, my ethnographic work focused mainly on interviews with Student Life professionals from different Student Life offices across the University of Toronto campus. These are people with whom I may have met previously, but I had not previously engaged in intensive discussion with them about the nature of our

work. These discussions enhanced my everyday observations in our shared space.

History of Student Life Programs

This field is interchangeably referred to as Student Affairs, Student Life, or Student Services, depending on the institution's naming practices. For use in this paper, I will refer to these programs as Student Life or Student Services.

In 2015, Student Life departments at post-secondary institutions encompass a diverse range of services designed for the student. Services include, but are not limited to: student housing and residence, mentorship, leadership development, first-year orientation and transition initiatives, civic engagement and volunteerism, career exploration, student government and other campus organizations, health and wellness, recreation and athletic programming, co-curricular programming, international programs, and accessibility. The aggregate goal of this assemblage of programs is to support and facilitate student success (Seifert, et al. 2011).

The history of this field spans the history of higher education, although it has manifested in different ways over the course of its development. In early academic institutions, the development of academic knowledge was paramount. Close relationships between students and faculty and academic mentorship inspired the students' academic curiosity, and guided them towards careers in knowledge production in the University. The services required by students could be understood as *in loco parentis* (Cox and Strange 2010) providing the care and supervision usually exercised by parents. Co-curricular programs were valued for

their contribution to student learning in their academic courses. President Hatcher of the Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1938 required students to participate in 'cultural activities' outside of their academic classes, and in physical games, particularly for those enrolled as teacher candidates (Cox and Strange 2010). It is suggested that in Canadian higher education, the first specialized titles and appointment of staff specifically assigned to serve students accompanied the enrolment of the first women in our post-secondary institutions. Women posed a need for specialized services in housing on and off campus (Cox and Strange 2010).

The earliest evidence of professional organizing and collaboration by faculty and student services personnel is at the Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1939. A faculty committee was struck to 'improve certain conditions under which our undergraduates do their work' (Cox and Strange 2010). National professional organizing is later seen in the development of five professional organizations that sought to encourage collaboration between student services practitioners across the country and develop guiding principles for their work.

Students in 2015 have remarkably different needs than students from previous generations. Student services programs and resources continue to change and develop in response to the changing needs of the students enrolling in University each year. The University itself also mirrors social and political life. The neoliberal institution is marked by rapid corporatization, decreased public funding, a focus on producing employment-ready individuals, devaluing social

science and humanities education, the expansion of university-provided services, and the spread of audit culture (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000; Shore, 2008). Student services programs are therefore directly linked to social and political processes that value a ranked educational system, and prioritize the production of self-interested and productive workers. However, this is not to say that student life practitioners pursue a neoliberal agenda.

A student life practitioner described the field to me as a blend of three major ways the University interacts with the student. First, the student as a client: the logistical and administrative interactions between the institution and the client in regards to the exchange of money, enrolment in programs, academic issues, etc. Second, as a service-provider: managing the actual services provided to students from campus space, health and wellness, Internet usage, to residence space management. Third, as educators of the ‘whole’ student: providing support and education to students that enriches their academic experience and develops the individual person, recognizing that they live meaningful lives outside of the institution⁴.

This project explored Student Life programs as they are offered at the University of Toronto’s St. George campus. Over 70,000 undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff occupy this campus space on a daily basis, creating a vibrant and diverse campus community. The University of Toronto is often ranked the number one University in Canada, and within the top twenty

⁴ University of Toronto - Student and Campus Community Development. *Learning Outcomes*. <https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/bts/learning-outcomes>

universities in the world⁵. On the St. George campus, students in the Faculty of Arts and Science are assigned membership in a college, a division that allows the university to effectively divvy up the administrative load of so many students and create smaller, more cohesive communities. Student Life programs exist both at the college level, for members of a particular college community, and centrally, providing programs and resources to the larger student body. Staff that compose this field at the University of Toronto collectively engage in the UofT Student Life Professionals (SLP) community through an email list and at meetings where they discuss current research and trends in the field. This community works to build connections for resource sharing, promotion of programs, and potential sites of collaboration, as the office divisions and sheer size of the university can prevent regular in-person interactions.

