Continuums and Conundrums of Student Engagement, Person to Person: Introducing Academic “Desirability” to Narratives of Belonging and Creating Unique Research Experiences for Undergraduate Students

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# Introduction: the SERT Approach

The following reports on the experience and findings of the second Student Experience Research Team (SERT) - a project of Ryerson Student Affairs Special Projects and Storytelling, generously funded by Ryerson's Registrar's Office. The purpose of this project is to provide a meaningful research experience for Ryerson undergraduate students in the context of Student Affairs and its concerns. Readers will find that we weave together some traditional elements that describe and account for the research and its results with more informal features that describe the experience of the research process itself for the team. As with the first SERT project, [reported on and explored in a “zine” you can download here](http://sertgallery.ca), these two elements are integral to each other - the experience of learning for the undergraduate researchers is linked inextricably with the way in which the research process played out for them and the insights that were generated as a result. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board [REB 2019-476].

This project, the Student Experience Research Team (SERT), is driven by four commitments:

* Creating a meaningful, high-impact research opportunity for Ryerson undergraduate students that will enrich their understanding of their own and their fellow students’ experience in higher education.
* Supporting these students financially by paying them a good wage for this.
* Activating non-traditional “ways of knowing” in our methodology.
* Making a meaningful contribution to the field of Student Affairs through these research efforts.

Readers interested in learning about the value of meaningful research experiences for undergraduate students and our interests in doing so within a student affairs context can find those details in the first SERT project’s report available on our online gallery at [sertgallery.ca](http://sertgallery.ca). Throughout this report, in our efforts to invite you in to the SERT experience, we include excerpts from our team blog posts. We use our private blog as a teaching and training tool, where we share reflections, complete homework activities, and capture our project as it unfolds in real time. We offer excerpts here as windows into our process and our in-the-moment feelings and experiences of the project.

*Posted on February 4, 2020 by John Hannah in “Where are we now?”*

*“Well, we’ve become a bona-fide team now, a group who has formed a kind of micro-culture around ways of thinking and being together, around a set of ideas that have become important to us. And we rooted ourselves in the research traditions where we felt a kinship – a naturalistic approach to social science, adopting critical perspectives, believing in not only the legitimacy, but the importance of using alternative arts-based approaches to understanding the lives of students, approaches driven by a desire to see things from a new angle, in ways that unearth new questions, that situate researchers inside the research, as participants, mitigating the relationships of power and orthodoxy. We acknowledge the complexity of the human experience and seek not to reduce it, believing that, as Muriel Rukeyser (1968)says, “…the universe is made up of stories, not atoms,” (p.111). A strong foundation for scholarly inquiry with heart.”*

Our work is rooted in arts-based methods of inquiry. The way the arts destabilize prevailing narratives is core to our research philosophy even when our tools or what our participants make is not strictly rooted in “art” or art-making. We work also with a desire to empower students to act as the artist of the research process and their participation in it, guiding the experience as co-creators rather than only receivers of meaning (Hannah & Ellis, 2018). SERT’s by students, for students model combined with what we lovingly call the “slow” approach, is a methodology that seeks to destabilize the hierarchies of “researcher” and “researched” in order to come closer to understanding the experiences of the students we work with in this project. Our slow approach takes us to unique places because we make room for meandering conversations; we spend time in art galleries considering art, considering research, considering their relationship; our path is laid just one step at a time as we determine, together, the areas we want to explore and the methods of doing so. The curriculum, if you will, is built out of community, not the other way around.

*Posted October 24, 2019 by John Hannah in “Anatomy of a Research Topic”  
“Admittedly, it can be a bit of an unusual process to draw a research question onto a blank canvas. Normally, this arriving at an interesting, viable topic for research unfolds more organically, being formed by a slower process whereby there is an intersection or collision between our everyday work, our thoughts, our insights, our understanding of the relevant literature, our interests, and our questions that naturally rise out of all that….But somehow, in our deliberately messy and patient method, we make space for community-building and genuine conversation which, in some surprising way, generates its own kind of energy suitable for locating a research topic. And so it was with SERT 2019.”*

# Arriving at our Research Interests

## An emergent practice

We began by drawing.

In the first SERT meeting with our new team assembled and an energy of new-ness in the air, we drew “the student experience”, each of us. Thus began SERT 2.0, the second iteration of a team built to explore Ryerson students’ experiences and perspectives using arts and non-traditional methods of research and inquiry, nestled within a student affairs context at Toronto’s “urban, city-building” post-secondary institution.

