STOPPING BACK IN: PORTRAITS OF STUDENTS RETURNING FROM LEAVE FOR MENTAL HEALTH REASONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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Dedication

To my mother, Erin, whose unwavering love, support, and guidance throughout my life made this dissertation possible. And for my grandfather, Cecil, who always wanted me to be a doctor.
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A single page of thanks could never suffice when thinking about all those who have helped me on my way towards my degree. My path began with my mother instilling a great love for inquiry and learning and it ended with her supporting me and reminding me (daily) of the work that the pursuit of learning takes. My family has been forever supportive and motivating at each step of my education; I thank them for their continued love, text messages, voicemails, and facetimes both real and virtual. I am hopeful that our shared successes will continue to motivate the next generation and I look forward to learning from Cecily Camille in the not-so-distant future.

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ABSTRACT

STOPPING BACK IN: PORTRAITS OF STUDENTS RETURNING FROM LEAVE FOR MENTAL HEALTH REASONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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Educational research has produced numerous theories attempting to predict enrollment patterns of college students. From Tinto (1975) to more recent student persistence scholars, too often studies focus on a narrow aspect of student retention or persistence like co-curricular engagement, pre-college achievement, and institutional fit. Interruption of enrollment is frequently depicted as a personal or institutional failure rather than a persistence tool utilized by a significant population of students.

Research that considers non-college life events is fairly limited and typically presents quantitatively or serves as a predictive tool for the types of students by demographic marker that will or will not persist. Mental health problems carry impact across demographic delineations and the population of students disclosing mental health concerns or diagnoses has grown significantly on college campuses. Research attributes the lack of enrollment in higher education due to mental health reasons at anywhere between 4.7% and 8.7% of traditional college-aged students who were once enrolled. A stopout is one tool available to students managing their health concerns while on the path to graduation.

Using Reason’s (2009) conceptual framework of student persistence, this dissertation explores the college experience for students who stopout due to mental health reasons and subsequently return to full time study. Framed by Schlossberg’s (1995) transition theory, this study views the multiple transitions a student working through mental health concerns encounters.
when enrollment in college is interrupted. Portraiture methodology is used to create meaningful portraits of each student as they return to college after a leave. Portraiture is purposeful in highlighting the voices and successes of this population of students.

The portraits bring to light a confluence of persistence challenges framed in Reason’s (2009) work. Organizational behavior and peer environment that students encountered prior to the leave and after returning presented significant barriers to participants’ successful transition. Sustained psychological treatment while away combined with an established plan of re-entry aided in students’ transition. More than any other resource, the participants found strength in the self as they transitioned back to campus. Implications for further research as well as institutional practice incorporating and supporting students’ returns are also discussed.
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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

Statement of the Problem

College student persistence in the United States continues to vex institutions, economists, and education researchers. At the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), students persist at significantly higher rates than the national average (University of Pennsylvania, 2016). For both the 2008 and 2009 cohort of first time, first year students entering Penn, the 6-year graduation rate is 96% and 95% respectively (University of Pennsylvania, 2016). The national numbers look quite different, for the fall 2009 cohort, the 6-year graduation rate sits at 59% (NCES, 2017). Educational researchers have produced numerous theories attempting to predict enrollment patterns of college students. From Tinto (1975) to more recent student persistence scholars, too often studies focus on a narrow aspect of student retention or persistence like co-curricular engagement, pre-college achievement, and institutional fit lack of fit (Pascarelli & Terenzini, 2005). Not engaging non-college life events (NCLEs) or the multiple psychological decisions leading up to the decision to leave school leaves significant gaps in our understanding of student persistence, dropout, and stopout (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Cox, Reason, & Gillman, 2016).

Persistence is typically measured by the 6-year graduation rate for first time, first year entering students. Students who remain continuously enrolled see graduation rates
that are significantly higher than those who have interruptions in their enrollment. This statement is obvious and yet much of the literature ignores the students who are persisting with an interruption. “Even though stopout is related to time to degree and degree attainment, there is a dearth of research on how non-continuous enrollment, especially multiple episodes of stopout, affects graduation chances,” (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006, p. 576) In a longitudinal study, Desjardins et al (2006) found that of the population studied across three different cohorts at a large public research university, 71% of students had some period of non-continuous enrollment over more than six years of observation. Of those students who eventually returned, 70% of those students had a subsequent stopout (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006). In total, less than 7% of students with two or more stopouts ever graduated. Across the country, in the 2011-2012 cohort entering attending a four-year college or university, 53% of students had stopped out for five or more months at some point during their college career (NCES, 2016).

Students stopout or take a leave of absence from college for a variety of reasons. Students may pursue job opportunities, may be needed to assist at home, they may find their interests and academic goals no longer match, or they may be faced with a health issue that requires time away to manage. Students encounter a number of college and non-college life events (NLCEs) during their enrollment (Cox, Reason, Nix, & Gillman, 2016). Focusing on three major NLCEs (grieving a death, financial interference, and psychological interference), Cox et al (2016) found that only psychological interference carried a significant disruption to graduation outcomes. Seventy-one percent of students enrolled at four-year non-profit private colleges like Penn, reported that their mental
health had declined since they first enrolled (NCES, 2016). In a National Alliance on Mental Illness survey (2012), 64% of students with mental health issues who were no longer enrolled attributed their lack of enrollment directly with their mental health status.

Though a myriad of explanations and considerations exist for potential interruption of enrollment; factors outside of both the institutions’ and individual students’ control have largely been ignored as “the utility of targeted interventions for such students appears limited,” (Mattern, Marini, & Shaw, 2015, p.22). However, there are a handful of studies that show a stopout or leave of absence for health reasons has little impact on eventual retention and in some cases, can be beneficial (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009; Meilman, 2011; Woosley 2003). Woosley (2003) found that students who take a leave of absence to address a health issue return at higher rates than students who left for any other reason studied (financial, academic fit, etc.).

The dominant discourse on college students who struggle with their mental health has focused on initial transition to campus, barriers of disclosure, and more recently, how to legally, ethically, and efficiently transition those students off of campus, even if only temporarily (Keup, 2008; Lee, 2014). Similarly, research related to college student retention has focused on initial transition to campus, inclusion in freshmen learning communities, and recognizing and reducing external barriers to academic and social integration (Bean, 2005; Bean & Eaton, 2001;Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1975). The central point of much of the research examining retention and persistence is on the retaining of students without interruption of enrollment (Tinto, 1975; Reason, 2009). What the data is showing us, however, is that a significant population of students will interrupt their
studies and of those students, many of them will need to be successfully transitioned back to campus after that interruption.

Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray’s (2003) longitudinal qualitative study found that two-thirds of their sample of college students with psychiatric disabilities (n=35) had enrolled in post-secondary education at least three times. These data suggest great internal motivation to complete post-secondary education for these students but also that campus transition and/or student support services were not sufficient on at least two separate occasions for those students; once before the first leave and at least once afterwards. For students in Desjardins, Albhurg, & McCall’s (2006) study referenced above, those that enrolled three separate times, their graduation rate was under 5%.

Like much of the often cited and foundational student persistence literature, models, and statistics, the limited data available on the stopout experience is overwhelmingly quantitative. Only very recently have scholars been able to follow students’ post-interruption from college to get a better sense of this population and develop the idea of a student stopout and return. Even with increased awareness and more accurate statistics, the current models fail to include the voices that the numbers represent. The data tells us to be quite concerned for the stopout population’s ability to persist and institution’s ability to retain yet we know very little about where to base that concern or how to celebrate the successes of the students who do eventually persist.
Purpose of the Study

Outside from the traditional look at dropout and persistence literature, we know very little of the experience of students returning from leaves for mental health reasons (voluntary or involuntary) and what circumstances may influence their experience in transitioning back successfully or lead to subsequent leaves. Important research questions develop as we consider the documented increase of students disclosing severe psychological diagnoses on college campuses and those students choosing to address their needs by requesting a leave of absence (Gallagher, 2013; Meilman, 2011). Research shows that there is high likelihood for those students who have an interruption to return to higher education, so we must responsibly explore the experiences of students who return from leave of absence for mental health reasons (Woosley, 2003). Using portraiture methodology grounded in the tenets of phenomenology philosophy, this study explores the students' conscious experience of returning from leave taken for mental health reasons at the University of Pennsylvania.

Using Schlossberg’s (1995) Transition theory to ground the line of qualitative inquiry, the following research questions were explored: 1) what are the experiences of students returning from a leave of absence for mental health reasons? 2) How does the temporal and physical context impact their experience? 3) What sources of support exist for the student? And 4) How can learning from these experiences impact how colleges and universities work with students returning from a leave or stopout?
Using portraiture methodology allowed me to search for the good in the experience of returning from a leave and celebrate the successes of students who navigate the initial disruption and return to the university. Studying these experiences at Penn, an institution that graduates at rates far above the national average over, allows for the exploration of a context that has contributed to the high rates of successful transitions for initial non-persisting students.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study relies on the large amount of literature on student persistence and hones in on the facilitating and barrier factors students with mental health issues face on college campuses. Additionally, helping to ground the research, I will explore students returning to an educational setting from a variety of circumstances (financial, academic, military, medical, etc.). Finally, using Schlossberg’s (1995) transition theory, I examine the concrete steps of transition that a student leaving, spending time away, and eventually returning to school go through. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) point to the nuanced processes that an adult going through a transition experiences and Schlossberg’s (1995) theory creates a robust framework with which to base this study.

Much of our contemporary understanding of retention and persistence on college campuses finds its foundation in Tinto’s (1975) longitudinal study when he developed his interactionalism theory. He found a student’s likelihood to persist in higher education is tied to the interactions between individual characteristics, family background, pre-college schooling, and the academic and social systems that exist in college. He posits that students are more likely to persist if they feel socially connected and supported by friends as well as other subcultures in the campus environment.

Since 1975, numerous scholars have taken Tinto’s (1975) model and expanded, amended, or completely upended it. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) found strong
empirical evidence for five (only four across institutions) of Tinto’s thirteen presuppositions and therefore argue that there may be a much more robust understanding of student persistence. A specific drawback to Tinto’s model is that it does not incorporate factors external to the institution as influencing enrollment behavior (Cabrera, Casteneda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992).

Bean (1980) in his Student Attrition Model takes a more holistic look at student persistence and includes external factors as well as students’ individual intentions as predictors of persistence. Expanding the model, Bean and Eaton (2001) argue that student persistence could be defined by a psychological model for both voluntary and involuntary leaves. They perceive the steps leading up to a leave entail a number of necessary psychological decisions that help predict whether or not a student will leave school. Economists studying persistence see similar necessary decision points as influencing persistence and “dropout behavior is explained as a rational response to new information” (Stratton, O’Toole, & Wetzel, 2008 p.320).

Conceptual Framework

Reason (2009) conducted a robust review of retention and persistence literature to develop a thorough conceptual framework from which to understand the thick history of the line of inquiry as well as the nuance of student retention and persistence.

While sometimes used interchangeably, it is important to note definitional differences in persistence and retention. In short, students persist (or do not) and institutions retain (or do not). Using Reason (2009) as a conceptual framework to guide
this study, it calls for a systematic yet subtle study of persistence and retention. Looking to his framework for influences on student retention, Reason (2009) bases his framework on previous work he had done with Terenzini (2005) to exemplify the multiple inputs on student persistence. The figure below exemplifies the multiple sources of influence on student persistence.

Figure 1. A Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence (Reason, 2009)

Reviewing over three decades of research on one of U.S. Higher Education’s biggest shortfalls, degree completion, Pascarelli and Terenzini (2005) found that too often studies focus on a narrow aspect of student retention or persistence, rather than the multiple inputs into whether or not students persist through post-secondary education.
However, with the comprehensive model presented by Reason (2009) above, it still does not entertain differing health status that may play in a role in a student’s ability to persist through higher education on a two, four, or six-year timeline. While this study adds another narrow examination of subsection of persistence literature, Reason (2009) calls for further research on student “subclimates” and a “continued exploration of sociodemographic characteristics” (p. 677). Although, Reason (2009), is not explicit in a call for a study of students who initially do not persist but eventually return and/or complete; data suggest that this population is large enough and “at-risk’ enough to consider. The decision to leave school is not always permanent. Yet, too frequently across persistence literature, data sets only examine student enrollment behavior at predetermined moments without consideration of eventual return or temporary interruption.

To be specific, I review literature on students with psychological disabilities or mental health concerns as it relates to their persistence through higher education. Most frequently for college students, these issues or diagnoses are depression, anxiety, and panic attacks (ACHA, 2014). In addition to these more common reported issues, students can experience a myriad of mental health issues including thoughts of suicide, eating disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, substance abuse or addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, and of course many others.

Keeping in mind Reason’s (2009) framework that there are multiple inputs, students’ pre-college characteristics and experiences, out of class experiences, and factors external to the institution all can have significant impact on student persistence. This
examination differs from traditional studies that follow pre-college academic preparation and student engagement. While significant predictors of persistence, there are multiple, varied, and nuanced inputs into the persistence puzzle (Braxton, 2000).

Both dropout and stopout behaviors can be considered a result of new information. For students struggling with health status while enrolled may encounter “new information about the time and effort required to study and receive reasonable grades” which may impact their decision to stay or to leave (Stratton, O’Toole, & Wetzel, 2008, p. 321). Reason (2009) demonstrates, effectively, that throughout the literature on persistence there are multiple and coexisting inputs that factor into a student’s decision or ability to stay enrolled. For students who return from a leave of absence, demonstrating they did not originally persist, the transition back to campus and their understanding of that transition deserves its place in the persistence literature.

**Theoretical Framework**

Building upon Reason’s (2009) conceptual framework to understand student persistence, when examining a return from leave, one must consider the transition that the student undergoes. Without successfully negotiating the transition from student to non-student and then back to student, there would be no returner/persister to fit within the complex framework presented by Reason (2009). Schlossberg (1995) developed her transition theory for adults in transition and the four resources of Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies that contribute to the process of transition.
The transition situation that a student encounters can include considerations like what triggered the transition, the timing of the transition, the duration, and other concurrent stresses (Goodman et al., 2006). The consideration of the self includes personal and demographic information, state of health, psychological resources, and general outlook optimistic or pessimistic (Goodman et al., 2006). Support can take many forms in an individual’s transition and is not as easily identified objectively. That said, Goodman et al. (2006) describe layered “convoys of support” that may be interrupted by a transition that include close family, partners, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc. (p. 77-78). Finally, the strategies that individuals employ during a transition vary just as the support networks would for an individual. Those strategies may change according to the...
first three “S’s” in the theoretical framework but can be more easily defined as “coping responses,” (Goodman et al, 2006, p. 82).

Schlossberg (1995) provides a helpful theoretical lens with which to view students’ transition. To cease enrollment in higher education can be a significant shift in ones’ timeline of goal attainment, a change of identity, a stress on family and financial resources, and for many students their understanding of their mental health status is a difficult and painful transition itself.

The College Experience for Students with Mental Health Issues

Students and individuals with psychological disabilities or mental health issues can manage their symptoms and thrive in an academic or work setting. However, when students cannot, or do not, successfully transition into a higher education setting, retention of those students is at risk. Many of those students may choose to take a leave of absence to help address those issues or barriers to a successful transition. To ground the study of students’ experiences when returning from leave, it is important to understand what we can learn from prior studies that examine multiple influences on students with psychological disorders or mental health issues to take time away from school.