Interlocutors for this project were experienced in both college-level and central program delivery, with each specializing in a different Student Life functional area, like residence life, student group advising, or program assessment. Despite their physical distance and individual communities in which they practice, I found that the work conducted is similar across all Student Life offices, and is often peculiar, or unexpected. Most offices participate in the planning of, or guide students in the planning of orientation and transition programs, though this task also includes packing one thousand orientation backpacks. Student Life programs across the university dedicate programs to improving student mental health – one such program involves hauling hundreds

⁵ UofT News: <http://news.utoronto.ca/tags/rankings>

of bananas into a student lounge, as they have proven to be a student favourite, as far as free snacks go. Residence staff at the university are committed to keeping students safe and protected, including picking up a large bulk order of various types of condoms for live-in staff to have on hand for students, in case of emergency. These “other duties as required” may at first seem unusual, but they are essential to the effective delivery of programs that serve student needs. Student life practitioners consistently reflect on the needs of their student populations, pursuing better, and more relevant programs as these needs change so students who participate feel fulfilled and satisfied by their time at the University of Toronto, and as a member of their individual college.

Audit Culture

Stemming from processes of financial regulation, audit and assessment is now being used to measure and evaluate aspects of social, cultural and political life. Audit is where “the financial and moral meet” (Strathern 2000). Quantitative measurement is directly related to attainment and to this end, audit in the University is used to encourage continuous improvement (Strathern 1996). Rankings, as described previously, are large-scale public audits of the University experience that are widely ‘embraced and endorsed’ (Shore and Wright 2015) without question by society at large. Performance indicators, as used by rankings, are reshaping social institutions like the University. Program development, media, hiring, and funding within the academy are unequally

prioritized, as they are identified as key performance indicators that bode well during ranking season.⁶

However, in recent years, there has been a shift in the subject of audit scrutiny. Instead of the students being the subject of evaluation for public comment, the Universities themselves become the subject, and I argue, largely at the mercy of the student perception. The University, then, must determine – what does the student want out of their University experience?

There are few accounts of this question in academic research on higher education in recent years. A study from the University of Leeds (Callendar 1996) reports that the two most common reasons for a student to enter University were first, to get a job, and second, to get a job which requires a specific academic credential. Students are not pursuing University for the sake of learning and developing their academic curiosity. Their intentions are calculated and instrumental. Though this report is almost twenty years old, I believe the sentiment remains true. From my own experience, I can verify that future employment prospects are major influences on students' pursuit of higher education, but I would also argue that students attend University in 2015 to find friends, intimate or marital partners, develop social skills, pursue personal development, and explore their identities, all of which, in conjunction with a student's post-graduation employment opportunities, are indicators of satisfaction. Some of this can happen in the academic classroom, but the

⁶ Marilyn Strathern (1996, 1997, 2000), Cris Shore (2008, 2015), and Susan Wright (2015) have written extensively on audit culture, assessment, and the University.

majority of these social goals, as articulated by students through rankings, can be met through participation in programs developed by practitioners that are dedicated to these specific developmental goals. Student Life departments are tasked with the organization and nurturance of the students' life outside the academic classroom for the entirety of their University career. It seems that the University has concluded that happy, motivated, and successful students are more likely to report positive experiences at the institution, so programs, resources, services, and crafted student experiences must be provided to ensure this.

Assemblage of Student Life

In my own experience in the field of Student Life, and through stories shared in ethnographic interviews conducted for this project, attention to the impact of their work on students is deeply ingrained in the processes of planning, facilitating and internal assessment. Student life practitioners approach their work in the most earnest way, with genuine pastoral care for student well being, and belief that their work is important and meaningful in the present and future landscapes of Canadian higher education. My interlocutors often referred to their own experiences in University as the source of their motivation and passion for the field, including experiences in international programs, as student union leaders, orientation (frosh) leaders, student activists, or residence life student staff. As they have transitioned to the practitioner role in these programs, their excitement for the student experience has not faltered. Student life practitioners I

interviewed reported remarkable job satisfaction, and are incredibly thoughtful about their experiences in the role. Student Life practitioner roles are highly active: they require energy, attentiveness, and ability to approach the work with an open mind and fulfill “other duties as required”.