The Student Experience Research Team (SERT) is a student-led research project that uses arts and non-traditional methods to explore Ryerson students’ experiences as they relate to their personal, professional, and academic development. Our first project, the SERT pilot in 2018-2019 investigated students’ expectations compared to their lived realities and what emerged was a picture of the “stuck narrative” - the oft-told story of a student overcoming myriad challenges and emerging on the other side “transformed” in some way. We found that this narrative dominates our stories about the student experience. It is a compelling narrative, to be sure, but has become a kind of unquestioned piety, reinforced in many ways by the institution, its educators, and students themselves, and thus suffocating the possibility of other stories. Participants in this study created collages that expressed some of these alternative stories and experiences and we displayed this work at Ryerson’s ARTeries Undergraduate Research Conference in March 2019.

This time, SERT seeks to investigate Ryerson students’ personal definitions of “student engagement”, belonging, and “academic desirability” and the ways in which those definitions relate to and impact their experiences as undergraduate students.

So, we began by drawing. Drawing as a way of learning, thinking and sharing is a staple of the SERT method, for we practice reconnecting what we believe is lost when we rely wholly on the written word to evoke and produce meaning. We know that, as Nick Sousanis (2015) says “Traditionally, words have been privileged as the proper mode of explanation, as *the* tool of thought. Images have, on the other hand, long been sequestered to the realm of spectacle and aesthetics, sidelined in serious discussions as mere illustration to support the text - never an equal partner.” (p. 54). Sousanis’ groundbreaking graphic novel dissertation investigates this false dichotomy and re-establishes the deep connection and relationship between word and image, in an effort to “unflatten” our perspectives. He writes, in a text that features panels and pages of dizzying, intricate representations of humans, structures, systems, and the universe: “When represented through any single mode, this world of our experience, of endless horizons, is necessarily flattened. A shadow cast from a higher dimension. Distortions happen. Connections severed. Information lost. Its wholeness conceals its limitations and offers the impression that it’s complete, but this is only one way of looking. Changing orientation puts forth a decidedly different world view.” (Sousanis, 2015, p. 57).

SERT draws to reconnect and unflatten. While Sousanis (2015) gives us “unflattened” perspectives, Lynda Barry (2014) wonders what happens in our minds, in our bodies when we make and consume art: “How are our hands, images, and insight connected? There is something common to everything we call the arts. What is it? It’s not aesthetics…. This ancient ‘it’ is something I call ‘an image’. By image I don’t mean a visual representation, I mean something that is more like a ghost than a picture; something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive - a book, a song, a painting - anything we call an ‘art form.’ Images are also contained by certain objects…. How was it put there? Why do we have an innate ability to have a sustained and interactive relationship with an object/image well before we are able to speak? What kind of interaction is taking place?” (p. 15). These are some of the kinds of questions SERT considers as we engage in designing a research protocol; and we create and look at art forms as a way to understand and express that aliveness.

As with the pilot SERT project, we are particularly interested in the potential for arts-based research methods to elicit “the ineffable” (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p.1) and to "...expand the possibilities of diverse realities…counter the hegemonic and linear thinking often associated with traditional research…increase voice and reflexivity in the research process…and create more embodied and accessible research results" (Butler-Kisber & Polma, 2010, p. 2).

As we wrote in our first report: “We are guided especially by the thinking of Elliot Eisner and Tom Barone who articulate as clear a vision for arts-based research (ABR) as we know. They define ABR as a "… process that uses the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning" (Eisner & Barone 2012, p. xii). This is an emphasis, not on objective truths, or definitive answers, or causal relationships between variables. An inquiry driven by those things would lead to more traditional research methodologies as the appropriate choice. But inquiry can be led by other concerns, other interests - things like the provision of new perspectives, a deepened understanding of social phenomenon, the disruption of dominant narratives, the productive advancement of conversation, the vexing of others. And, animated by those legitimate motivations, the researcher can fruitfully turn to more "non-traditional" forms of research like ABR. ABR uses expressive forms - film, photography, collage, poetry, fiction, drawing, music, dance, sculpture - as devices of inquiry, as data, as objects of scrutiny, as forms of reporting - all with the purpose of revealing something new, poking into what is often hidden behind dominant views, to "make vivid what one had not noticed" (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. 156).”

In this cycle of SERT, you will see how our research design was informed by arts-based research traditions and our reporting on that work here and on [sertgallery.ca](http://sertgallery.ca) includes artistic interpretations and visualizations of our process, results, and conclusions. All the images throughout this report were created by SERT in our team sessions or as homework and reflection assignments.

The first drawings we created of “the student experience” launched us on a meandering path of questions and insights and more questions and more insights. We soon realized in all our weekly conversations and reading we returned again and again to the concept of “student engagement”. And thus our area of interest around which to begin designing a research protocol was clear.