The initial transition to college can be difficult for many students coming from high school. Goodman et al (2006) look to the four main resources that adults have when managing transition. The situation itself may be foreseeable but the self may determine how one interprets that situation or employs specific strategies. Those with psychiatric
disorders see many of the same barriers to successful transition as students who do not encounter struggles with their mental health. Kampsen (2009) and Lipirari (2011)’s work both found that there are a number of barriers typical to students with and without psychological disabilities; however, those barriers may be magnified given a student’s disability status. Major themes emerge in persistence literature on students with mental health issues. Help-seeking behavior in students, disclosure patterns or failure to disclose, issues of personal identity/stigma, and non-coordination of services all have shown to carry impact on students’ enrollment behavior. If we consider how these pockets of literature fit into Reason’s (2009) framework, it is reasonable to assume that mental health status will impact the way the student can and will approach the college experience “box” that has significant bearing on student persistence. While these issues certainly intertwine and are compounded by mental health related symptoms it is important to engage each of them separately for better understanding (Belch, 2011). To engage the issues that students face when struggling with their mental health and initial or secondary transitions, the relevant literature will be broken into the four main resources available during transition times: Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, 1995, Goodman et al, 2006).

The Self

Students experiencing psychological distress or mental health concerns on college campuses have increased as has been documented throughout the years. Though percentages of students feeling very sad, overwhelmed, and/or hopeless are quite high (~45% and higher), of those students expressing such feelings only 6.8% of students
report seeking help for any psychological distress (ACHA, 2014). Student persistence as it relates to help-seeking behavior could find its roots in the pre-college characteristics of a student, the institutional context, the peer environment, or a learned response to individual experience (Reason, 2009).

Within the Asian and Asian American student population, Cramer (1999) found that self-concealment of distress is a common barrier to seeking help more so than their European American college-going peers. However, in both populations, effectiveness and need for counseling went relatively unquestioned; though that finding is not universal. Calloway, Kelly, and Ward-Smith (2012) studied help seeking behaviors on a college campus and found that barriers to help-seeking were augmented by thoughts of stigma, concerns for confidentiality, lack of awareness and overall treatment concerns. A strong concern for students in the study was generally questioning the effectiveness of counseling prior to seeking it at all. A variety of social, ethnic, cultural, religious, and other demographic identifiers have been taken into account in terms of help-seeking behaviors and what intersections there might be. When looking at white students as compared to racial/ethnic minority students, Miranda Soffer, Polanco-Roman, Wheeler, and Moore (2015) found that students from racial/ethnic minorities, even when they had presented themselves to a campus counseling center, were more likely to endorse stigma-related concerns as well as the lack of finances or time to continue to treat than white students.

More generally, first year students report feeling highly stressed but find that the stress is “normal” and choose not to seek formal resources on campuses (Alipuria, 2008).
Moreover, Alipuria (2008) found students were much more likely to seek help informally through friends where they were “known and understood” (p. 78); however, students were reluctant to seek help in ways that would allow peers to know they were seeking formal help. Accessing the formal support services is also a common barrier for students who may be comfortable seeking help as the perception of wait times, how to ask for an appointment, or even getting to the physical building may feel insurmountable (Masuda & Boon, 2011). Masuda and Boon (2011) suggested that the process of making an appointment to the initial intake may be awkward or inconvenient for students experiencing distress.

Similar to students choosing not to seek help, a common barrier to transition as well as institutions’ ability to treat or serve students is students not disclosing any disability or issues to campus officials. Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, and Garza (2006) found that more than half of students who reported psychiatric disabilities in the National Longitudinal Transition Study Wave- 2 (NLTS2) had never disclosed that disability to their institution. These findings corroborate the concerns over stigma or not wanting to seek more formal avenues for assistance.

Students often define themselves through their disability for better or for worse (Kampsen, 2009). Often that self-definition contributes to a feeling of stigma and subsequent hiding of the disability. As referenced by Belch (2011) and according to the NIMH many students may not even be aware of their disability as the age of onset for many mental health concerns are during the traditional college student age group.
The Situation

When students do disclose and do seek help, many times the coordination of the services on a campus is not adequate to meet students’ needs. Many institutions have had to cut back on preventative and outreach services in order to accommodate crisis intervention and campus management (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Faculty and student affairs staff often feel ill-equipped to handle students who may disclose a psychiatric disability or present disturbing behaviors (Myer, James, & Moulton, 2011; Sharkin, 2013).

In addition to a large proportion of university employees being unfamiliar with how to serve and assist students with psychological disabilities, communication between offices that do has been problematic at times (Lee, 2014). It has been shown that partnerships “between and among campus groups (faculty, staff, students) can maximize both resources and the benefits to students with psychiatric disabilities” (Belch, 2011, p. 87). Another important player in the coordination of services is parents. Frequently, student affairs staff may be less apt to involve parents in an effort to promote individualism or out of fear of privacy laws (Liparini, 2011).

The lack of coordination of services/care falls on institutional priorities and understanding of the needs of various student groups. It may be that students who would normally disclose are either unaware of the resources or fear that they would not meet their needs. However, it has been shown that engaging with counseling or other mental health work can be beneficial for retaining students (Lee et al., 2009).
Princeton was the first college to institute a dedicated counseling center to help retain high-quality students who were dropping out due to personal or emotional problems (Kraft, 2011). This was the beginning of college counseling models for retention. In a 2009 study of incoming first year students, Lee et al (2009) found that those who engaged in counseling were three times more likely to enroll in a third semester (sophomore fall) than those who did not engage in counseling. Students who engage with counseling perform better in all but one measure of retention: graduation rates, where graduation rates are the same as students who do not engage with counseling (Turner & Berry, 2000). As compared with students who are removed from campus for mental health reasons, students who struggle with their mental health who remain connected on campus have shown greater rates of recovery (Hoffman & Mastrianni, 1992). However, Hoffman and Mastrianni (1992) do not account for the severity of illness that may impact rates of recovery for students whether they leave campus or remain.

Kadision and DiGeronimo (2004) found that mental health plays a large role in a student’s decision to leave school; as well as a large role in an institutions decision to have a student leave school. Kessler, Foster, Saunders, and Stang (1995) found that 5% of college students in the United States withdrew from school due to mental health issues. Fifteen years later, Stevenson (2010) found that 4.7% of students in the U.S. will drop out due to mental health issues. It is important to note that the typical age of onset for many psychiatric disorders falls just before or within the traditional college student age group.
Therefore, many students will face new and foreign challenges in addition to those challenges typical to transitioning to a higher education setting. These challenges can have a great impact on educational outcomes. Men with early onset psychiatric disorders were half as likely to graduate as women without psychiatric disorders (Kessler, 1998).

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The Strategy

Students take a leave of absence for many reasons including career, personal, financial, as well as a change in health status. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) found that emotional health plays a strong role in academic success and retention of students. The ability to appropriately and successfully deal with emotional stress common to a college student was an important factor in retention (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Arguably, students who cannot successfully handle those challenges to emotional health due to their mental health status or disability are inherently an at-risk, in terms of retention, population of students. Using qualitative interviews of eight university students who opted to take a leave of absence due to psychiatric illness, Wiener and Wiener (1997) suggested that in addition to academic stressors related to course work, a major theme among participants were social stressors indirectly contributing to their leave.

Keup (2008) describes the status of mental health on college campuses is the hallmark of this generations’ college goers. She goes on to say that of those students who struggle with psychological disabilities/mental health issues, 8.7% of them have
impairments so serious that they cannot remain in school (Keup, 2008). This would lead the student to request or be placed on a leave of absence. Taking a leave of absence does not constitute a dropout or eventual non-persistence to degree; though multiple stopouts have shown to significantly diminish six-year graduation rates (Desjardin, Ahlborg, & McCall, 2006). Woosley (2003) found that students who leave to address a personal/health issue return at higher rates than for students who left for any other reason studied. Meilman (2011) of Georgetown University described that those students who take a leave of absence should be considered an “on-going” at risk population of students. He found at Georgetown, of the students who take a leave to address psychological or mental health issues, one-third of them will relapse and need to take a second leave of absence.

In many cases students may need to be hospitalized to receive adequate treatment for their mental health issue. Depending on length of stay, this can create a very difficult transition immediately back into the academic realm. It may be in the students’ best interest to request a leave of absence in order to better re-integrate into the academic and social contexts of college. Transitioning straight from the hospital can be quite overwhelming and academic, social, and emotional issues are major concern areas leading up to and after the hospitalization to school transition (Clemens, Welfare, & Williams, 2010). While a leave of absence may ease the immediate issues, Ganz and Pao (1978) found that taking a leave of absence alone did not ensure a better re-entry after a hospitalization. This supports much of the more contemporary work that students taking a
leave may continue to have issues that interrupt their educational goals and require subsequent leaves.

Returning

Reintegrating into college after a leave of absence is not a simple undertaking. Haines (2013) refers to reentry as a difficult and rugged process. The process is a combination of physical movement and cognitive change. Through exploratory interviews, Haines (2013) found that even temporary sojourns like study abroad made students feel significant uncertainty upon return. Looking to students who return from self-selected mission trips, research points to a marked cultural and social identity shifts for students (Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovica, Gorton, & Foy, 2006). Short-term departures from an educational setting can impact a student’s identity, what a year or more might do remains under studied.

A number of studies chronicle the difficult process of re-entry in elementary and secondary education contexts for students (Goldkind, 2011; Toldson, Woodson, Braithwaite, Holliday & De La Rosa, 2010) or students who drop out of high school (Berliner, Barrat, Fong & Shirk, 2009). While helpful to understand that for both populations mental health is strong factor in their departure and re-entry into school settings, little is explored in terms of what occurs when the students return to school beyond their expressed desire to return.

Managing the transition of a returning student takes significant coordination between the institution and the student. Students who returned to school after an
academic suspension showed improvement on academic success indicators when they engaged in population specific retention programs upon that return (Wang & Pilarzyk, 2010). Looking specifically at re-entry to higher education after a major natural disaster, Lowe and Rhodes (2013) found that educational optimism carried great influence on a students’ re-entry. Among this population, psychological distress showed to have a significantly negative impact upon re-entry. Chartrand’s (1992) work supports this in finding that the lower the psychological distress for students the greater the original intention is to persist in college. This is helpful to understand that psychological distress can disrupt a student’s ability to successfully transition back to school for students regardless of specified reason for the leave. For a nontraditional woman who returned to school after significant time away, guilt related to her mental health status was a prevailing barrier to her seeking help (Fillipponi-Berardinelli, 2013).

Just as there are multiple inputs in Reason’s (2009) framework for understanding persistence, there are similar inputs for understanding a student’s likelihood of return. In addition to mental health status, educational optimism and demographic markers like family income can carry significant weight on the decision or ability to return. Though little work shows how the confluence of student mental health and family income can impact ability to return to school we can look to Wagner et al (2006) NLTS2 that found students whose families earn $25,000 or less a year are 23% less likely to be engaged in education or preparation for employment. Internal motivation or disposition also plays a significant role in decision to return (Wiener & Wiener, 1997). Six of the eight students
that Wiener & Wiener (1997) followed returned to school and stated they knew they were capable of working in an academic setting.

Shifting to look at Reason’s (2009) supportive peer environment and other supporting factors that aid in successful transitions in Schlossberg’s (1995) theory, Walker (2014), after reviewing relevant case law on mental health leaves and college students, suggests that universities should create a peer support group for all returning students. In a qualitative study on the impact of a peer support group for returning study abroad students, Acrouca (2013) found the presence of the group helped students process as well as integrate the personal changes each had gone through while away from post-secondary education. Buell (1999) suggests social support is linked to increased re-enrollment after stopping out. Of several factors, Buell (1999) found that family support was integral for students’ re-enrollment and direct support from parents had a positive effect on students choosing to reenter.

While the initial stopout is an important and often difficult transition for students, the return from stopout also proves to be a significant transition. Schlossberg’s (1995) theory can help us understand that transition but specifically within the context that Reason (2009) provides. How the individual, the institution, and networks available assist in a return can all influence how successful that transition will be. While retention and persistence remain an issue for college campuses understanding this small piece may aid in completely the larger puzzle.
The “mental health crisis” on college campuses is widely referenced, researched, and talked about in the literature across subject matter. Methods typically include a survey or focus group of students and counseling center directors as well as a general look at college student demographics (ACCA, 2014; ACHA 2014, NIMH 2010). It can be said confidently that there are a number of barriers to transition for first year students and those are magnified in the cases of students with mental health concerns. Researchers have taken a look at why students do not persist in both secondary and post-secondary schools. There is even fairly strong research to describe which students will return after time away and which will not; based on demographic difference and health status (Buell, 1999; Wagner et al, 2006; Goldkind, 2011). What is so clearly missing is an understanding of students' experiences when they return. More importantly, we do not yet have an understanding of this phenomenon as the student experiences it, in their words.
CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methodology

“In this drawing, the girl hides behind herself. The sun is too much in her hands.

In this drawing, the girl’s double wears green around her hair,
a decision made to tell them apart. To be so lucky.”


The experience of students re-entering higher education after leaving for mental health reasons is exclusively a social or human endeavor and therefore one that begs to be explored using qualitative methodologies. The previous research on the topic has been highly quantitative and focuses on initial transition and barriers leading to the decision to take time away. That time away, drop out, or interruption in study is typically viewed as some sort of individual or institutional failure. Rather than looking at a failure in retention, this study employs portraiture methodology to search for the goodness in the experience of students’ leaving school and subsequently returning from their time away.

Portraiture is an innovative approach to qualitative research that is grounded in and expands upon the philosophy of phenomenology. Phenomenology has its roots in European philosophy as early as the 1700s as a philosophical concept explaining that reality is the human lived experiences and without consciousness of that experience, there is no objective reality (Groenewald, 2004). In other words, phenomenologists believe that there can be no concrete certainty outside of the immediate and lived experience of one’s personal consciousness. Portraiture expands this concrete certainty to include the
researcher’s consciousness as well. Portraiture, in ways that many quantitative methodologies ignore, brings to focus the role of the researcher in crafting the methods, the findings, and conclusions of a study.

While qualitative methods generally recognize the role of the researcher, portraiture makes clear the researcher is shaping the results of the research. The methodology uses an “explicit recognition of the use of self as the primary research instrument for the documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of people and the culture being studied” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). The creation of portraits allows for the alignment of artistic and scientific inquiry to produce an accessible and telling story. Often, portraitists are described as searching “for a story” rather than listening to a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, p. 12).

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, the creator of portraiture, describes in her writing on the use of portraiture, two experiences with having her portrait made; once as a child and another as an adult. Each time the portrait that was created by someone other than herself and each left her with a lasting impression that influenced the creation of portraiture as a qualitative research methodology. She describes the “warmth of this human encounter” at eight years old and at 25, the portrait was not quite as she saw herself, “but she told me about parts of myself that I would have never noticed or admitted,” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 4-5, 2005). It became clear to me in the way that Lawrence-Lightfoot and others that have followed that portraiture is at once a warm human endeavor and one that aims to illuminate the unseen or overlooked. Using portraiture allows me as a researcher to give voice to the often voiceless and pays real tribute to the qualitative tenant that participants are the experts of their own experience.
Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) describe the process as allowing participants to “feel seen…fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, and scrutinized” (p.5). This means that the final product, the portraits would be both “documents of inquiry and intervention, hopefully leading toward new understandings and insights” (p.5).

Site and Participant Selection

Portraiture consists of five essential features that include: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole. The context is the “physical, geographical, temporal, historical, cultural, and aesthetic nature of the research site, participants, and their experience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 41).