The (sometimes overwhelming) positivity and genuine care for students from student life practitioners seems to be in direct contrast to the University’s motivation to grow these programs. Whereas student life practitioners exhibit concern for the development of the student as a productive member of both the University’s academic community, and the student’s personal communities in and out of the institution, the University remains concerned with international rankings, enrolment increases and academic output. This is not lost on student life practitioners. It was pointed out to me by an interlocutor that the University of Toronto is one of few institutions in Ontario that does not reference ‘students’ in the opening lines of its mission statement. This is not to say that the University of Toronto does not care about the experience of its students, but that at an administrative level, the University seeks to leverage the experiences of students to gain status and acclaim. How, then, do all of the actors involved in the lives of students at University assemble to serve them?

I have mentioned previously that the University wants its students to be ‘successful’. To the University administration, and to international ranking systems, this usually means employable. Many actors – University administration, the students themselves, industry employers, and community leaders, to name a few, have problematized employment and ‘job readiness’ of

university graduates. For these actors, improvement in this area equates with student *success* as it translates into international rankings and society's audit systems. Student life practitioners seem to have a far more subjective and abstract perception of success. For them, success as experienced by each student looks entirely different. Respecting and nurturing different versions of success is incredibly important to student life practitioners. It's also makes success far harder to measure.

Despite different understandings and apparently disparate goals, measures intended to increase the "success" of students remain a well funded and important functional area of the University's operations. To explore how the pursuit of "success" through Student Life assembles and holds together diverse actors, pursuing common or even disparate goals, I turn to Li's (2007) analytic of assemblage. Among the practices that contribute to the development of an assemblage, as described by Li (2007), are forging alignment, rendering technical, and authorizing knowledge.

Forging alignment between University administrators and Student Life practitioners relies on the common purpose that brings together the various actors. The relationship between the University administration and practitioners seems aligned towards the goal of creating successful students, but this relationship is not without a hierarchical power dynamic. Student Life programs are funded by the administrative body of the University, and practitioners are generally given the freedom to offer programming that they deem important. However, as Li (2007) describes, this autonomy is not with responsibility.

Conditions apply, initiating processes of internal audit to ensure program quality and effectiveness, and justify funding. It is at this point that different versions of "success" could fracture the alignment: the "success" practitioners produce might not pass the audit test.

Rendering technical means to isolate a problem and create a bounded space in which this problem can be solved through a series of prescribed steps, resulting in positive outcomes. Here, we can see how the rapid growth of student life practitioner roles responds to the framing of the problem of student success in technical terms. Rendered technical, the job readiness problem should be solved by students interacting with practitioners at the Career Centre since they have the '*authorized knowledge*' specific to this issue and will ensure students are prepared to enter the job market post-graduation. Authorizing knowledge, the third practice of assemblage creation is also a boundary making process, limiting who is authorized to share and educate on a topic, and limiting critique.

Assembling actors in the University around Student Life and student success is necessary for the continued growth of these programs that are recognized as important to the institution's optics. However, the practices involved in providing these programs are continually subjected to forms of power that impact their delivery and existence.

Professionalization of Student Life

While working in the assemblage of student life, practitioners are subject to forces of power that bound them. At the same time, leaders in the field are

actively working to attain power and value in the institution by professionalizing their work. I've used the term practitioner throughout this paper, as my interlocutors expressed discomfort with the term professional. Many student life practitioners claim to have 'fallen into' the work through their undergraduate experience in student leadership, residence life, or as student-staff. Student Services is typically not considered 'professional' in that it has not required specialized training or particularly esoteric knowledge (MacDonald 1995). However, recent trends in the field point towards a requirement for specific knowledge and academic credentials that has not existed until now.

The process of professionalization of this field in Canada began with collaboration across institutions and the development of national professional organizations (Cox and Strange 2010). In Canada, this organization is known as the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services. In recent CACUSS history, members have begun to encourage each other to explore the field critically through scholarly research, in many cases using the United States as a comparative benchmark. My interlocutors felt that the pressure to look at the field academically is a result of both the "internal" concern among practitioners to ensure their programs are operating on grounded theoretical principles, and external pressures from the institutions in which they work.