## An interrogation of “student engagement” theory

Student engagement — this has arguably become, in recent years, the foundational concept in all of higher education, the primary mediating mechanism of student and institutional success. It has become the currency of post-secondary schooling. In many ways “student engagement” has become a fact-totem thanks, in part, to our reliance on the NSSE, the National Survey of Student Engagement; it’s a concept perhaps taken for granted as a deep and true representation of student experience. But it’s also confusing, oftentimes poorly articulated, inadequately theorised, variously understood and defined (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Trowler, 2010; Kahn, 2017; Milburn-Shaw & Walker, 2016). Kuh (2009) attested that there is no single definition of student engagement. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) argued that engagement should represent relationships inside and outside the institution. Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) reasoned that the policies established by institutions “aim to capture the measured outcomes of the performance of students, graduates, teachers and that of the university itself” (p. 6).

It is by no mistake that SERT chose to explore an area that is full of questions. As Kahu & Nelson (2018) describe, “we still do not fully understand the complex ways that individual and institutional factors interact to influence that engagement… In order to improve student success, we need to better understand how the various factors interact and impact student engagement and therefore success” (p. 61). Trowler’s (2010) review of the literature concerning student engagement, for instance, considers the range of considerations of “engagement for what?”: engagement to improve learning; engagement for equality/social justice; engagement for institutional benefit; engagement as marketing, to name a few. Engagement for whom is considered too: for students, individually and collectively; for managers; for the ‘engagement industry’; for the higher education system; etc. etc. (Trowler, 2010). While we understand student engagement is good, the ways in which we talk about engagement and indeed the ways in which we ask students to engage can be questioned. Various scholars have laid out criticism against mainstream approaches to student engagement, for example.

According to Kuh et al., (2008), student engagement represents “both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practice” (p. 542). The influence of the behavioural model of looking at student learning is clear here; we see also the likening of student experiences as commodities, as time and energy are identified as the resources necessary to engage. Zepke (2015) worries about the commodification of student engagement and describes mainstream views of student engagement as “insufficient”, calling for a more holistic view that incorporates not just the behavioural but the emotional and cognitive dimensions of a students’ experiences. We are drawn also to a more holistic model, further elaborated on by Kahu (2013): their framework illuminates the “antecedents” and “consequences” of student engagement, with a consideration of the sociocultural influences as well as the structural and psychosocial influences on a student’s experiences. Kahu (2013) helps us see engagement as a complex phenomenon, operating at the cognitive, behavioural, and affective domains, and influenced by a set of overlapping influences that lead to a complex set of possible consequences. It is from this model we continued forth in our explorations of student engagement and hoped to more deeply understand our own.

## Proposing a theory of student desirability

As we considered student engagement, ideas and questions about the ways in which students access opportunities, the ways in which they perform engagement, and the ways in which they actually *feel* engagement pulled us into discussions about who is seen as capable of achieving these standards set out by the education institution. We looked at all the ways a university celebrates its highest achieving students, its leaders, its most-engaged. What does it take to be recognized in this way? What does being a “model” student have to do with engagement, we wondered?

Kahu and Nelson (2018) suggest that “student engagement” operates in the “interface” between student and institution - a complex, iterative space of fluctuating identities and experiences. They further suggest that the primary mediating factors at play in that interface that affect the degree to which a student can be meaningfully engaged are: academic self-efficacy, emotional states, a sense of belonging, and well-being (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). We postulate a fifth, or more all-encompassing concept operating in this interface that we are calling “perception of student-desirability”. In a 2011 keynote address, Mia Mingus described her desire for a disability politic “beyond desirability” and from this work we are inspired to develop our own concept of desirability when it comes to students and their sense of belonging in a university institution. Mingus says,

“Our communities are obsessed with being beautiful and gorgeous and hot. What would it mean if we were ugly? What would it mean if we didn’t run from our own ugliness or each other’s? How do we take the sting out of “ugly?” What would it mean to acknowledge our ugliness for all it has given us, how it has shaped our brilliance and taught us about how we never want to make anyone else feel? What would it take for us to be able to risk being ugly, in whatever that means for us. What would happen if we stopped apologizing for our ugly, stopped being ashamed of it?...we must move toward the ugly. Not just the ugly in ourselves, but the people and communities that are ugly, undesirable, unwanted, disposable, hidden, displaced,” (2011).

We felt there were some connections to our ideas and questions about who is “seen” as “perfect” or “model” at the university, and in turn who or what experiences are “displaced,” or “hidden” or “unwanted.” We sought to broaden desirability, for our context, beyond physicality and ability, and to investigate instead the ways in which students do or do not feel desired, in all their forms, by their post-secondary institution. We might also call this the “ideal” or “model” student, examples of which abound across post-secondary school websites and articles dictating “how to be successful” or highlighting the “top habits of successful students”, etc. Students, no doubt, are privy in some way to these narratives, and feel a sense that they either possess or do not possess these desired characteristics. A simple google of “how to be successful in university” tells you a lot of what we were talking about in those SERT sessions - articles about how to impress your profs, lists of the characteristics common to top performing students, etc. We are curious to know whether students’ self-perception of desirability has some effect on their ability to participate in student engagement as they commonly understand that concept.