The study setting is the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), a private, elite, four-year, doctoral university in the northeast United States. Meilman (2011), found in his research on leaves that return from leave rates correlate with first year retention rates at colleges and universities; Penn has a high rate of first year return at 98% (UPenn Institutional Research & Analysis, 2016). Additionally, Penn has a great deal of resources both monetary and human to assist in a variety of student transitions including that of a return from leave student. For almost six years of my professional career I was one of those human resources. Due to the explicit role of the researcher, I found that my professional knowledge and perspective of the setting would be important. As Keen (2016) found in her study on Native American students and a college preparation program, her familiarity with the program and context allowed her specific insight into the lived experience of the participants and let her voice take “central and creative” roles
in shaping the portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, as cited in Keen, p.78, 2016). Choosing to study the experiences of participants on their campus allows the participants to work in their natural setting rather than a constructed one, a benefit of qualitative research generally (Creswell, 2014).

When determining the qualifications for the study, it was important that all participants had returned from an interruption in their studies that they attributed to mental health concerns. Because the overwhelming majority of undergraduate students at Penn fall in the traditional college student age range of 18-25, it made sense as part of purposeful selection to limit participants to this age range. In Fall 2014, 0% of first time students as well as degree seeking undergraduates at Penn were older than 25 (University of Pennsylvania, 2016). According to Penn’s records, women make up 52% of undergraduate students; men account for 48%; there are no alternative gender options presented in the publication (University of Pennsylvania, 2016). 82% of undergraduates at Penn come from out-of-state, 44% of undergraduates are white, 7% African American/Black, 18% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 9% Hispanic/Latinx (University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

To select participants, I used non-probability snowball sampling (Creswell, 2014). While students who have left school and subsequently returned may not be as difficult to find as typical hard to reach populations, the context of Penn and other relevant HIPPA and FERPA regulations makes these populations less visible on a college campus. To avoid any sense of coercion by identifying participants through the Counseling center and/or Academic advising offices, I began with a single student contact. In an effort to build and establish trust in recruiting participants to join the study, I found a current
student who was highly involved and well regarded in mental health efforts on campus as well as the university’s leave of absence policies to serve as a gatekeeper (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). I provided my gatekeeper with an invitation email with information regarding the study as well as a copy of the informed consent form to pass along to students as she saw fit (see Appendix A). Participants were not limited in their class year or return from leave year. The only qualification for the study is that the student identified that their separation from Penn was in part due to their mental health and that they had successfully navigated the return from leave request process. Portraiture being a more in-depth and intimate line of inquiry, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest a smaller sample size for a single researcher. Because the point of the method is not to obtain generalizability, smaller sample sizes are appropriate to understand the research questions.

After two rounds of working through my gatekeeper to recruit students to participate, four participants emerged as being well suited for the study. The four participants in the study are all full time undergraduate students in two of the four undergraduate schools at Penn. All four are in the traditional college student age range of 18-25 and all have returned from leave of absence taken for mental health reasons. Though not part of the qualifications for the study, all participants had taken a leave of absence during their first year at Penn. Each participant is a U.S. citizen, though their parents’ citizenship status differs. Three participants identify as women and one identifies as a man. One participant is Hispanic; three are white. Two participants are first generation college students, one is a second-generation college student, and one is a
double legacy student at Penn. English is spoken at three out of the four participant’s homes while Spanish is spoken at one participant’s home.

The four participants are pursuing four different majors/areas of study. One participant has returned from multiple leaves; three have returned from a single leave. Three participants took leaves for a full year and one took a leave for a single semester. Two participants identified as LGBT and two were not outspoken about their sexuality though referenced heterosexual relationships during interviews.

Data Collection

Unlike quantitative inquiry, where the researcher comes with specific hypotheses to be tested, discrete propositions to be proved or disproved, detailed interview questions, predetermined observational schedules, and a well-defined research plan, the portraitist enters the field with a clear intellectual framework and guiding research questions, but fully expects (and welcomes) the adaptation of both her intellectual agenda and her methods to fit the context and the people she is studying (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186).

Using unstructured interviews over a period of seven months, I met with the four participants for anywhere from one hour to ninety minutes on and around their college campus setting. The unstructured nature of the interviews, though guided by my research questions ensured my ability to shift directions according to the participants’ feedback. In addition to the data collected through in-depth in-person interviews, I kept researcher memos, asked that participants journal between interviews, and offered a disposable camera for participants to express themselves visually throughout their time of return. Participants were not keen on either the journal or disposable camera as only one participant made any entries into a journal and a separate one used the disposable camera.
As is common for portraitist in addition to interviews and researcher memos, observations are a key data point for creating the aesthetic whole. Throughout the seven-month data collection period, I observed participants in their setting, the physical setting itself, and the temporal/political setting of being a very divisive Presidential election year on a college campus.

Maxwell (2013) describes that while the research question will lead and navigate the interviews, that the interview questions are meant to elicit the information necessary to answer those interview questions and not the actual research questions themselves. I designed an interview protocol aimed to gather the perspectives, observations, successes, and challenges that the participants have and/or encounter in their first year returning to campus and coursework after a leave of absence. These interviews were conducted one-on-one in a convenient location, beginning early summer 2016 until January 2017.

Typical of qualitative interviews, I took copious notes in all interviews. Knowing that my notes from interviews are more an interpreted version of the participants’ feedback; I audio recorded all interviews to avoid coauthoring data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldena, 2014). At the close of each interview, I reviewed my notes and made my own reflections on the data. Portraiture allows and welcomes the role of the artist/scientist though given its roots in phenomenology; my post-interview reflections help to clear my mind of any explicit bias. Chan (2015) found this type reflection activity to be particularly helpful to curbing the influence of researcher presumptions when studying student smartphone use in diverse learning environments. Critically reflecting and engaging with my participants, my findings, and my own feelings on the project was an ongoing process through data collection and analysis. As Ravich and Riggan (2012)
suggest, a reflective process in both writing and with colleagues helps to ensure reliability. Using reflective memos or other forms of data collection also allows for the triangulation and ultimate trustworthiness of methods.

Important in qualitative research, though perhaps harder to define than in quantitative approaches, is the aim to achieve trustworthiness in data collection. An attempt to do this is a process called “triangulation.” Triangulation is a “method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives” (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). Though originally designed to obtain multiple participant generated data sources, for the analysis I focused on three different sources of data collection: participant interviews, observations, and research memos. Between interviews and after completion, I employed “member checks” to touch base with participants to make sure that we both understand how messages are being conveyed and provide clarity around what themes I drew from what they shared. The benefit of triangulating both data collection sources and methodological choices is the increase in confidence in the research data given the diversity of data used (Ravich & Riggan, 2012).

Data Analysis

To analyze data collected using portraiture methodology, researchers must remain committed to the philosophical foundation of the approach itself and maintain that participants’ consciousness of reality is what makes it reality. van Manen (2007) eloquently states that “not unlike the poet, the phenomenologist directs the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous
membranes of past sedimentations—and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect” (p. 12). The portraitist goes a step further by directing her gaze and then portraying the experience of an individual or setting.

I transcribed each interview within two weeks of meeting with the participant. Transcribing the interviews myself allowed me to sit very closely with the data and begin to analyze and reflect iteratively as is called for in qualitative designs. When analyzing the data, I took from what participants shared with me and identified resonate statements or quotes (Creswell, 2007). This process is similar to “in vivo” coding; a technique that uses participants’ own terms, words, or phrases and records them as codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). As a second step, I took those quotes or statements and develop themes from them. Also called pattern coding, this technique helps, as Miles et al (2014) suggest, condensing the first cycle into smaller, more manageable themes. Importantly, pattern coding serves to collect and cull out common or similarly coded passages from the data and use those to try to get to the essence of the experience (Saldana, 2012). Pattern codes are “roughly analogous to the emergent themes that portraitists search out and create” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 190).

Portraits listen for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, and poetic and symbolic expressions across the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Using this analysis and my own reflections and memos throughout the process, I developed robust portraits of each participant around emergent themes and the evidence to support each theme. The evidence was sourced from the participant interviews, researcher memos, and observations of the participants and setting and cultivated through both rounds of coding. Structured development of the portraits was critical to my
understanding of the aesthetic whole. As Davis (1997) writes, if “portraiture is more than a graceful compilation of random reflections, personal views, and interactions with individuals and sites, there must be an underlying structure that can be learned by novices, adapted with experience, and defied with expertise” (p. 263).

**Researcher Role**

Voice is a central concept in portraiture methodology. “In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere,” and though can be perceived as reflecting one’s own experience more clearly than a participant, the effective portratitudeist engages in systematic and empirical data collection (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). The role of the researcher is made explicit in portraiture methods yet calculated and restrained in final product. Because the researcher is the “instrument of inquiry and the lens of description, interpretation, analysis, and narrative,” it was with great intention with which I considered the role of my voice in the narrative (p.86).

My role as researcher also impacts the trustworthiness and credibility of the study as my work with the participants. I take seriously the position of power and leadership that can be easily assumed by merely being the one asking the questions, by being the researcher. Additionally, in my young career at Penn, I have worked quite closely with a number of students in their decision to take a leave, their requests to return, and in their navigating their time post-return from leave. Because my research aim is to truly learn about the experiences of the participants, my approach to research will affirm that participants are the experts of their own experience as they return from leave of absence and throughout their lives. I have been explicit in this study that it is exploratory in nature to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of students returning from leave of
absence for mental health reasons by working with participants who have experienced or are actively tackling such an occurrence.

Finally, the role of the researcher being so present in the final product can impact the way a reader or viewer may encounter the work. English’s (2000) critique of portraiture methodologies point poignantly to the power that comes with portraying something or a series of things as “real” (p. 21). He says, “Admitting that such an activity is subjective does not come close to dealing with the power to engage in it” and though this same tension runs throughout educational research, English (2000) finds it more problematic when used in a methodological approach that “professes to be emancipative, open, and ultra-sensitive to such issues” (p. 22). Understanding the power the role of the researcher has with her subjects and then ultimately with her audience is critical to the just representation of the answers to research questions. My intention in the portraits created, much like an artist, is to leave open a reader’s own interpretation of what is presented. In my final chapter, I attempt to remind the reader of that power I inherently have just given my positionality and invite readers to reexamine the portraits with full authority to read and experience the narratives for themselves.

Limitations

There are several limitations to qualitative study and portraiture methods in addition to the ones mentioned above like role of the researcher or interpretation of final product. With a small sample size, as is encouraged for a single researcher, the results are far from generalizable. Though portraiture was created to move away from the unfeeling and artificially sterile quantitative research environment; in doing so the methodology
loses the replication and wide ranging application of the work. For this topic and these students in this specific context, however, generalizability need not be the goal and instead the focus on the individual voice and context can shed great light on the experience and possible policy recommendations.

After data collection, coding systems can “attribute more evocative meanings to the data” than what would be there without them (Saldana, 2012, p. 4). Because the methodology is grounded in individuals lived experiences, it could be problematic to assign themes or essences to a diverse group of individuals who happened to have experienced the same phenomenon. Many times, during this process, it was difficult to find an emergent theme across such distinct and diverse stories. Deep reflection and intense data analysis allowed the divergent stories themselves to develop the theme; the diversity was the story itself. Using participants’ words and direct quotes allowed me to use their words as the description of their experience within the geographical and temporal context. Member checks and review of my researcher memos also bolstered my efforts to avoid any false attributions during analysis.

I included the excerpt of a poem at the beginning of this chapter in hopes to illuminate the power and privilege that comes with the creation of portraits. Participants and readers alike may not “be so lucky” as to separate or connect disparate parts of a whole. It is the role and duty of the researcher to create a space where both can be done and that is a difficult process for a novice researcher. I do not take lightly the responsibility of justly implementing a methodology like portraiture, to miss the mark would be extremely limiting.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Fernando

Fernando (a pseudonym) insisted that we meet in person rather than skype although it was a two-hour train ride from his home to campus. I learned later that this was to escape the monotony of a midnight shift of loading shipping containers with coworkers twice his age, many of whom had not received a raise or promotion in over ten years. Any reason to step back onto campus is reason enough for Fernando. We met at a coffee shop near but just off the heart of campus. Fernando does not drink coffee. The place was more crowded than usual, especially for a summer afternoon. All the tables were filled with what looked to be graduate students or college administrators in their summer fatigues. Fernando and I walked to my office where we could have a bit more privacy and a guaranteed table. He wore mostly black along with his black rimmed glasses. Over the times we would meet, Fernando would display white and black as his primary color palette for clothing. He would tell me that his fashion decisions are conscious and purposeful in that “the clothes that I wear really just expresses my mood; expresses my day.” At our final meeting around six months later, Fernando wore a blue patterned sweater complete with a fresh haircut and bright smile.

For our first meeting, we sat at a round table with my cup of coffee and a scone I offered to him between us. Fernando asked a couple questions about the specifics of the study and we dug in. Fernando is from a neighboring state but as he described it – it may
have been an entirely different world from the well-resourced, competitive, and difficult social and academic culture he found at college. Fernando came into college after getting what many would consider a very late start. Neither he nor many of his peers or counselors knew to prepare for college applications, financial aid applications, or letters of recommendation. For the most part, Fernando did not try hard in school and spent most of his nights and weekends drinking, smoking, and playing video games with his friends. The polished and serious young man in front of me showed little resemblance to the youthful, teenage Fernando he described.

At six years old, Fernando’s mother attempted suicide and was subsequently absent from his life for the next two years. With that absence, he says he had to “dress myself and take myself to school. And…[my dad] had problems trying to find a new relationship. We would always move from one person to another. So whenever he would bring, you know, what would be what I would consider my step-mom, you know, we would try to bond but after a month or two they would just be gone as well. So I had difficulty connecting with a…like… a mother figure.” When a woman did eventually stay in Fernando’s life, she too “would try to take her life away so…yeah.” Fernando always had difficulty connecting. He relied on himself. He studied in his junior and senior year to try to get into college. He spent the little money he had on SAT preparation books. He found his own way to FAFSA and did all he could on his own. His parents do not speak English so it was left to Fernando to fill out the paperwork. The day before he knew he would be accepted to Penn, he spent the day at the local U.S. Marines recruitment center. He says “I really didn’t want to go but I mean that was really my only chance of getting the financial aid from them. So I was thinking about it like okay…so I
spend four years there and I hope that war doesn’t break out and something like that.”

Fernando is thoughtful and asked for a day to consider his options.

Like many first-year students at Penn, Fernando’s family bought him a mini-fridge for his dorm room. The financial wiggle room to provide for this purchase made possible by the financial aid from Penn and a generous donor from Fernando’s high school who gave “basically gave me a $50,000 scholarship”. When he came to school, his small refrigerator was filled with all his “favorite foods: fruits, yogurts.” As he described to me his transition to college, I got the sense that it was as if he lost control and woke up one day and found that “umm but right before I left for my leave of absence it was like full of Jack Daniels and other alcohols I replaced them with.” It was during that time of the loss of control that Fernando experimented with LSD.

And that’s when I started contemplating suicide…and I almost did when my friend pulled me back and so that’s when it dawned upon me that things were getting a bit too dark for me. But I …I waved it off because I didn’t understand it. Things I don’t understand I just try to ignore. You know, it’s my nature to do so…I either try to understand it but if I don’t I try to avoid it, you know. But um, so that happens November. Nobody finds out except my friend and he checks up on me and I told him it’s just the drugs that I could believe I could fly or something you know? And I try to forget that and I tried to convince myself that it was just the drugs that it wasn’t actually me.