In Canada, few graduate-level degree programs have existed to train student life practitioners, but a need for these programs has emerged following the rapid period of growth and new hires. As Student Life departments continue to grow, job-ready graduates need to be ready to fill positions. At the Ontario

Institute for Studies in Education, a Masters of Education program was established in fall 2014 with a specific focus on Student Development and Student Services in Post-Secondary Education. Alongside programs such as this, active practitioners are consistently conducting their own professional development through conferences, learning communities, academic reading groups, and more. The introduction of programs producing specific knowledge and awarding academic credentials is a step towards professionalization and legitimization of the field within an academic institution.

The academic legitimacy of Student Life as a field of knowledge and practice is incredibly interesting to me. It became clear through conversations during this project that practitioners in the field of Student Life are looking for the kind of power that lies in endorsement and recognition from the academic side of the University. The formats are those that an academic institution would deem acceptable – scholarly research, critique, and academic credentials. The newly created position of Student Life Coordinator within the Faculty of Arts and Science, an academic unit, may be evidence that the University is beginning to recognize the value of Student Life practitioners' expert knowledge of student development, involvement, and leadership theories in the academic lives of students as well.

As this field continues to professionalize, will the impact on students change? There was not a clear consensus on this from my interlocutors. Some worry that the emphasis on credentials and production of specific knowledge will not serve the field well. The current make-up of the field is as diverse as the

students it serves, with practitioners from an incredible range of academic, technical and professional backgrounds coming to work every day. Will the requirement of a professional degree program like a Masters of education for entry-level positions limit the diversity of knowledge that the field can draw on? Others, in particular those currently pursuing further education in the field, struggled with the inability to share the knowledge they produce due to research ethics constraints of studying the students they serve in their professional roles – the work was not purely academic, and the divisions became blurry. It was strongly noted by all I spoke to that research in the field that focuses on the Canadian context is much needed, and that professionalization could make space for that, but insist that research in the field must be interdisciplinary.

Power

The goal of this project was to explore a subset of practices of power in the University as seen through Student Life programs. I proposed that the expansion of Student Life programs and services is directly related to the categories of ‘student experience’ and ‘student satisfaction’ found in formal ranking publications like the Maclean’s Annual University Rankings, the Council of Ontario Universities, or the QS World University Rankings, and the use of student testimony in large scale data collection initiatives like the Nations Survey of Student Engagement. This ‘audit culture’ that has become normalized in social institutions happens externally through comparative surveys and rankings like the aforementioned, and internally to evaluate current programs and offerings in the

name of improvement. I believe that Student Life programs provide experiences outside of the classroom that contribute to overall student satisfaction. Few students attend University purposefully for higher learning. Instead, University has become a rite of passage for many students marked by new friendships, relationships, personal growth and identity development, and ideally concludes with an opportunity for employment. As a student-staff member in the field of Student Life at UofT, studying the 'who' of this field was important. In addition to asking why this field developed at the University, I wanted to know how the programs were developed and sustained within the institution, and who was involved in creating them. I explored how the various actors assemble to support student success, identifying the contrasting values at play. Finally, I briefly explored how this field is pursuing professionalization.

Power can be seen in the practices explored above, influencing actions and decisions of the University and student life practitioners. What I believe to be the overarching theme of power in this scenario is how these programs, services, and resources exist to carefully craft the *experience* of students at University, in hopes that they will think fondly of their time on campus, sentiments that will be reflected in the University's reputation. This was striking to me because I came to the University of Toronto looking for the best four years of my life, as so many other students do. To think that there are professionals dedicated to making sure that I feel that way by the time I cross Front Campus at my convocation is both startling and comforting. I began to reflect on all of the activities I've participated in that could be considered 'Student Life' programs from my first year to now: first

year Orientation, leadership and mentorship programs, health and wellness programs, student clubs and organizations, international programs, residence life, career services, alumni relations. The power to craft an experience from the beginning to end is a power that should not be taken for granted.

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