*Posted October 24, 2019 by John Hannah in “Anatomy of a Research Topic”  
“And our galaxy of interests were apparent from the start – a shared curiosity about deep themes related to the student experience – belonging, identity-formation, transition, social capital, self-advocacy, diversity, the concept of “engagement”, hustle-culture, wellbeing etc. etc. And then we stumbled on the concept of “Desirability” as elaborated by Mia Mingus and this became a kind of device to help us find more focus. And, so we began to imagine the notion of desirability in relation to student life – conceiving of the “desirable student” as a concept. What is a desirable student? What features come up when imagining a desirable student – being put-together, being prepared, being smart, athletic, musical, perhaps involving aspects of beauty, body, social graces, cheerfulness, etc. – the ingredients of social and physical capital. Our concept of desirability, therefore, is theoretical, postulating a constellation of traits that make up the whole of desirability – some traits traditional and common, other traits more implicit and “unwritten”, part of a shared code of desirability. We wondered how students would rate their own desirability along these lines and in what ways this perception of self would affect their experience as a student. As we began formulating more specific research questions for collective scrutiny and feedback, we also started wrestling with the concept of “student engagement” – that thing so oft-cited in the literature as critical to student success. What do students think of when they contemplate “engagement”? Do they feel equipped, or prepared, or able, or predisposed to “engage”. And, if not, does this leave them feeling left out or at some sort of disadvantage? And what kinds of things would make a student feel ill-equipped to “engage”?”*

We know student engagement is one of the grounding concepts in Student Affairs practice and scholarship, and our project seeks to understand how students themselves define and understand “engagement”, in an effort to understand and identify potential barriers to meaningful engagement. This concept became another way for us to talk about “belonging.” In this work we posit the theory of student “academic desirability” as a potential factor bearing on meaningful engagement - that is, we are curious whether students’ self-perception of the way the university does or does not “desire” them as a student is a variable that impacts their ability or willingness to engage.

## Research Questions

Thus we arrived at our research questions, of which we had several, and in keeping with our approach, we set forth not to arrive at any one conclusion but to unearth possibly even more questions.

*Research Questions for Stage 1:* What are some students’ perceptions about the concept of “student engagement”? Is the concept of student engagement sufficiently articulated at Ryerson? What is the common understanding of “student engagement” among Ryerson students? Do superficial applications of the concept lead Ryerson students to compliance, hustle culture, or a sense of being left out of engagement? What, if any, are the barriers to engagement as it is commonly understood? This part of the inquiry was conducted through a survey.

*Research Question for Stage 2:* Is there a relationship between students’ sense of academic desirability and the degree to which they feel able to engage? We investigated this second question in follow-up interviews with four of our survey respondents.

# Research Design

Our research design took shape from a combination of SERT discussions, excursions to art galleries, readings, ongoing discussion, drawing activities, and the like. We received Ryerson Ethics Board approval in February 2020 and just as we were poised to host our participant interviews, we, like the rest of the world, reacted to and were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and so our design necessarily shifted too.

*Posted on February 4, 2020 by John Hannah in “Where are we now?”*

*“So, how to inquire into these questions? That’s what we next dug our teeth into. Methods and methodology, the complex relationship between the observers and the observed, our purpose in all this, not objective truths but personal ones, focusing here, in this particular research context, on stories as the sense-making devices towards which we would focus our scrutiny, motivated by a desire to simply talk with fellow students, to ask them something meaningful. A survey first. Traditional, yes, but we played with it and imagined some other, less traditional way of doing that, making the survey a kind of interactive event with art, and strange old-telephone technology, and quirky guerilla-marketing stickers, and a homemade audio booth. It’s next-level-diy-style-survey. Who knows if any of it will do anything truly interesting or have the imagined effect of bringing researchers and participants closer somehow. But it doesn’t matter. It was in the making of these things, the imagining of these things that we deepened our thinking on the research process. The pondering of all those diy survey shenanigans gave us a way to talk about what it means to inquire in this way, to interrogate the virtues and limitations of traditional research methods, to just talk about research and what it means.*