It was actually Fernando. He would attempt suicide twice more and spend seventeen days in an inpatient setting before taking a leave from Penn. It was not an immediate slide into a mental health crisis, but rather, a steady decline of both physical and mental health during Fernando’s first year. The eagerness of an incoming first year student that existed in August led to isolation and lack of motivation to connect with peers that were actively trying to connect with him. “They wanted to connect with me but
I really just didn’t dive in. So, things were getting really bad.” It was “October-November I realized I wasn’t really making any friends.”

Friendship and connection never came easily for Fernando. He struggled in his youth and in high school to connect with others. He had trouble forming friendships because he did not understand the concept. “For example: people who love animals…I don’t understand. I mean, I understand it logically but emotionally I don’t understand how they can be connected to an animal or how people can love each other like that.” This type of emotional connection was never demonstrated to him.

Walking down Locust Walk, the main thoroughfare on Penn’s campus, is a visual and auditory display of stereotypical college life. The walk is a brick and stone pathway lined with mature trees and blue-light emergency phones. In the fall, before the cold sets in, the walk is littered with excited undergraduates vying for your attention to attend their performance, join their group, or donate to their philanthropy. A group of students with speakers blasting a “Chainsmokers” song approach me to hand me a flyer about some fundraiser. I do not read the flier but instead fold it half and place it in my pocket to be recycled later. I cannot tell if I am flattered by the idea those students think I could be their peer or if I am bothered by it and need to rethink how I dress for work. It hits me though, that for the extraverted student Locust Walk is a platter from which to pick your interest or affinity and jump right in. Indeed, the student groups are out, visible, and actively reaching out rather than hiding behind a listserv or in the corner booth of an activities fair. Fernando is not that outgoing student. I can imagine him taking fliers from students on the walk or a copy of the day’s Daily Pennsylvanian (“DP”) because it is
easier to accept the offer than to vocalize your lack of interest in whatever it is they are touting. Then a few hundred feet down the walk, doing the same thing that I do and dropping it in the next recycling bin.

In December of his first year, Fernando had corrective jaw surgery “and so they wired my mouth shut for three months.” He spent Christmas in the hospital from the surgery. “And…and I spent all that time in my own box because I couldn’t communicate with anyone. And you know, while I was laying there I just started really thinking about everything: the past, and thinking about what happened with my family, and what happened with my mom, my religious views, and everything. Things started getting darker and progressively worse.” He lost contact with a close friend and could not turn to his father or family to talk about his struggles “it’s just not…it wasn’t really an option for me” he says. His pure liquid diet and extreme exhaustion from his surgery began to impact his academic motivation. During his first semester, he was very strict with himself to finish everything he needed to before drinking in his room alone – he now used sleep as his escape and saw little point in even crossing the street to his classes before getting back to bed. He was not necessarily behind in his course work, but could not find meaning to it anymore. He would experience vivid flashbacks and “vivid images of what my future would be like and I didn’t want that future anymore.” “Going to sleep was kind of an escape instead of using drugs; because I couldn’t drink or use drugs either. So whenever I was feeling down I would just go to sleep. So eventually the thoughts would come to me like ‘I just really want to stay asleep;’ it felt better to be asleep than awake.”
“When my dad came he was like focused on only the school stuff and saying ‘why did you say all that stuff?’ He was really annoying me. It was like totally a picture of what annoys me. They told me I was taking a leave of absence, there was no choice, and that was that.” Fernando was angry. He felt as if Penn was playing games with him; playing games with his future. He would ask for explanations and all he would get in response is “oh just one step at a time.” Fernando described his experience as brutal. He had trouble grasping the seriousness of his situation. He strongly believed that this was a ridiculous measure taken after a not so meaningful event and one that would impact him academically in a way he was not open to.

The University allows a certain amount of time after a student is granted or placed on a leave of absence to move out of the residence halls on campus. Fernando told me that he “took a gamble that Student Intervention Services wouldn’t enforce the rule of actually having me leave.” So he was in the residence hall, without courses, for another month. To his knowledge, no administrator ever found out or questioned him. Although his father was involved in the original leave conversation with the school, he also did not question him or wonder why he was not returning home.

Prior to the university’s involvement, Fernando spent seventeen days in the hospital over two back to back stays. Though he was slow to accept his residence in the inpatient setting, eventually he did. He befriended other hospital patients while there. His social worker pulled him aside and told him that he had bad news for Fernando. He said to him, “it looks like the University doesn’t want to do anything with you anymore. I was in conversation with them and it seems they want to cut ties with you.” Sitting in front me
in our conversation, Fernando still does not know what the social worker meant by telling him that Penn wanted to cut ties with him. What he knows is that it was the beginning of a process that felt irreversible and at times insurmountable. “I was very mad. It was very… I was very mad.”

Fernando would attempt suicide once more before leaving campus; a total of four attempts in the span of only a few months. Though the leave from Penn was presented as mandatory and not an option, he still had to turn in voluntary leave papers for the separation to be official. It was the very last day of classes that spring semester when Fernando submitted the paper work.

At fourteen, Fernando took a job waiting tables at a high-end restaurant in New York City. He was too young to work so he and his uncle lied about his age. Fernando talks of his short time at the restaurant before being found out and subsequently fired with much detail and almost joyful recollection. Fernando laughs as he recalls the most important rule of all at the restaurant not to put any fingerprints on the clear plates on which entrees were served. He observed another person on the wait staff touch the clear plate and he had to endure significant grief from the head chef and unrelenting chastising from the rest of the wait and cook staff as the entire order had to be scratched and recreated. The head chef laughed as he had to fire Fernando and encouraged him to “keep that motivation going” even though or perhaps because that motivation began with a lie.

Fernando likes or needs to work. I came away feeling that it was always both a like and a need. While Fernando was on leave, he worked at a distribution company on
the midnight shift. He also worked at IKEA (which he enjoyed much more than his distribution warehouse), and tutored a boy in his town. There were nights where Fernando would find himself in the cafeteria at his distribution center, after midnight and think to himself “how did I get here?” He was promoted at this job and oversaw thirty employees and their work product, though the promotion came without a pay increase, it did allow him to rework their entire work output system. Fernando hated that job.

The process to return to higher education was not without its hurdles or speedbumps. His process started “the minute I was put on leave—that’s when the planning began.” He spoke with friends who had gone through the process before; he looked up the questions ahead of time. “The first step was to get treated.” He spent his time away building up his coping mechanisms and making positive decisions for himself. Originally, Fernando sought treatment once a week but started seeking therapy twice a week so that he could achieve his goal of returning the following fall; after one summer away. It was sometime around November, a year after he first contemplated suicide, he decided he needed more time away from school. He negotiated this with his father and contacted the office that was “brutal” with him when he exited. It wasn’t an easy decision to come to for Fernando. Through his work with his therapist he came to realize that it was only time that would be impacted; “academically, financially, nothing would change.” He explained that one more semester away would be more beneficial for him. Each time we met, Fernando never wavered in his opinion that the extra semester was necessary.
The time away allowed Fernando to work on establishing and reaching small goals. The first small goal was to find a therapist that would treat him. That goal was followed by getting out of bed in the mornings to make the appointment. Then realizing he could do some of the things he put his mind to, he started developing more and varied goals. This was a shift for Fernando, “before I didn’t really have goals. But um I started setting small goals in terms of like I want to go and buy this article of clothing. Or I want to build this program…et cetera.” While on leave, he would “go on Code Academy and just learn to code things. And currently I have like 30 books and all the money I made I spent like half of it on those books.” An interest in finance developed while he was away that fueled a goal to raise his GPA once he returned to school. He tells me though, a few times throughout our meetings, that “if that doesn’t work out then I just graduate and then just go get an MBA after that. I’m not putting a lot of pressure on myself. But I have it all planned out.” I’m not sure where it would be or if it would even be appropriate with this type of methodology for some type of visible representation of his stop out and come back would be helpful for me to follow this.

On his way back to enrollment, Fernando trusted the system; the same system that did not enforce the rules of him moving out when he took a leave or process with withdrawals from courses and instead he initially received all F’s in his courses. He trusted the same system that sent him a referral list of three psychiatrists that refused to see him: two that would not see college-aged students and one that preferred more long term clients than Fernando would be. Fernando’s request to return was accepted but it would be weeks before he could select courses. It would take months and several phone
calls to have his financial aid correctly applied. Student Financial Services sent Fernando a bill for over $30,000 for the semester though previously his estimated family contribution was not even $1/10th of that price. I asked him if that is frustrating or anxiety provoking to work through all this? He responded “Um I mean – I trust the system. I know that they messed up three times, but they can fix it; they’ve done it before. I’m just frustrated it didn’t go the way I needed it to go.” As he relied on the system he trusted to correct its mistakes, he also carried with him difficult tasks and goals to begin his collegiate career again.

Once Fernando moved into his on-campus apartment and was settled he “started thinking about what to do. Who would I turn to? If something went wrong you know? Was I really ready? I felt ready. But that’s because nothing had gone wrong. The physical move-in was simple. It was the emotional, social move in that took some time to organize.” Fernando’s return was peppered with worries about whether or not he was ready. He had developed mechanisms to reach out when he needed to friends and family but remain concerned about his ability to do so. Does he even have friends? “When I came back I realized, ‘oh wow I really didn’t have any social trace here.’” At first move in, Fernando rearranged the entire apartment. He utilized space in ways that were most efficient and created a living room that felt more welcoming and open. He got together his books, his planner, and more to be prepared for the academics ahead of him. With the organization and preparation done, all that as left was connection. Though he had spent the greater part of year learning to sift through what he could do for himself and to then
get that done; social and human connection was something that Fernando could not do by himself.

There’s no [New Student Orientation] ‘NSO’ for us. And for us, the ones who went on medical leave of absence, we don’t tend to be socially active, we’re socially regressed, you know? That’s what leads us to taking the leave. So when we come back there’s no social part at all. There’s no events for us. The freshmen have their events. The transfers have their events. We’re on our own.

Taking a leave of absence at Penn is still a relatively taboo topic. Students know students who do, students write up opinions in the “DP,” in fact the DP did an entire Podcast on students taking and returning from a leave at Penn; still though taking a leave is not the norm. So, knowing that Fernando had not established deep social ties here at Penn, I asked if he anticipated folks asking about his leave. “Everyone does” he said. “I might just explain that I went on a medical leave or just a leave in general…if they keep probing then I’ll just tell them straight up. Maybe not all the details but the general gist.”

He spoke of events with a student group, Active Minds, where students get up in front of the group and tell their story. The story could be about a leave, an eating disorder, family issues, or whatever. A few weeks before the semester started, he anticipated speaking at one of meetings himself.

Fernando also had big plans to socialize more. He was a different person than who went on leave and people recognized that.

A lot of people when they see me now um…big change. Both physically, because I had the surgery, they don’t really recognize me. A lot of people don’t recognize me. Even though when I say hi they act like I’m a stranger. For the people who do know me and can recognize me, they see a big change in my mentality; kind of like a vibe. I’m no longer backed in the corner not socializing. I’m more outgoing. I’m more adventurous.
He was ready to get back in touch with friends he had before he left. He had hopes to connect with classmates, make deeper connections with friends than he had previously. Before his leave, he would describe his experience of getting meals with friends as being overcome with thoughts and doubts of how long the good feeling would last rather than how good the meal actually was. With a full kitchen in his apartment, Fernando hoped he “might find artistic expression” through cooking. He had no idea how to cook for himself and was excited to learn. Towards the end of the semester I asked him “How’s your cooking going?” He said “It’s really gr…actually it’s not, I don’t want to lie about it.”

Fernando was making his way back to being a quintessential college student. As hard as he tried, the temptation of a quick pizza overpowered the desire to cook for himself. He described the mundane nature of fighting over dirty dishes his roommate would leave. “If you let them pile up, it will be a bigger problem.” This statement struck me. As simplistic as it sounds, with the help of medication and therapy, Fernando was now in control in a way he had never been before. He was not letting things pile up. He would tell me that his mind was clear; he was more focused than ever before. Things like Physics which he says he is not adept at, came easily in his return semester. His weekends were mainly reading ahead and practice problem sets but it made his week days much less of a pressure cooker than his time pre-leave. In courses, Fernando would use his “experience as a way to help” other, younger students understand that a C on the first midterm is not the end of the world.

The first few weeks being back on campus, Fernando described using a metaphor: “It’s like a river. And I was like, with the help and support of my friends, I was able to
construct my own raft and like you know, not drown. And just in case my little raft
does break down my friends can throw me a life-saver.” His parents trusted him more than
ever before. He met up with classmates to do homework. He made another friend that he
would go to the gym with. Social saturation had not completely happened for him but he
was well on his way. For him, he was trying to figure out where he fit. In a rather drastic
move for Fernando in the first few days back, he went to a fraternity party with his
roommate.

I went to one frat party. It was a transfer party. Umm it was actually like really
good. Normally I like stand back from the crowd but I kind of like um that party
like um what’s it called the stage light was on me for a while? I got involved in
their games and I started on like a winning streak. I went in there and everyone
was a transfer and not me and my friends were like don’t worry just tell them
you’re from somewhere else. And they were serving some alcohol. And I was like
okay, I took a small cup. I told them I was from Penn State. Am I saying that?
Penn State? So I didn’t really give much thought. Penn state is like three hours
away right? Yeah I didn’t know that. I thought it was like twenty minutes away.
So everyone was like, ‘how was the drive you know?’ And I was like, ‘it was
fine.’ And they were like ‘oh really?’ and I was like, ‘yeah took like twenty
minutes.’ And they were like ‘what I thought it was like three hours away!’ And
I said ‘it depends on what route you’re going.’

We both burst into laughter at his retelling of that story. Whether the party-goers believed
he was from Penn State or not, he came away from the evening with several telephone
numbers and Snapchat connections. Over the next couple weeks, however, he would
delete those contacts and Fernando does not care much for Snapchat.

As Fernando and I got more comfortable with one another our conversations
turned much more topical and timely. While much of his family is undocumented, the
election of Donald Trump to the President of the United States was weighing on his
mind. He spent more time prior to the election working with the people is his family who
were citizens to remind them how important their vote was even though it may not feel that way. As derailing as the election could have been for him and his family, he remained steadfast in his studies. School was coming so easy to him. He was not worried about grades where before it was all he could think about it he was still doing poorly. Now he assumed he had A’s in most of his classes but he was not sure because he was not checking. He would tell me that his “mind isn’t on many things—other than what it needs to be on.”

Fernando finished his first semester in tremendous fashion. He raised his GPA substantially, he made a few good contacts socially with plans to continue to expand that, he began dating someone who was helping him keep to his gym and healthy eating schedule. Fernando was happy.

Before I had an issue figuring out why I was in college. Why am I doing the things I’m doing? Who are my friends? You know like an existentialist type of thing. So you know over time I had time to think. So eventually I had to learn to accept the cards that were dealt to me. You know where I was born, who my parents are, whether I was rich or poor. You know, um just coming to accept that stuff. And learning that like some things can be changed and just some things can’t and that’s okay. And so I began to figure out what I actually wanted. That’s not connected to what my parents want for me or what society wants for me. And I started listening to myself a little more.