*And then we decided also on “interviews” as our dig-deeper-device. It was the obvious choice – interviews, opportunities for deep, unstructured conversations with fellow students about their lived experiences, their thoughts on “engagement”, a way to test this idea of “student-desirability”. And here again, we engaged in a kind of spontaneous improv, wondering what was possible, wondering what ways we could take the traditional interview idea and…make it better, make it real, make it ours. So…walking interviews, inviting the student participants to lead us to locations on campus that resonate with them, meeting them on their turf, walking with them, drawing on the promising work coming out of the counseling community exploring “walk and talk” therapy, eliminating the confines of four walls, engaging the body, reducing formalities that curtail conversation. It’s worth exploring as a method for elicitation of genuine student stories. So that’s where we went.”*

## Methodologies: Survey “Activations” and Interviews

Our research was conducted in two stages—first, a survey distributed widely that investigated students’ perceptions about the concept of “student engagement”, and, second, a follow-up interview with a selection of survey participants that investigated potential relationships between students’ sense of academic desirability and the degree to which they feel able to “engage”. To be eligible for the survey section of our study, participants needed to be currently registered full- or part-time students studying at the undergraduate level at Ryerson University (including Chang School of Continuing Education students). To be eligible for the second part of the study, interview participants must have completed the survey and opted in to an invitation for a followup interview. We had 279 survey respondents in total and we conducted four individual one-on-one followup interviews via video-conferencing, the Covid-19 pandemic preventing us from being able to activate our original plan for walking, on-campus interviews.

### Survey “pop-ups” with the survey-audio-recording booth

Our survey was accessible to student participants in three different ways (participants were able to complete the survey only once using any one of these methods).

1. Online at their own leisure; students may have received the link via an invitation to complete the survey through any of our recruitment efforts (e.g. program email, social media, etc);
2. Online using a tablet/laptop at one of our research “activations” as detailed below;
3. Online and in audio-format inside our Survey Audio-Recording Booth at one of our research “activations” as detailed below.

At our research “activations” we set-up in various locations on campus and participants had the opportunity to participate in the survey on-the-spot including via our Survey Audio-Recording Booth. These activations, as opposed to simply sending the survey link, served a few unique purposes:

1. Generating interest in the survey, our research questions, and demystifying the research process by inviting students to ask SERT research assistants questions and learn more about undergraduate research.
2. Meeting participants where they were, potentially increasing our survey sample through a unique recruitment effort.
3. Creating the opportunity for SERT research assistants to explain the consent form in detail to potential participants.
4. Presenting the opportunity to engage with the Survey Audio-Recording-Booth, a unique survey response tool and alternative to the online-only option.

We know, most of our team being students ourselves, it can be difficult to get undergrads excited about participating in surveys. SERT began with the intuition that students have an idea surrounding engagement—whether it was vocalized/formalized or not—but we needed a way to get those ideas from them to us, as organically as possible. It seemed like the best way to do that was face to face, offering our research to students, rather than insisting they read a tome of already-decided-upon suggestions. In an effort to offer unique and alternative ways for participants to share their stories, we created a “Survey Audio-Recording Booth” (lovingly referred to as the SARB). The SARB was designed in collaboration with Ryerson student and artist Tristan Sauer who had previously created an anonymous recording telephone booth. Sauer was inspired by Toronto’s Speakers Corner video and audio booth that collected human stories and aired weekly from 1980 to 2008 on CityTV. With this idea in mind, we read about the ways in which “audio diaries” have the potential to elicit more natural and potentially affective answers from participants (Crozier & Cassell, 2015). Audio diaries also are able to capture emotion as they spontaneously emerge, without being filtered through the additional cognitive processes of writing (Cottingham & Erickson, 2019). We enlisted Sauer to manipulate an old phone as our recording device for the booth.

The SARB included an iPad/laptop computer and our rotary-phone recording device custom built by Sauer. When a participant entered the booth, they could fill in the survey in a dedicated space and then record their open-ended answer using the telephone. Although only 8 students chose to use the phone to record their answers, we nevertheless found the SARB enhanced our work in several ways. The SARB allowed us to openly present our research as it was being compiled. Having a ten-foot-tall cubicle, somewhere between a phone booth and a portal, drew eyes and interest from students. In that, the researched-upon get a firsthand look at the development of new research questions. We found that this presentation—a sharp turn from the invite-only academic research model—allowed students to acknowledge their interest in different ways. From passive (but lingering!) glances to openly approaching SERT members for explanation, we created enhanced interest in our research through face-to-face application. Furthermore, the options for students to record their survey responses in a multitude of different ways allowed our research to be felt in an embodied way. The process of picking up and speaking into a phone revealed the engagement possibility of an already familiar, embodied experience—akin to the experience of chatting with a friend or venting to a loved-one.