Our final meeting was at the beginning of his second semester back. We met in the main library on campus. He requested an early morning meeting even on a day the University was closed so there would be no classes and no work study job for him to go to. I explained to him what an honor and privilege it was to get to know him and for him to share his experience with me. I sat there in our reserved booth in awe of the young
man that was before me. Though I did not know the Fernando before his leave, I am proud to know him now.

Before we leave the library together, Fernando shows me the textbook his Calculus instructor is using this semester. It’s a series of four volumes the professor designed himself each costing “exactly $6.33 on Amazon” he tells me. We share in astonishment at the artistic vision of the professor. The “textbook” is unlike anything either of us has ever seen. It’s a calculus comic book. I cannot imagine Fernando before his leave being so giddy about an unconventional textbook. As we exited the building I could not help but see Fernando leaving behind his concern for when the good experiences would end and instead welcoming and actively searching for the positives – even from a $6.33 calculus textbook.
Elissa

I have come to know Elissa (a pseudonym) during her tenure as a student at Penn. We met originally in the fall of her first year; an asthma issue brought her into my office. Since our first meeting several years ago, Elissa has chopped her long locks of hair off to a trendier short cut and lost some weight along the way as well. I became her advisor and case manager when she returned from her leave of absence. She has had her academic plan in place for some time now but the routine of meeting every two weeks then once a month then finally just a couple times a semester seemed to benefit her. Before every meeting, Elissa sends a bulleted list of topics she would like to cover. No other advisee has done this with me at least not as consistently as Elissa. She looks tired meeting her the morning of our first interview. She had been up since 5AM preparing for an exam. Knowing Elissa and meeting her that morning, her 5AM wake up time seems more routine than exception. Elissa is busy and prefers to be.

As she approaches her final semester at Penn, Elissa is able to reflect meaningfully on her experience, how Penn has influenced that experience, and what influence she would like to have on Penn. “I am passionate about mental health and research and am grateful for all the opportunities Penn has given me with organizations, connections, and research opportunities. However, there are also some quibbles that I would have with Penn um as an organization, as an institution, and as uh, as the student bodies the student body that makes it up.” Elissa is active on campus, always has been. Sometimes to her own dismay, she stays busy and connected, always looking for the right next move or strategy to push her research or policy agenda. To get some time to sit
down with Elissa, someone needs to plan a week or so in advance to hold a spot on her calendar. “I still tend to try to do too much in my schedule, and I want to do all the things. I’m not a perfect role model, no one is and I think that there’s a lot of talk about how recovery seems to be linear like ‘oh you took a leave, you had problems before, and now you’re better like it’s not still an issue.’”

Elissa’s commitment to staying busy is strategic. More than being consumed with student group meetings, leadership roles, applications for summer fellowships, Elissa is purposeful with the time she dedicates to studying. She is getting better at saying no to things. “I’m happy to be able to select what I want to do and not and say no to what I don’t want to do,” something that was far more difficult prior to her leave of absence. The leave of absence for Elissa is a defining moment in her college career. She sees herself as someone who can give advice and mentorship to other younger students especially those students whose experience is not commensurate with their expectations.

“I wish I knew more of what I was getting into when I started college and when I realized what Penn was. Um and that’s on me at the end of the day. But um overall my experience at Penn has been a mixed bag. I’m happy to be here and I’m happy to be graduating soon.” Elissa refers to herself as a “waitlist kid” at Penn. A couple steps from graduation and the weight of that label takes up too much space in my mind. Elissa uses it with an airiness that feels too light for its implications. Why does it matter? I do not push her on it. “I wish I knew that it was okay to not find your group on the first day and that people change over time and you’re not stop bound to the people on your hall or who you meet at [New Student Orientation].”
You hear everyone say college is the best four years of your life. You go to Bed, Bath and Beyond and they’re like ‘Are you ready for the next four years of life? Take 50% off this shopping cart!’ But there is so much advertising, there’s so much media targeting at people going into their first year. Saying this is when you’ll blossom, this is when you’ll academically succeed; you’ll make your best friends. And if you’re not living up to that model, or that mold, that you’re seeing in media yet you’re hearing back from home that other people in your communities are expecting of you. It’s very hard to admit to yourself that something a) is up, b) you’re not in the right place, c) you haven’t found all the parts yet. So, I guess where I’m going with that in particular was I had a lot of expectations um that came from outside me, from my family, from my church, from my friends back home, and from within me and not living up to those made it more difficult to adjust to Penn. Because I wanted to at least have the appearance that I was living up to those.

Elissa comes from a Christian family, heavily devoted to the church and to meaningful fellowship. When she came to college she actively sought out Intervarsity, a student group, to find her niche on campus. Her parents had both been involved with Intervarsity and spoke highly of the experience. Elissa went to one meeting; the connection was not there. The expectation that Intervarsity would be a robust community filled with likeminded Christians did not jive with the reality that only around 12-15 students showed up to the first meeting and seemed more concerned with reconnecting with one another than with anyone new. Elissa went looking for connection across the campus and was finding very little. Even the weather was not what she expected. The college world she had painted for herself was not coming to fruition but she did not want to let anyone know that. She would spend her limited energy on, “how can I tell my parents that everything is fine? How can I figure out like to show my hall that I’m socially connected? How do I do everything I want to do and still have the guise of that college norm?”
Elissa is systematic when she recounts the reasons for her leave yet jovial about it all at the same time. She laughed as she described her path to the leave as a “pretty depressing road,” enunciating her laughter “Ha. Ha. Ha,” so I catch on to her ironic use of the word “depressing.” We know each other well at this point so she did not have to but I appreciated the intention behind her chuckle. Beyond the lack of connection and mismatch of expectation and experiences, she is able to categorize her decline in mental health using the Biopsychosocial model. She has talked about this before.

There is a biological component to mental health disorders, a psychological and a social component. For me, all three factors were impacted during my first semester at Penn. Biologically, I’m predisposed to mental health issues especially depression and anxiety. Not something that I recognized or realized until I got here. Secondly, psychological. So, this is, this is where we talk about the thinking traps that people get into. And as even just talking now, you can hear that ‘okay, she’s definitely comparing herself to other people. She has a lot of anxiety about social perception. And she wants to be the best at, well this is from like your mentorship of me; she wants to do everything to the best of her ability. That’s a lot of perfectionism, that’s setting yourself up for failure; there’s a lot of anxiety about that. The last thing is social, so social supports and environment. This was the first time I was out of a supportive home, right. This is the first time I was out on my own and trying to live as a functional human being without friends who had known me for a couple of years without family who was there for me.

She could run a clinic on recognizing these components and the ways they might manifest in a student’s life. Complicating the biological influence of her predisposition to depression and anxiety, the thinking traps she employed, and her lack of supportive social network, Elissa began to question her sexuality. This questioning did not easily align with her Christian upbringing and she knew how her parents had voted on LGBT legislative matters in her home state. The anxiety she was already carrying as she perfected the portrayal of a high-functioning student while living a very different reality was
exacerbated by the internal struggle of questioning. The question itself is not the picture of the ideal college student in her mind.

Elissa was determined to be a math major and eventual math teacher. “Because I had my life all planned out,” and had taken multivariable calculus in high school she enrolled in Math114. “It’s not a ball park, it’s not a walk in the park is what I’m trying to say,” but when she believed she was failing Math114 she started to question this “waitlist kid’s” ability to succeed.

What should have been easy to me wasn’t easy to me anymore… I kind of had my identity shaken to my core. That relates back to my psychological issues but um so not only am I questioning my sexuality, I’m questioning whether I’m good enough to be at Penn. And that’s going on too with imposter syndrome, right? Because everyone on my hall did something amazing or is doing something really cool or got a perfect score on the SAT; competed in XYZ and all these just started to layer on top of each other and I feel really overwhelmed. It actually started manifesting in my physical health too.

What began with physical manifestations through asthma attacks and a hospital visit led to a sincere and plan “for my suicide.” She found herself crying randomly during finals of her first semester. She chalked it up to finals stress but instinctively knew it was more than that. Over the winter break of her first year, Elissa meticulously planned her death. “To me, I actually I was rejuvenated by like having a plan having something to do, like a course of action, an escape.” She wrote letters. She had plans for what things would go to what family members, friends. “I go to classes because just in case something doesn’t work out or I decide to keep living.” Not long after a very public suicide on campus, Elissa had the pieces of her plan in place. Thankfully, friends noticed and got her to the hospital.
Elissa is convincing. Though hospitalized for a week for suicidal intention with a plan that resembled the very recent, much publicized suicide; she was “fighting, ‘fighting’ with [Student Intervention Services]” after her PennCard was deactivated. She convinced “SIS” to let her come back. “I was back for like two or three nights and then [another student] died. So I was like ‘Ima go, I need to go save myself. I’m not going to die on this campus too.’” Elissa knew that if she remained at Penn, she too would die there.

A semester later, when she submitted her request to return along with documentation from her treatment team, Elissa was thorough and deliberate. She was careful to articulate how she was doing and how ready she was to return. She spent her time away in New York seeking treatment and getting her depression and anxiety under control. The College denied her request. “It was crushing…but ultimately I’m glad I stayed out another semester because I got to work on my passion.” It was clear that Elissa lost a little bit of trust in Penn when she was made to stay out longer on her leave but used the time to her advantage working with a national non-profit in Washington D.C. aimed at destigmatizing mental health. She continued her treatment in D.C. and a few months later submitted an even more thorough return from leave request. This time her request even included “screenshots and examples of the work I had done to show that I was ready to get back to my academics at Penn.” Her request to return was accepted and Elissa was back.

In one of our meetings, I asked Elissa directly about putting on appearances as compared to the appearance she was trying to put on in her first semester. “Oh well it’s
funny you mention that. I think we all put on that appearance too. Some of the advice I got in treatment was ‘fake it ‘til you make it’ and that was an interesting concept to me because that’s what I’d been trying to do for so long and it still wasn’t working.” Elissa was no longer putting on the same appearance as before. The things she wishes she knew before the leave are all things she recognizes now and purposefully speaks out on.

I recall speaking with a somewhat stressed Elissa one evening over the phone helping sort through whether or not she should use her real name in what proved to be a very public national article. She used it. She outing herself in that article in terms of sexuality, her suicidal tendencies, her academic struggles, and her overbearing preconception that she was failing socially while at Penn. Elissa, through this journalist, was re-writing her experience and managing her expectations in a way that prior to her leave she would not have been able to do. A day after the article hit the internet I wrote to Elissa in an email: “I’m so proud of you. Well done.”

The return was not without its challenges. Elissa still tries to do too much and over schedules herself frequently. She runs into moments of depression and anxiety that are difficult for her to manage. Administrators and friends who know her worry about her at times, but making the decision to save her life and take time away from Penn helps her though these more difficult times. She is proud of the person she is today and happy to have garnered “the strategies that I’ve implemented somewhat effectively into my life at Penn.”
Elissa lives. Though I have been a small part of her journey since the early asthma attacks, meeting or this project she is “a junior studying Psychology in the College with a minor in Spanish and Statistics potentially in Cognitive Neuroscience but probably not. I’m involved with Active Minds and the Lambda Alliance. I am passionate about mental health and research.” Elissa has hosted panels on mental health and leaves of absence; she has contributed to online blogs and the Daily Pennsylvanian on the topic. She is also involved in Christian fellowship groups on campus that is more in line with how she views and practices her faith. I cannot help but notice that, Elissa, in her acquired wisdom and thoughtfulness is not seeing that she is meeting her expectations of the “college norm” she so badly wanted when she began here at Penn. “That college norm to me is someone who would be going to the Christian group frequently; who would be doing very well in school and not going to parties, um, who would have a really strong friend group.” Because of her difficult decision and ultimate persistence, Elissa is living the life she wanted all along.
Bruce

Bruce (a pseudonym the participant selected), as in Bruce Wayne, was waiting in the coffee shop that she had told me she was looking forward to trying out. Though she said she wasn’t “cool enough for something like Bruce Wayne,” the pseudonym stuck. Bruce dressed unlike other Penn students I had met. She wore flowy clothes and counter to the typical women walking down Locust Walk, Bruce wore long, full-coverage, garments; not a tank top or shorts. I learned much later that her flowy clothes matched her passion for belly dancing. Watching her student group, Yalla’s spring show videos on Youtube In February of 2017, I saw women clad in bright, full-length skirts with cropped tops or bikini tops to show off the movement of the hips and navel. Dancing to the music produced by other students, it was artistic expression that I had not yet seen in my eight years at Penn.

Bruce had already picked a table close to the counter but we decided to move further to the back for a bit more privacy. It was a warm day. Iced coffees far outnumbered the drip orders. Bruce’s family moved to Texas from Arizona the summer before she began at Penn. Arizona was her home. More than a year later Bruce still feels like an outsider in Texas. When she left Penn to take her leave in the spring of her first year she was returning to a foreign place, “I had lived in my dorm for longer than this house that was supposed to be my home.”

Bruce quickly found math at Penn to be exceedingly difficult. She had never failed anything before and when she “flat out failed” her first exam in Math114 she
maneuvered her way into the lower section, Math104. A week or so later when she got an email from that professor telling her “you got the lowest grade in the class by 15%, I suggest you drop the class” she promptly dropped the class. She laughs as she recalls the situation “thanks for the vote of confidence.” It was at that point that she knew she could no longer be a math major. “It’s a bit of a loss of identity,” facing friends and family and having to have the changing-my-major-talk. “It definitely didn’t help my mindset or like health in general not knowing what I was anymore.”

Family has a strong influence on Bruce. Her father wants her to be successful personally and financially. He was not thrilled when she expressed a desire to go into education. She appreciates the role her mother plays in her life but with some limitations. “I don’t need a reminder to make a dentist appointment because my mouth hurts. I’m an adult I know what I’m doing, kind of.” This constant communication is clear in the times we would meet. If Bruce did not get a call from her mom, she would get a text message, or look back through her recent messages to indicate how frequently the communication came in. She understands the financial and health concerns her family had for her given how the leave occurred but wishes they would give her a bit more space.

Bruce took three courses her first semester, technically full time by university rules, but she decided to enroll in five courses the next semester to make up the difference for her financial aid package. Of the three courses that Bruce took her first semester, she actually only finished one of them. She took two incomplete grades with plans to finish over the winter break. She did not complete the courses over break and returned to school with a notice from the College of Arts and Sciences telling her she was
Mandatory Leave of Absence* for the Spring 2015 term unless you complete all work by Wednesday, January 28.” Bruce started her second semester with five courses plus the two incompletes she had to manage. “So my spring semester started off kind of rocky. Um, that combined with some mental health stuff like it was kind of like this, and then it kind of was like this, and then it just sort of went like this and then there was about a month that I didn’t go to any classes.” Bruce is showing me her right hand; waving it softly in front of me, then more wildly, and then finally taking her hand and plunging it into the small two top table we were sitting at together as if it were crashing. Second semester of her first year, Bruce crashed. “Op, my mom just called. Nope. Send a text, ‘sorry can’t talk, text me.’ Okay haha, my mom.”

“So May first, I left for a leave of absence. I was actually still convinced that I could pull myself out of it. That I could like do all this back log work and it took my CAPS advisor, my academic advisor, my parents, and every single one of my friends to convince me ‘no, [Bruce], you can’t.’” Bruce struggled with significant anxiety in her spring semester that prevented her from going to class. Later, while on leave, she was diagnosed with Bipolar disorder which was really helpful. The diagnosis was helpful not only in providing an explanation for her significant change in academic ability and motivation but also simply being on the right medications leveled her brain chemistry.