We found that using space to our advantage, the familiarity of campus, rather than inviting students to a sterile research space, allowed us to access students who perhaps wouldn’t have normally opened a survey invitation, including the social beings and the after-hours studiers. Using sites familiar to the subjects of our research, also lent itself to the embodied experience of our data collection. Students are accustomed to groups of administrators and students tabling in their common spaces; but our SARB felt and indeed looked different. Students took interest and many even thanked us for inviting them to fill in our survey in this format. The concept of being in the field is drawn from “world travelling” a metaphor of narrative inquiry brought to us by Maria Lugones (as described in Dewart et al., 2020). Where Lugones initially used the metaphor to define the power imbalance she brought to her research on precarious housing, we use it to cross the divide between researcher and researched-upon. Our shared identity as students became the common ground in approaching students. One even wondered how they could become involved in our research.

### Walking interviews turned digital-walks

After our survey closed, we invited participants who opted-in to a followup invitation to

join us for an interview to focus on our second set of research questions. We contacted 39 students and conducted 4 interviews in total. We acknowledge that this is not a representative sample of Ryerson students but the experience nonetheless yields rich insights about students’ experiences and perspectives as related to our research questions.

We originally designed a walking-interview method, as we were attracted to the loose and conversational benefits and potential to explore connections between belonging and place/space, among others, offered by this method. Kinney (2017) found that awkward pauses in face-to-face interviews occurred more naturally in walking interviews, giving participants time to think about their next comment; Hannah (2018) considered the ways in which pairs in a canoe experience a disrupting of the hierarchies between people in conversation (2018). Similar findings in the field of psychotherapy attest to the value of the “altered physicality” between patient and therapist; Revell and McLeod (2017) found that connections to outdoor space and side by side contact gave clients a holistic, if paradoxical, relationship to therapy—the freedom of space to explore new ideas, and the confines of support inherent in the therapeutic process. Walking interviews take the power of space away from the researcher, putting them at the whim of participants; the participant is imbued with power and can better self-advocate in spaces they are familiar with (Kinney, 2017).

#### A team that pivots: Research during COVID-19

Part of our recruitment process for SERT research assistants includes asking candidates to describe their comfort with ambiguity. The events of March 2020, on a global scale, tested our adaptability, amongst other things, in a very real way. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 13, 2020, Ryerson University announced all classes and exams would shift to an alternative/online format. All in-person events and gatherings at the university were cancelled indefinitely as well. On March 17, the university announced a shift to an essential services model, resulting in the complete closure of nearly all campus buildings and services. Students, faculty, and staff had to adjust to a new learning, teaching, and community reality, overnight.

*Posted April 2, 2020 by Tesni Ellis in “Uncertain waters”*

*“SERT adjusted, too. Our boat, while navigating unprecedented waters, remained afloat if not a bit stalled, a bit seasick even. We learned how to use Zoom and connect in new ways. We considered the pandemic’s impact on our research methodology as planned, its impact on our participants, its impact on us. We felt it all over. We continue to feel it all over.*

*But when we see each other's faces on our screens, invited suddenly into the intimacies of our homes, rooms, kitchen tables, it feels possible. We remain a team committed to students, committed to our project, and committed to our purpose. And we smile and find ways to laugh and support each other through unimaginable grief, chaos, upheaval in all the ways it is manifesting for each of us individually.*

*Our interviews may suffer – we may only have a couple participants join us on google-maps-digital-walking-interviews. But that’s okay. We understand students are just trying to make it through. And yet some interesting things can be said about student engagement and distance from the institution or feelings of belonging when we can no longer gather on campus. When we are forcibly distant rather than ideologically or emotionally distant. So, as this team is built to do, we switch directions in some ways and continue forward in others.”*

Thus we submitted revisions to our REB protocol that described our new interview design: from walking, conversational in-person interviews on campus to video/audio conference-call interviews with students wherever they were.

We approached these setbacks with good humor, writing in our interview invites: “a once-in-a-generation pandemic obviously limits our ability to do walking interviews so we're accommodating physical distancing and doing something a little bit different!” Every student who responded to our callout was able to connect with us and set up an interview. We shifted all of our processes online, utilizing Google maps to navigate Ryerson’s campus virtually. We interviewed participants over Zoom as they guided us on a digital walk of the university to reconnect with the emotions and feelings that one feels on campus. We were able to see that the participants were excited to set up an interview and were also craving social connections.

We understood, given the global crisis at hand, that our participants were not necessarily able to separate their current reality from what would have been their “regular” routine at Ryerson. And why should they be? So, we allowed space for participants to reflect on and share their current experiences in recognition of the magnitude of what was happening for all of us. Our intended interview design had included asking participants to take us to two locations of significance on campus, while a walking/conversational interview would unfold. In lieu of that, we used Google Maps and the screen-sharing tool on Zoom to re-create a “walking interview” of sorts. The interviews involved one SERT research assistant calling one participant on Zoom at a time. 3 participants gave consent for us to record their image using video and audio and the screen-sharing tool; one participant chose only to share their screen and the audio of the interview. At the beginning of the interview, the participant was asked to think of a place “on” campus they would like to begin on Google Maps. As the interview continued, participants “walked” around campus and its surrounding downtown Toronto streets and engaged in a loose conversation about belonging, student engagement, desirability, and anything else that came up for participants and research assistants during their time together.