It was terrifying and shameful for Bruce to request to take time away. The decision was almost fully motivated by academic concerns as everyone around her was telling her she would fail all of her courses. Bruce remembers getting only three days to move out of campus and having to have her mom take time off of work from a recently
acquired job to come and get her. Her mom told coworkers that “her daughter was sick. I guess that’s easier than saying my daughter is having a mental breakdown.” Bruce had not been completely up front with her parents though they knew she was struggling. Now, looking back, Bruce realizes they knew more than she thought they did but the leave was still a shock to them.

When she got back to Texas, she got a job almost immediately. Bruce needed to do something with her time. She also took an American Sign Language course while away as well as worked closely with a therapist. She went through the process to get her driver’s license in Texas including a student driving instructor that she ended up spending several hours behind the wheel with. He offered her some sound life advice. Through her work she earned enough money to buy a used car giving her the freedom from her mother’s carpool to get to work as well as well as the nearest body of water to fish. Bruce taught herself to fish while on leave and would go almost every day. She likes to think she is pretty good and is most proud of a twelve-pound catfish she caught.

It never crossed Bruce’s mind that she would not return to Penn. She is proud of the fact that she took a single semester away rather than a full year like many other students. She worked, she took classes, she engaged in treatment, she did all of the right things to set herself up for a successful return. When faced with the submission of the return request that consists of eight questions she said, “I wasn’t nervous about returning before I had to fill out the request. The questions weirded me out a little. I guess it reminded me that it wasn’t like a sure thing I was coming back. I had to prove to them that I was functional enough to return and that I spent my time wisely and that I already
had exact plans for when I returned.” She felt a lot of pressure off the start for her return but assures me that she is confident that the struggles she had upon her return would have come whether she was gone for a semester or a year or more.

“Here you go, you’re back. Okay, now what?” Not much was made clear to Bruce regarding her status after returning from leave. She received emails for both the Class of 2018 and the Class of 2019. “Who do I walk with at Hey Day? No one ever really told me what class I’m in.” She’s not frustrated by this but more confused. The frustration stems from Student Financial Services, Weingarten Learning Resources Center, Student Disability Services (SDS). Her financial aid upon return was a struggle to put in place. The number of referrals to the Weingarten Learning Resources Center frustrates Bruce. She could not put in place the accommodations she believes she deserves. She found SDS to be supremely unhelpful. “For example, if you go to Student Disability Services website right now there are six links. One of them reads ‘Navigating Penn’s Campus’ and you would think that that would bring you to some accessibility map or resources right? You click that and you are redirected to Penn Facilities Website and just a map of the campus.” Bruce is right. From the map, it takes another click in the margin to get to PennAccess and even that page is rather confusing. Bruce also tried to work with SDS to have a companion animal with her on campus. “Which is, I’m sorry, the most bull shit thing. The process for them to say ‘yes, you can own a Guineee pig, a hamster,’ right now, right now, I’m anonymous. I’m Bruce Wayne right now. I have an illegal hamster right now. He’s a little law breaker.” Eventually, she moved off campus so the animal was no longer an issue whether she is Bruce Wayne or not.
When friends or acquaintances ask Bruce about her leave she answered honestly. “I didn’t mind the questions especially because I was really proud of the work I had been doing with [the National Non-Profit Organization]... so I wasn’t embarrassed by the fact that I was on leave. That wasn’t the issue. I think it was the fact that it was scary to have people moving on without me.” Once she was back on campus, friendships were formed with members of the first-year class so she began to feel more comfortable in the class year limbo she felt placed in. The semester she returned, however, followed a similar path as the one that led to her leave. As we would meet over time, Bruce liked to gesticulate with her hands and would laugh afterwards “I guess you can’t see that on a microphone.” The gestures ended in a downward motion. At Spring Break of her first semester back her father, mother, grandmother, aunt and uncle staged an intervention with her to make sure she could return for the remainder of the semester. “There’s a lot at stake financially, so I mean, I get it why they wanted to talk to me about it but they didn’t... I felt a little ganged up on.” Bruce convinced her family that was having trouble trusting her - given the way her leave occurred her first year - that she was able to return and would finish the semester.

Bruce finished, mostly. Again, she took an incomplete grade in a course to finish over the summer. While not promoted by the advising offices on campus, taking an incomplete in a class is certainly a way to manage one’s academic load with little to no penalty. Eventually letting that course lapse into an F was the right thing for her mental health but Bruce feels some guilt since the instructor went above and beyond to accommodate her. The F also put her on academic probation which made her second
semester back after returning packed with pressure. “I was on academic probation which was really stressful which meant I had to get a GPA of at least a 2.0. So that was really stressful because Penn was like ‘its 2 or bye.’ So when things weren’t getting done it just magnified the stress because um it was like ‘oh man I could lose everything.’”

Bruce received a text message from her mom, “It says ‘how did election go? Powerpoint presentation? Life? Drug script?’ Good job mom. My mom is pretty great.”

After November 9, 2016, Bruce’s typical downward hand gesture to demonstrate the path of her semester became warped.

And the election very much didn’t help. I think that was like that was sort of like…leading up to that when things started to become a very clearly not a great time. And then like on like at the beginning of November um I think part of it is because like I mean okay so this is like [anonymous] but like so like I am like a survivor of sexual assault and so like seeing somebody in the news who’s like…literally the fact that I now know that, well only half the population voted and approximately half of those people voted for Donald Trump which to me says that a quarter like one out of every four people I meet is at least on some level okay with sexual assault, which is like terrifying to me. And there was a definitely a week during which I couldn’t leave my apartment cause like you get that whole like remember back to that time that like all men were terrifying because some men are terrible.

I felt great pain for Bruce in this moment. I had noticed that the otherwise vibrant campus had been overshadowed by the results of the election. Students on both sides of the aisle were feeling unsafe. Students on Penn’s campus were the subject of racist, targeting messages and events. Other groups of students were objectified to sexual objects alone by fellow students. The coping mechanisms Penn students typically employ were depleted; as were much of the staff and faculty.
Bruce missed midterms, could not follow through on certain assignments, and dropped the ball here and there during her semester. She managed the fallout of those things on her own. “It’s really hard to be functionally honest with my parents because being honest with them will terrify them.” To hear that she missed a midterm would create undue fear in her parents and Bruce did not want to do that. She is an adult and wants to be able to manage consequences by herself. By the end of our time together, Bruce told me she had a positive conversation with her mother about not contacting her repeatedly with to-do lists as it was not actually an affected tool to gauge whether or not she is functioning properly. “Even when I’m shutting down, I’ll just tell her I’m fine. And all that leads to is like dishonesty and distrust because like I’m just irritated and I need her to stop. Regardless of what she’s asking there is like almost zero likelihood that I’ll give her an actual answer.” Everyone manages their parents even if that means presenting half-truths to show functionality; however, exhausting that might be.

The Fall 2016 semester was difficult for Bruce but she is starting to get the rhythm down. Even with the stress of the election, she observed certain cycles she would find herself in as the semester wore on. As always, she shows me with hand gestures. Bruce explains a series of convergent circles of social connection. She flows in and out of being in touch with numerous people frequently, to a few close friends on a healthy basis, to needing to interact with anyone and everyone she meets, and then finally with no interaction with anyone. Bruce is working on the balance. At times during her second full semester back, she would not leave her apartment for days. Only an invite to play “D’n’D” got her to exit. “Dungeons and Dragons” she followed up with; I am not hip to
the abbreviated name. Through the weekly game she made positive social relationships and developed new vernacular for the class status limbo she feels stuck in. In accordance with the game lingo, she is a “junior with a minus one penalty” versus her friends that are “natural juniors.” When I pushed back on the term “penalty” Bruce said, “Sure, I get it, it’s just how the game works. I guess I can be a junior with modifiers.” I prefer the second name; Bruce will likely continue to use the first.

As Bruce and I got to know each other our meetings consisted of conversations about politics, social life at Penn, a recent speaker that came to campus, and frustrations with the Greek formal recruitment process. These very common, almost mundane conversations were our norm. It became increasingly clear that Bruce did not define her student experience by her leave or by her return. She defined her experience as one of a bit of struggle but nothing she cannot overcome. When asked directly, she will tell you about the frustrations of financial aid or bureaucratic issues for accommodations but mostly she does her best to tackle what is in front of her. On days we met, sometimes she was tackling things as simple as the impending rain outside or diverting her path around a radical preacher with a megaphone on College Green. Bruce is living the life of a persisting student, not without obstacles, but few students persist without them.

At our final meeting together, Bruce was happy to be returning for her third semester in a row. Her leave is now situated firmly in the past. She continues to struggle in certain aspects of her life but owns that as her experience. “I’m not 100% functional right now but I’m doing alright.” She continues to keep busy and “just keep swimming because I’m a shark and if I stop swimming then I’ll die.” She laughs as uses this
metaphor with me. Bruce works hard to stay on top of her academic, work-study, extra-curricular obligations, as well as the to-do list her mother sends occasionally now. She is not always successful but has carved out the strategies she can use to keep her pointed towards success. We walked out of the library on an unseasonably mild day early in her third semester returned. She had not yet made the dentist appointment she had been meaning to. I thanked her for her openness and her persistence at Penn. I am grateful for the ability to get to know Bruce; her quirkiness, her stubbornness, her struggles, and most importantly her success. I graciously accepted when she said “I’m definitely down for coffee sometime” as she went right and I left past the large white button sculpture in the center of campus.
Jamie

Jamie (a pseudonym) looked nervous as she waited at a four-top in the library for the first interview. The interview had been delayed a few weeks due to a broken foot that was still in a boot on this day. Jamie had gotten to the area in the library just outside the private room that we would meet in before me. We were both early so we waited for the specific reservation time. I identified her by her walking cask on one leg but did not approach her. She had her laptop on her lap and bag by her side; using every free moment to get some work done. Once the clock turned, I opened up the room and we went in to talk more privately.

Jamie originally wanted to select the pseudonym Paige for this study, but thought “that might get weird or confusing” given it is also my name. “You can just make one up for me.” With that, we tabled the discussion of a pseudonym and went on with our conversation. We began with general questions about how Jamie found her way to Penn and her academic interests. Jamie spoke clearly and decidedly. Jamie is thoughtful and careful with her words. Her unambiguous answers shifted slight when I asked the question, “What year are you now?”

It’s hard to say. Credit wise I’m technically almost a sophomore. I just say I’m a first semester sophomore in the class of 2018. I was originally class of 2016. It’s weird being in between. I’ve taken multiple leaves…I kind of got used to the question I guess. I started saying ‘oh I took some time off” and it just got kind of difficult at first when people asked ‘what did you do at that time?’ I was secretive. No, more like closed off about what I had been dealing with.

Jamie of the 2018 class opened the story of her multiple leaves from Penn. She spoke reservedly, gingerly, as she walked me through her experience. It was at once a
rehearsed story and yet somehow Jamie was still familiarizing herself with it. Jamie came to Penn having had several of her family members attend before her. She brought with her the dream of becoming a doctor like her grandfather. Jamie was “very interested in the pre-med program…like hard core.” She immersed herself in the study of biology and opportunity to do research. She anticipated working closely with the student clubs that supported her “passion for Spanish and medicine.” The sheer presence of the Kelly Writer’s House on campus signaled to her that she would delve deep into the creative arts through writing and reading. Penn was “a good fit.”

Typical of the incoming student, Jamie was filled with excitement. She was familiar with Penn given her legacy status but was eager to find her own connection; her own experience. No one had pushed her to go to Penn, Jamie found the Penn of 2012 all on her own and consequently she was ready to make it her own. She was placed with a roommate in the only remaining residence hall on campus without air conditioning (not so 2012 after all). Philadelphia in August is at times unbearably hot and humid and Jamie is “not too cool for A/C.”

Jamie and her roommate were not fast friends. In fact, they were not friends at all and though they walked to class together most days, she was not nice to Jamie. As Jamie spoke about her relationship with her roommate and her first semester it was with a certain lightness that caught me off guard. Jamie struggled significantly but describing it to me that day she seemed pleased that she had come out of that situation and in all likelihood would not find her place there again. Jamie was confused as to why her roommate was not nice to her. She assumed that most students came to college ready and
willing to make any and all friends; “I guess she wasn’t interested in that” she said. Jamie 
would eventually find her “best friend” through her Biology lab but her residential and 
academic life was growing more and more uncomfortable.

Things started to unravel rather quickly; nothing was making sense to Jamie. For a student who had never done poorly academically prior to college; she was doing poorly in her biology course; the passion that brought her to Penn in the first place. She spoke with the instructor to little avail; she tried to contact her advisor; no response. She asked career services if it mattered which biology she took; they were not all that helpful to her. Jamie was doing the right things; reaching out for assistance. She is someone who does the right thing yet she was not reaping any rewards for it. Her life was not as she had imagined it would be in college. In addition to her academic struggles she was confronting major identity issues as well. Her first semester was shaping up to be “sort of a nightmare.”

“I was going through a lot with my sexuality at the time, like, I was changing in the closet, literally. I was just so ashamed with so many different aspects of myself and of my life.” The irony of the statement was not lost on me. “The stress and the transition to college really amplified things I had been feeling in high school, I guess.” There were two weeks left in the semester when Jamie could no longer get out of bed. Her depression had taken control. Her mom “started calling me and I was still in bed” when she was supposed to be in class. Jamie would make up excuses and say she was not feeling well. Eventually, her mother said to her “[Jamie], this is a problem.” Jamie giggled and apologized for accidentally saying her own name in the audio recorder. Jamie is rule a
follower; even when those rules are as inconsequential as saying one’s own name in one’s own interview.

Her mom drove to campus and reserved a room at the Inn at Penn, a hotel on campus associated with the University, where they both would stay so that Jamie could finish the semester. Jamie did not finish the semester; not exactly. She left the semester with two incomplete courses and requested a leave of absence for the following spring semester. Jamie did not want to take the leave originally. She was confused. She wanted to get back to school, not lose her place in her class year, and finish the courses she couldn’t manage to finish in her first semester. Her mother told her “there are things that are more important than your education right now.”

“Honestly, I was just so tired emotionally” and so Jamie went along with whatever her mother suggested. Jamie’s mom coordinated the treatment that Jamie needed. Her parents were “extremely supportive” in working towards an eventual diagnosis that would help Jamie understand what had been so confusing to her in the fall. Jamie has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The treatment she underwent was strenuous. “I basically felt like I had to learn how to walk again. It was really intense to do the treatment that was so antithetical to what I was feeling and what I was thinking.”

In addition to her treatment, Jamie took some writing courses through a local program and a course on fantasy novels at the local community college. She learned about herself, her condition, and how to cope with her new normal. Jamie also passed the time volunteering at an animal shelter. There, she met her first girlfriend. “That created
another dynamic for my family to deal with and for me to deal with.” She had always been open with her mother; they are very close. Her parents did not approve of her relationship. But that relationship was really important to Jamie. It allowed her to see herself for perhaps the first time. While the relationship itself was not great it helped her make sense of what had had her so tangled in the fall.

Jamie is a matter of fact type of person. When explaining to me the return from leave process she spoke meticulously about forms, questions, offices, committees, or “councils” as she called them, and advisor meetings. I had to press her about how it all made her feel. Did she feel welcomed by the all the bureaucracy? She said, “I was stressed out by all the questions and revealing how much I had gone through and how much I was actually dealing with. I didn’t want everybody to know about it. You know, like the whole college office.” After all the paper work was done, Jamie’s request to return was granted. Her mother tried to reason with her that she was not ready to return citing the “I’m your mother” evidentiary standard but Jamie felt ready and her therapist agreed. Jamie packed her bags and moved back to campus to live with her best friend- biology lab partner. She had completed one of her incompletes and let the other one lapse to an F. Nevertheless, Jamie was back. Being back though, came with its own challenges.