Some of the questions we asked during these virtual interviews included:

* As we take a “virtual tour” of Ryerson campus, instead of taking a walk together, try your best to put yourself in the mindset of being at Ryerson two weeks ago. What do you feel as you remember and see - do you feel a sense of belonging, or of being desired by the university?
* Do you consider yourself an “engaged student”? What kind of behaviours or attitudes do you perform that make you an engaged student?
* How have your behaviours or attitudes changed since the coronavirus-related university shutdown?
* If you feel like an “undesirable” student, what effect does this have on your experience here? What is your feeling of desirability now?
* What are the attributes that you think Ryerson considers the model student? How do you feel you compare? Has that changed in any way since the COVID-19 outbreak affected Ryerson students?

Our method also included a pre- and post-reflection tool that SERT interviewers used to critically consider their dual role as researchers and students. The reflection tool can be found in Appendix A and interviewer reflections can be found on our website at sertgallery.ca.

An unintended benefit of carrying out digital interviews is that our research has become even more accessible. One of the main themes of our research is to ensure it's accessible for all of our participants. By connecting with students online, we were able to meet students where they were. Online interviews also gave us an opportunity to easily and quickly record meaningful reflections before and after each interview. Our immediate reactions would have been harder to attain had the interviews been in person. With the benefits came the challenges, a challenge faced during the interview process was not being able to read and pick up on body language and behavioral cues that sometimes researchers depend on. Occasionally other technical difficulties rose, some places on campuses were not digitally accessible through the application used.

# Analysis

## Our approach to analysis

SERT sees narrative as a fundamental aspect of the human experience. People tell stories to make meaning of our experiences and of the phenomena we encounter. We see our participants as narrators of their experience. So, our method coincided with that understanding, as we generated stories through unstructured interviews. We acknowledge further the nature of our interpretations that follow as a kind of subjective truth, not an objective truth. We are interested in deepening our understanding of students’ experience, their perceptions, their lives, rather than what is necessarily objectively true or what causes things to be true. It is with this perspective that we interpreted our participants' stories and responses and later situated them within the broader context of current discourses about student engagement.

*Posted on February 4, 2020 by John Hannah in “Where are we now?”*

*“And, as we wait for ethics approval, we are anxious to get started on all of this. And as we wait, we contemplate and begin designing our approach to analysis, finding our position on this in a way that coheres with our foundations and our approaches to “data collection”. There’s an obvious path here towards narrative analysis, a preference for stories as the unit of scrutiny, stories in all their context and complexity, not reduced to codes or themes. We are inspired by what for us is a kind of guiding work by Petra Munro Hendry, The Future of Narrative in which she writes: “Narrative research has held out the promise of providing a more complex and complete picture of social life. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which culture and society shape and are shaped by individual lives. It also provides what seems like a more egalitarian research relationship that honors the intersubjective modes of knowledge production,” (2007, p. 489) but we share in her struggle about how we can represent the stories we hear, make sense of them in a way that does not reduce them to parts, and do it in a way that has some trustworthiness. And we’re also perturbed by her idea that, as narrative researchers, we can become “…so busy capturing “experience” that we can’t listen. We have so many strategies for “getting it right” that the real experience is obscured,” (Hendry, 2007, p. 494).”*

## Survey Results

Our survey intended to investigate the following research question: *What are some students’ perceptions about the concept of “student engagement”?* After spending several meetings discussing, drafting, and rephrasing our survey questions to ensure clarity in our intended areas of inquiry, we had 11 questions: 10 multiple choice and one open-ended. The design of our survey questions was based on our interest in gauging how students not only define student engagement, but also how they perceive as well as experience barriers (or not) to engagement. While our main focus in analysis of this survey was on the topic of student engagement, a few of our questions presented the topic of “desirability” to students by prompting further self-reflection on whether they feel like they have characteristics of the “model student”. A copy of our survey questions can be found in Appendix B.