I was very lonely. Um, I was in between. I was, um, I felt like out of the community. Because I basically was so embarrassed with what had happened that I lost touch with a lot of people. Um, and also I hadn’t really been speaking to that many people before I left because I basically went off the grid. Um, so I came back and it was very lonely, I was on the far edge of campus, it wasn’t like central. I ate meals alone a lot in my room. Um, still had the meal plan though but um, I don’t know it was a really difficult time. I spent a lot of time by myself and um I mean I had my best friend there but I mean she wasn’t there all the time. I mean um, that semester was good because I finally like came out, um, so that was
good and then it was just also fun to have my best friend there and be living with her for a short period of time. That was nice. Um the overall, I was taking three classes to get back into the swing of things and it just… it just wasn’t enough yet.

Jamie’s dreams of medical school were still forefront in her mind; even though her favorite class prior to the leave was a random art history course she happened to pick up and while on leave, she willingly chose to pursue her interests in creative writing and fantasy novels. Looking back, Jamie can see that her passion is not Biology but upon her return it still clouded her judgement. So her OCD flared up again. She felt lonely, “I felt like nobody would understand my situation. Um and I just really kept to myself. Um, I found it difficult to meet other people because a lot of the events are focused on a class by class basis. Um and I was neither here nor there…socially it was really detrimental.”

There was no community for Jamie; academic or otherwise. So Jamie took another leave. Her mother choked back the “I told you so.” I feel like just with Fernando a map of her stop outs might help

The second leave for Jamie was significantly harder. “The fallout was worse. Because I got scared I was never going to graduate.” Right before the leave, Jamie submitted a petition to have her F in Biology to be retroactively withdrawn and that petition was denied. “That was a kick in the gut.” Jamie had not officially ever failed anything in her life and so seeing the F on her transcript was extremely foreign to her. The presence of that grade cemented the soft held idea that she had failed her first semester at Penn; motivating the fear of never coming back, never graduating.

Jamie spent the next two years enrolled in intensive inpatient programs specifically targeted at treating OCD. She took it back when she called the facilities
“plants” but Jamie described the experience as if she was planted there. It was through
that intensive treatment that she blossomed into someone able to manage her OCD. “I
was able to just like stay in the moment and to kind of just enjoy things; which is kind of
a big deal because OCD is like ‘what if, what if, what if;’ it’s all like future stuff and it’s
really important to stay in the moment.” Eventually, she felt securely ready to return to
Penn again; this time with “skills that I didn’t have before.”

When Jamie came back the second time she was much more systematic about her
approach which feels more true to the Jamie I came to know. Jamie is a planner. Jamie
worked hard to put into place other safety nets that she did not have in her original return
including her treatment team, Weingarten Learning Resource Center, her advisor, and a
secondary advisor in the college office. “So having all those together in a very like week
by week basis like that really helped to get through that semester, that first semester back.
It was not without challenges though. Um, the returning students group at CAPS helped.”
This well-developed plan was suggested by the College office but Jamie did the leg work
to put it in place. Jamie did not feel pressure to put this plan together as she trusted that
the suggestion was “coming from a good place. Honestly, like Penn’s been really great in
terms of allowing me to come back and do everything because then I had to go on
another one.”

Upon her return, Jamie took on three courses and did very well. She enrolled in
another Art History course that eventually paved the way for her to follow her passion for
the subject, a psychology course which she found interesting but laughed when she told
me she realized she “had enough of that in [her] life already.” Her final course was a
literature course that was highly triggering for her throughout the semester. Jamie, the planner, appreciates academic trigger warnings and this class did not come with one. When Jamie tells me about this, I wondered if my research description and informed consent form were appropriately warning in nature. She took the triggering course pass/fail because frequently she could not go to lecture.

Jamie finished the semester; a feat she had not yet reached in college. Instead of celebrating with a new set of courses in the spring semester, she had a bad reaction to a medication that sent her physical health spiraling out of control and she was unable to stay in school yet again. Through a number of mix ups with medication, diagnosis, and hospital visits she left Penn for the third time. Leading up to the leave, Jamie’s mom was not really taking her physical symptoms seriously. She assumed, along with the Student Health Service at Penn, that the headaches and nausea and passing out in the middle of class were all stress related. A group of three friends created a wraparound care plan for Jamie. “Those three people really stepped up. It was way above their paygrade.” Eventually, Jamie calls her mom and asks to come home for a few days and that visit turns into a few weeks and by the time she’s feeling better her advisor tells her she has missed too much time and her professors feel like she cannot make up the work. So, she “was basically forced to go on a leave for that. And I got really frustrated because I had worked so hard to get back. And to have it be yet another physical problem that was completely out of my control; not to say the mental health was in my control but to have something with the knowledge that I had OCD and like everything that was going on and
have it still get messed up by somebody who we thought knew what he was doing. It was just like really unfortunate.”

This leave did not carry with it the weight of the first two leaves, however. Frustrated, but Jamie was not fearful that she would not return to Penn. It was not more than six months after she left for the last time that Jamie was sitting with me, returned. Returning this time “was really easy. Um, I basically, I didn’t copy and paste what I had before but I was able to, a lot of it was still applicable.” We both laughed together at the idea of her basically copying and pasting her old return requests. The leave and return bureaucratic process was old hat to Jamie at this point. Though the process was familiar, the decision to approve her request still rests with the school. “I was nervous though that they were going to think that I couldn’t handle it; that I didn’t deserve to be here. But I wanted to come back because I love Penn and I… I earned my spot to be here. And I was not going to give that up.”

Jamie is confidently back to school. She has grown significantly not only in age and maturity but in her ability to set herself free. Letting go of her dream to become a physician released her from the grips of the heavy burden of a narrow definition of success. She is free to pursue her passion of art history and creative expression. Reflecting on her experiences leaving and returning she represents them in a positive light. “I hear a lot of people talk about coming back and they say they had a really awful time. And I feel bad. I don’t actually know what they’re talking about.” She credits the inexhaustible support from her mother, her advisor knowing her way “around the system,” and not having to deal with and office called Student Intervention Services.
which she has had friends describe as a “nightmare” for the relative ease of resolving her interruptions in enrollment.

As the semester wore on, Jamie kept laser focus on her success and continued growth as a person and as a student; taking any setbacks in stride. Not someone who lets people in easily, Jamie shared with me a very personal and trying journey to her sophomore year. She has redefined success for herself. Walking the leafy campus in the fall, taking three courses, focusing on her wellness, Jamie is content and serious. Most of all, Jamie is happy. “I changed my approach to education; I changed my approach to life. So basically, I just um, I take it day by day. I try not to look too far in the future; I try to stay in the moment. I try to really enjoy what I’m doing now and focusing on what makes me happy not necessarily what will make me successful because I think what will make me happy will also make me successful.”
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

“The consensus is not clear; the story more scattered. In quantitative research, the scattered data points would mean that the investigator would have no story to tell. In qualitative research, on the other hand, the divergent and dissonant views are themselves a story” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)

Student persistence has been narrowly defined in higher education literature as those first-time, full-time college students who persist directly on the path to graduation. Rarely have transfer students been included in this definition. Even rarer is the inclusion of students who “stopout” and eventually return. More frequently than not, stopouts are included or confused with students who drop out of higher education all together. A student’s path to graduation will be as unique as the student themselves. Working with the participants in this study highlighted just how unique and divergent those paths can be.

Conceptually, this study acknowledged the multiple and varied influences on student persistence through higher education (Reason, 2009). Theoretically, I employed Schlossberg’s (1995) transition theory as a way of understanding how adults cope with transition using available resources. Student transition in and out of enrollment within the larger conceptual framework of student persistence results in a complicated reality of the search for or dependence upon available resources. More specifically, a student’s ability to find resources in the situation, support, strategies, or self is influenced by
sociodemographic traits, organizational context, peer and individual environment and experiences.

The portraits produced as part of this research show how four students having returned from leave manage the transition out of enrollment and in particular, back to enrollment. I found in my interviews with participants that each of them spoke at length about the circumstances leading up to their leave. Initial transition issues typical of an entering college student became exacerbated by deteriorating mental and sometimes physical health (Kampsen, 2009; Lipirari, 2011). Each participant at first did not want to interrupt their studies for fear of disappointing loved ones or losing their spot in their graduating class.

It seemed easier for each participant to recall specific personal problems or successes prior to their leave than upon return. Tinto (1975) described attrition as a process within which students demonstrate discontent or dissociation. The findings in this study indicate the same is true for student facing a stopout. We would speak at length about the circumstances that led to the leave and much less so about their current day-to-day life aside from coursework and social implications upon return. A worrisome theme that emerged from the interviews and portraits is the amount of pressure students placed on themselves or allowed to be placed on them during the first few weeks of their first year. The transition to higher education is stress inducing itself with various barriers students face regardless of mental health status (Lipirari, 2011). Along with a sense of redefinition of identity when entering college, academic superiority and meaningful social engagement was intricately tied to participants’ identity. Though mental health
concerns were what ultimately led to the departure, all participants expressed significant
disappointment and sense of failure from their social and academic lives in their first
year. Such strong feelings however, did not result in meaningful outreach to formal
support resources. Three out of four participants did not disclose any mental health
concerns to Penn prior to their needing intervention or leaving. This supports the data
represented in Wagner et al (2006) findings using the NLTS2 that more than half of
students struggling with psychiatric disabilities did not disclose to their institution.

Findings indicate that because participants’ identity had already been “lost” or
restructured as a result of taking a leave, upon return there is significantly less pressure
placed on the need to be academically superior and maintain a significant social presence
on campus. The need for “the college norm” as Elissa put it is not completely ignored
upon return as each participant expressed a lack of social support in their first semester
back. Fernando says “there’s no NSO for us;” Jamie says, “I found it difficult to meet
other people because a lot of the events are focused on a class by class basis. Um and I
was neither here nor there…socially it was really detrimental;” and Bruce says, “Here
you go, you’re back. Okay, now what?” Returning students ability to tap into
surrounding supports to aid in their transition back is limited within the peer environment
that Reason (2009) points to as an important aspect to student persistence. The peer
environment gives individual and groups of students a “sense of place” (Reason, 2009, p.
670). This sense of place is missed upon return by the participants in this study. The
organizational context furthers this limitation in the reliance on class specific programing
and delineations.
Berger (2001-2002) as referenced in Reason’s (2009) conceptual piece points to several categories of organizational behavior. In my experience, observations, and participant generated data, related to student persistence, Penn tends to behave symbolically. Symbolic organizations “focus on history, lore, and myth in creating culture on campus” (Reason, 2009, p. 668). Class membership emerged as a major theme for the participants. Most were confused or struggled to define it exactly. Class year membership is signaled as a major identifier for students at Penn. Bruce asked “who do I do Hey Day with,” a long-standing class-centric tradition at Penn ushering in the new Senior class each year. The President of the University, Dr. Amy Gutmann in her convocation address to begin the academic year, her first words were to name the class and the year they will graduate. The College of Arts and Sciences website has tabs delineated by “Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors, Transfers, Parents, etc.” A visitor to the site must use search bar to get anywhere close to a page on leave of absence or return. Where does one click when they are in between?

Because the participants in this study identified as having left school for mental health reasons, each were open about the great support and eventually self-actualization found through treatment. Both Bruce and Jamie found comfort in simply having a diagnosis; something to name their experience. These factors, external to the institutional environment or NLCEs clearly had significant impact on participants’ ability to persist through higher education (Cox, Reason, & Gillman, 2016). However, only one of the four participants sought treatment through the institutional context prior to hospitalization or their actual leave. Students who engage in mental health treatment on college campuses
fair quite well and even better in particular contexts in terms of retention and graduation rates than students who do not seek mental health treatment (Lee, 2009; Turner & Berry, 2000). Each of the participants engaged in mental health treatment during and after the leave of absence. From the portraits and findings in this study, the pressure and expectation of the “the college norm” did not include accessing mental health treatment.

Portraiture methodology pays close attention to the context in which the study is done as does Reason’s (2009) framework for student persistence; though specific to the institution itself. Penn is a highly selective, elite, research, Ivy-league institution. I found in my work with these participants that described themselves after getting into Penn, they felt great pressure to have the next thing that they do to be even more impressive than an acceptance to Penn. A contemporary wave of research points to the increase in pressure on students and families to maintain an advantage educationally and class-wise through particular education attainment even after admission to elite colleges (Weis, 2015). Upon returning from leave however, students identified feeling less pressure to succeed at such a high level. Significant self-assurance and self-efficacy came with the idea that they got into Penn so they must be able to remain and graduate from Penn. Each student described a moment where they used their experience to help another student, typically younger, manage the amount of pressure they were putting on themselves. Without noticing, these students were becoming the calm, collected, and connected student they had expected they would be upon first entry.

While the peer environment upon return was stunted due to lack of organized events or efforts to support students returning from leave, the individual student
experiences in the classroom and out of the classroom played a big role in the success of return for the participants. However, the out-of-class context came with its own challenges during the study. The temporal-political context of the time the participants and I were working together is important. During the summer sessions and fall semester of 2016, the United States saw one of the most divisive political campaigns in history and certainly the most divisive campaign college aged students had ever observed. On November 9, 2016, many midterm exams were cancelled or postponed, classes cancelled, homework passes given. There seemed to be a dark cloud hanging over an otherwise bright and vibrant campus. Students and student groups from across the political spectrum were feeling unsafe and unsupported. Students were unable to cope with the same amount of stress as they could previously. After the election, it became increasingly difficult to schedule with participants – they were stretched thin as midterms and finals approached. Two of the participants identify as queer, one participant has undocumented family members, another is a sexual assault survivor, all will have pre-existing mental health conditions when they are no longer on their parents’ or university health insurance. These four students were carrying all of these identity markers in a tense political climate and yet they needed to keep focused on exams, problem sets, and counseling appointments; a difficult task indeed.

The role of the family emerged as an interesting and nuanced theme across the portraits. Students relied on family members in different ways as a source of support. Family influence for Jamie led her to Penn in the first place, an extended stay to support her, and eventually to the treatment she needed for her condition. Bruce’s caring mother’s
routine check-ins led Bruce to be dishonest with her yet also appreciative and understanding. Elissa’s parents took time to come around to accept a number of factors in her life but never relinquished support and love. Fernando’s relationship with his family, while complicated, is at its core is supportive and trusting of his decisions. While universities are less inclined to involve parents or guardians due to privacy laws or a push towards individualism; they may very well be a cornerstone in the persistence puzzle.

Finally, what the findings show is that the “dearth of research” in the area of student stopouts impact on graduation is deserved of further examination (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006, p. 576). Moreover, the use of a stopout or leave as a tool for persistence for some populations of students can be quite effective. The students in this study successfully navigated the leave and return process at a highly selective and rigorous university. Listening to their stories shows that the decision to disrupt their enrollment not only positively impacted their ability to graduate but also, and more importantly, their ability to live.

Implications for future research

This small scale study is the first of its kind to follow students who have returned from a stopout in such an evocative manner. Portraiture allows and demands the voice and the words of the participant to elicit meaning from the data collected. While highly important and telling, this study is small. It is important to continue to explore successful transitions back to campus for a multitude of reasons: financial, physical health, family needs, and other external causes. Not only would institutions, students, and families benefit from a broader study but also one that includes many more participants. While the
voices of these participants are necessary for full understanding, a true sense of the
landscape for returners would be helpful.

In addition to broadening the scope of the research in terms of context for the
stopout and amount of participants, it would be additive to understand impact on
graduation timeline and outcomes. The participants in this study all anticipated
graduation from Penn at a slightly delayed timeline given the interruption. Examining
graduation rates of a larger sample but keeping within the bounds of qualitative methods
would illuminate much that is hidden in quantitative studies on the subject.

Looking beyond graduation, another interesting direction to carry the line of
inquiry would be to examine career or graduate study implications. Would a stopout and
successful transition back to college improve or hinder students’ ability to obtain
meaningful employment or enrollment in graduate study? Research shows that leaves for
internships have positive influence on both academic and career outcomes (Routon &
Walker, 2015). A complicating factor could be the institution type as well in determining
the impact a stopout and return has on post-graduation measures; so it may be necessary
to explore the question across multiple institutions.

This study examined the phenomenon of a return in a single institutional context.
As Reason (2009) conceptualizes and this study supports, organization context and
behavior has major influence on the persistence puzzle. The peer environment also
carries significant influence on the successful transition of a student returning. How those
two important factors change depending context would likely have a large impact on how
students transition upon return. A smaller liberal arts college, or commuter school or community college organization structure and peer environment may play out very differently.

Finally, for readers and future researchers, it is important to note the possible limitation of the methodology used in this line of inquiry. I purposefully used portraiture to elicit the voices and nuances of students and their experiences. In using portraiture, however, the researcher’s voice is omnipresent (as is true with all research), and the power that comes with that omnipresence should not be ignored. It is important to me that as the reader encounter this work that they take seriously their own interpretation of the portraits while leaving room for each participant to tell their own story.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the varied and unique stories of each participant that their path to and from a stopout or leave will be as unique as the students themselves. While each student took their leave for mental health reasons, it appeared to be less of a battle once they returned as they each engaged in targeted and helpful interventions while away from school. What was striking across the portraits was the idea that the stopout or leave aided in each student’s ability to eventually succeed.

Each student was at first quite reticent to take the leave as it signaled to them a sense of failure; however, upon return each student recognized the helpfulness of the leave and how the time away had actually bolstered their chances of graduation. It may be time that institutions and educational researchers see time away as a positive step towards graduation. Changing the narrative of successful college retention and persistence should prove helpful for students who must take time away from school for all reasons, not just those managing their mental health.

Finally, I found the students I worked with to be far more resilient than we give this generation credit for. While Millennials have been called many things, resilient is not a word I have heard frequently in relation to them; however, these students showed immense strength in not only their ability to step away but also in their ability to return to an uncertain future. Each student marked their own path back to campus in a way meaningful to them and not fully laid out for them by the support offices around the
university. Charting their own path took strength and resolve that many education researchers and administrators would miss after only looking at their lack of initial persistence.

Engaging admitted students in myth debunking

Though Mattern, Marini, & Shaw (2015) stated that “the utility of target interventions” for students who’s interruption is a result of factors outside both the institution and individuals’ control, I argue that the obligation to search for those interventions remains. As Reason (2009) described a symbolic organization as relying on lore and myth to build campus culture. It is clear from the portraits of these four returning students that in addition to the state of their mental health at the time of their leave, the enormous hurdle of expectation must be addressed. Using Schlossberg’s transition theory as a guide, there are two major periods encompassing a successful transition: the approach and the utilization of resources during transition. Prior to New Student Orientation, Penn uses online modules to inform students about conduct processes, safety and wellness resources, and research opportunities so that each student may “Thrive at Penn,” (TAP). Though two of the students entered prior to implementation of the program, two participants went through the entire module and still entertained the pressure associated with academic and social perfection.

Students may not immediately identify that their college experience will not be the “Bed Bath and Beyond” experience like Elissa described, prior to coming to college. Midway through the semester, Penn should require a “booster” to the TAP module as part
of the registration process for the next semester courses. This could highlight that individual students may not be as alone as they may feel and remind them of their ability to access advising, counseling, academic support, and social resources on campus.

In addition to the Thrive at Penn module, students have access to older more experienced students through the roles of Peer Advisors and Resident/Graduate Assistants. Using these students as resources to debunk the myths associated with Penn’s symbolic organizational structure should prove helpful. Engaging both populations of student connection covers both pre-entry contact through Peer Advisors and ongoing close contact through residence staff. Is there any research connected to Schlossberg regarding successful transition that you could tap into here? Also potentially any recommendations for how to help students returning identify with a class to give them the structure of social place?

Creating a social climate for returners

Upon return, every participant in this study noted that they felt lost and disconnected from the community. Several students pointed to cutting off ties with community prior to the leave and therefore had very little to return to. For students remaining out for a year, as the majority of the participants did, they felt disconnected and a little left behind by their time away. Persistence is still a factor even for the “non-persister.” KuhKinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) recommend that in an effort to bolster student persistence, colleges need to “involve every student in a meaningful way in some activity or with a positive role model in the college environment” (p. x).
When a student returns from leave, institutions should promote their reintegration. Jamie
found the group at Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to be very helpful in
her return but still limited in scope.

A returning student orientation (RSO) or something of the like might be very
helpful not only in the context of a leave for mental health reasons but for several types
of interruptions. New Student Orientation works in part due to the myth that it is
mandatory. A similar program from returners that feels obligatory for the student in
transition could prove successful. Research shows that for students who study abroad or
go on a self-selected mission trip show real uncertainty upon return (Haines, 2013;
Walling et al, 2006). The identity shifts that can occur during an extended absence from
enrollment deserve attention from the institution. Arouca (2013) found positive outcomes
from engaging in peer support or social groups upon return to higher education. While
CAPS hosts a returning students group, it may not fit the social climate needs that many
students are looking for upon return. The challenge of setting up a more social and
academic re-orientation or group structure lies in that students are returning in all terms,
fall, spring, and summer. The coordination of such a program would be no small feat.

Build a single stream return process

The success of students’ smooth transition back to college after a leave or stopout
could be facilitated by a number of factors related to the institution. A theme that
emerged in the data is the non-coordination of services between offices. Lee (2009)
points to non-coordination as a major barrier for students with mental health issues and
their persistence through higher education. The same would be true upon return from a 
leave to manage their mental health.

The findings of this study show that for at least half of my participants financial 
aid was in question upon return after being promised that there would be no problem. 
“Status” changes were slow for students when trying to register for courses, sign up for 
on-campus housing, and attempt to re-engage with a student group. Penn’s four 
undergraduate schools all manage their leaves separately, though the process is fairly 
similar across schools. Because of this delineation, however, creating a single stream 
could prove difficult. That said, students returning from a leave for mental health reasons 
must juggle the return from leave forms, their medical forms from all providers, the 
registration of courses, the reinstatement of financial aid if applicable, the application for 
on campus housing, and the establishment of a treatment plan upon return. And that is 
just the paperwork. Participants in this study carried with them shame, stigma, and 
uncertainty upon return or even if they would be allowed to return. Any way to ease this 
transition for them would likely bring positive outcomes.

Family and Institutional Role

The above recommendations are intuition specific as this study was institution 
specific in scope. Additionally, all students took leaves or stopped out to address mental 
health needs. Educational research tells us that students stop out for a multitude of 
reasons and this examination could prove helpful in understanding the return from leave
for many students whether they left for mental health reasons or not (Stratton, O’Toole, & Wetzel, 2008).

The role of the family was integral across participants both in means of support, challenge, and understanding. Because of the sense of loss or shift in identity for these students upon taking the leave and returning, the easily-identified single constant available to them was their family. It is clear from these participants’ experiences that families can play a significant role in helping provide the means for treatment or other intervention while away from school and a helpful and cautious support once the student returns. Just as researchers and institutions need to reframe their understanding of stopouts to acknowledge the positive choice a student is making, families may need to do the same to be better supports for their students as they work towards persistence.

While the institution itself may not feel like a constant in the lives of students who stopout, it very well could and should be. Regardless of reason for the stopout, these students aim to return to the same institution from which they left. In order to make that return, they must work with the institution. This opens the door for institutions to fully embrace students on leave in ways that have not yet been explored. Not all intuitions will face the decentralization or class-specific programming that the University of Pennsylvania faces; however, it is necessary to consider the barriers and successes that students returning from leave face at various institutions. Seeking out and embracing this community of students is the first step to better understanding their experience and eventually improving upon institutional practice around stopouts and returns.
APPENDIX A

Email to potential participants from informant

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Paige Wigginton and I am conducting a research study focused on the experiences of students returning from a leave of absence for mental health reasons at Penn. I am a doctoral student in Higher Education at Penn’s Graduation School of Education. I am looking to work along with participants to create holistic “portraits” of students and their experience returning from leave. Full participation in the research study will entail at least four interviews of 60-90 minutes each (face-to-face or Skype/FaceTime), using a disposable camera, and journaling between interviews. Participants will likely invest between 8-10 hours over a 6 month period.

Eligible participants are 18-25 years old and have returned from a leave of absence or other disruption in enrollment for self-described mental health reasons. Eligible participants are enrolled full time in one of Penn’s four undergraduate schools.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be selected by participants and no identifying information will be used. All data collected will be kept on a secure server in a password protected folder.

Participation is completely voluntary. Please see the attached informed consent form. Please let me know if you are open to further contact, would like to refer a friend, and/or have any questions about your or others' potential participation.
Thank you,

Paige Wigginton

pwigginton@publicsafety.upenn.edu

215-898-4481 (office) or 267-273-3368 (cell)
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Date:
Location:
Interviewer: Wigginton
Student Interviewee:

Opening Script:

Thank you very much for sitting down to talk with me. As you know, my name is Paige Wigginton and I work in student affairs at the University of Pennsylvania and I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program studying Higher Education. For my dissertation, I aim to understand and identify the challenges that students face in their first year after returning from a leave of absence for mental health reasons or a psychiatric disability. During our conversation I will ask you a number of questions in an attempt to better understand your experience returning to school after your leave of absence.

I also want to remind you that this interview will be audio taped and though I may quote some of your insights in my final report I will do so without any identifying information. This interview will last approximately one hour. If at any point you wish to stop or would prefer to not be audio taped please feel free to let me know. After this
initial conversation, I will follow up with you to clarify any questions as well as check in to make sure that I am representing your insights accurately.

Again I thank you very much for sitting with me and I am looking forward to learning more about you and your experience as your return to an academic setting.

Questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what led to your leave of absence?
2. Are you able to identify any moments in your early college career that made your transition to college more or less difficult?
3. Describe your experience requesting a leave of absence and the process that followed.
4. Tell me about what you did while you were on leave, what activities/aspects were most and least interesting/helpful?
5. Did you know at all times during your leave that you would return to the university?
   [if no: can you elaborate on those moments and what would have been helpful to you?]
6. Are you able to describe what it was like for you going through the return from leave process?
   Prompts: Academic concerns, family concerns/support, financial?
7. Once you returned to Penn, did you encounter any new challenges within the first few weeks of the semester? Can you tell me about those?
8. What would you say about your evolution as a student/individual? Did your leave of absence change the way you see yourself, the world, your path?

Follow up: Who do you talk with about these changes?

9. Can you describe how the university has aided your leave/return process?

10. What are you most looking forward to in your first semester returned?

Follow up: What are you most worried about in your first semester returned?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that my questions did not hit on?

Closing script:

Thank you so much for talking with me today. I appreciate your participation and it will be valuable to the study moving forward. I will check back in with you to discuss some of my findings and to make sure that you are comfortable with how you are being represented in the results. Please feel free to call or email me with any questions. Thanks again.

Paige Wigginton

pwigginton@publicsafey.upenn.edu

267-273-3368
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You have been referred to participate in a study on college students’ experiences of returning from a leave of absence or other enrollment disruption for mental health reasons.

Project Title: Stopping Back In: Portraits of Students Returning from a Leave of Absence for Mental Health Reasons

Lead Researcher: Paige D. Wigginton
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Ed.D. Candidate Higher Education; Graduate School of Education
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267-273-3368(c)

Principal Investigator: Marybeth Gasman
Director; Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions
Professor, Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
3700 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, PA, 19104-6216
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Study Description

This study explores the experiences of students returning from a leave of absence or other disruption in enrollment for mental health reasons. The purpose of this study is to provide holistic portraits of the return experience at a highly selective institution for students who personally identify their leave reasons with their own mental health. While there is some limited demographic data on students who take and subsequently return from disruptions in enrollment, very little research explicitly and holistically introduces the lives and experiences of students such as those being interviewed for this study, specifically students who successfully return to a highly selective institution after time away for
mental health reasons.

You will be asked to participate in four face-to-face or skype/FaceTime interviews that will last 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will take place over a six month period. The interviews will be audio-recorded.

Between interviews you will be asked to use a disposable camera to take photos of things or individuals (with consent) that have influenced your experience returning from a leave of absence. These photographs will be developed and used in analysis; however no photographs will be used in the final research product.

Lastly, to aid in the holistic development of your story, you will be asked to journal between interviews. There is no prescriptive direction for this journal just that you occasionally write down your thoughts as they pertain to the experience with the study and/or returning from a leave of absence.

**Risks**

Risks are minimal in this research though reflecting on your own experience may be triggering for some. Resources and referrals will be provided to all participants.

**Benefits**

Participants may or may not benefit from participation in this research study. However, I do see potential direct and indirect benefits from the study detailed below:

DIRECT BENEFIT: The opportunity for you as a student returning from a leave or other disruption due to mental health concerns to tell your story; one that has not frequently been told. In the future, this may help institutional policymakers, university faculty, and administrators to develop programs and policies to help to support this population.

INDIRECT BENEFIT: The opportunity to contribute to greater knowledge of the experiences and individual, school, and family/community factors that impact or influence the experience of students returning from a leave of absence for mental health reasons.

**Compensation**

There is no compensation for this study.

**Audio Recording**

All interviews for this project will be audiotaped using a digital recording device. If you agree to be interviewed, your responses to the interview questions will be audio-recorded. The digital audio file will be transcribed within two weeks after the interview and then permanently destroyed. You will receive a copy of each interview transcription for review.
Privacy/Confidentiality

Electronic copies of interview transcripts will be kept on a password-protected Penn+Box account through the University of Pennsylvania, to which only the lead researcher has access.

Within three years of the interviews, electronic copies of interview transcripts will be deleted. To ensure confidentiality, this study will use pseudonyms and refrain from obtaining or using any identifiable information.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. If you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw from the study at any time, no one will penalize you in any way.

Questions and Concerns

The lead researcher conducting this study is Paige Wigginton, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Paige at pwigginton@publicsafety.upenn.edu or at 215-898-4481. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints regarding your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 215-573-2540.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information, and agree to participate in this study, have the interview audio recorded, and return the study issued disposable camera and study-specific journal entries to the researcher.

Your printed name: _________________________________________________

Your signature: _____________________________ Date ____________

Printed name of person obtaining consent: ________________________

Signature of person obtaining consent: _________________ Date _____________

The researcher will keep an electronic copy of this consent form for at least three years beyond the end of the study. After scanning and saving this consent form in a password-protected folder in Penn+Box, the hard copy of this form will be destroyed.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Stevenson, M. (2010). 'If they can't stand the heat…': Supporting the academic development of higher education students with anxiety and depression disorders. *Open Rehabilitation Journal*, 3, 41-46.