Tables 1 and 2 represent the summary results of our survey including the total number of respondents for our open-ended questions and representation across Ryerson University’s faculties. Faculty and year of study were the only demographic information we asked our respondents to share with us. A cross-tab analysis of the data follows in order to highlight trends between certain questions.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Table 1: Summary - Survey Responses** | |
| **Categories** | **Quantity** |
| Total Survey Respondents | 279 (100%) |
| Total Surveys Completed in Full | 274 (98%) |
| Total Q4 Open Answers | 29 (10%) |
| Total Q7 Open Answers | 191 (68%) |
| Total Q7 Coded Open Answers | 174 (62%) |
| Total Respondents Opted-In to Be Contacted for Interviews | 103 (37%) |
| Total Interviews Conducted | 4 (1%) |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 2 - Summary - Faculty-Based and Year-Based Distribution of Responses (Ryerson University)** | | | | |
| **Faculty** | **Quantity (% of Respondents Overall)** |  | **Year of Study** | **Quantity (% of Respondents Overall)** |
| Faculty of Arts | 69 (25%) |  | First Year | 75 (27%) |
| Faculty of Science | 47 (17%) |  | Second Year | 60 (22%) |
| Faculty of Engineering and Architectural Science | 42 (15%) |  | Third Year | 67 (24%) |
| Faculty of Community Services | 39 (14%) |  | Fourth Year | 59 (21%) |
| Faculty of Communication and Design | 51 (18%) |  | Fifth Year or Above | 20 (7%) |
| Ted Rogers School of Management | 31 (11%) |  | Total | 279 (100%) |
| Chang School of Continuing Education | 6 (2%) |  | | |
| Total | 279 (100%) |

**Table 3: Question 1 Results - “Pick two from the list below that best describe your idea of what "student engagement" is.....”**

Question 1 of our survey asked students to pick two options from a list of statements that would best describe their idea of what student engagement is. We generated our list based on the scholarship considering student engagement as well as the research assistants’ own perceptions of student engagement as students. This was an extensive, thoughtful process and by the end we had a list that we felt represented many of the possible options that students could pick from to give us a basic understanding of how they understand “student engagement”.

The highest ranking statement was “Getting involved in extracurricular or leadership activities on campus” as 75% (211/279) of respondents selected this option to best describe their understanding of student engagement. Actively participating in class scored second highest with 30% of students selecting academic participation as exemplifying student engagement. “Seeking opportunities for personal development and learning” was the third highest response at 28%.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 3: Q1 Results**  **Pick two from the list below that best describe your idea of what "student engagement" is.....** | | |
| **Count** | Respondent % |  |
| **211** | 75.60% | Getting involved in extracurricular or leadership activities on campus |
| **86** | 30.80% | Actively participating in classes |
| **79** | 28.31% | Seeking opportunities for personal development and learning |
| **53** | 18.99% | Accessing resources for success on campus |
| **38** | 13.62% | Having an active social life |
| **37** | 13.26% | Getting a job on campus |
| **31** | 11.11% | Applying what I'm learning to my pursuits off-campus |
| **19** | 6.81% | Getting good grades |
| **8** | 2.86% | Hustling all the time |
| **279** | Respondents |  |
| **562** | Responses |  |

**Table 4: Question 2 Results - “Do you feel like an engaged student”?**

Question 2 offered a more personal inquiry into whether respondents *feel* like engaged students. Out of the 279 respondents of the survey, 57% (160/279) answered “No” to feeling like an engaged student while 45% (125/279) answered “Yes”.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 4: Q2 Results  Do you feel like an "engaged" student? | | |
| Count | Respondent % | Answer |
| 160 | 57.34% | No |
| 125 | 44.80% | Yes |
| 279 | Respondents | |

**Table 5: Question 3 Results - “Do you feel good about your level of engagement?”**

Question 3 asked students to self-assess how they feel about their level of engagement. 57% of respondents (158/279) did not feel good about their level of engagement and 45% (125/279) feel good about their level of engagement. We do not fully understand the way in which these responses correlate to the similar frequencies expressed in Question 2.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 5: Q3 Results  Do you feel good about your level of engagement? | | |
| Count | Respondent % | Answer |
| 158 | 56.63% | No |
| 125 | 44.80% | Yes |
| 279 | Respondents | |

**Table 6: Question 4 Results - Do you experience any barriers to being an engaged student? Check all that apply.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 6: Q4 Results  Do you experience any of these barriers to being an engaged student? Check all that apply. | | |
| Count | Respondent % |  |
| 148 | 53.04% | My commute |
| 144 | 51.61% | Too many off-campus responsibilities |
| 126 | 45.16% | I am too focused on my academics |
| 124 | 44.44% | A feeling of disconnectedness from the institution |
| 108 | 38.70% | I'm shy and/or an introvert |
| 94 | 33.69% | I am not aware of the opportunities |
| 58 | 20.78% | I don't feel included and/or represented |
| 52 | 18.63% | There are no involvement opportunities I am interested in |
| 35 | 12.54% | The idea of engaging makes me uncomfortable |
| 29 | 10.39% | Other (please describe): |
| 23 | 8.24% | I am not interested in what I am learning in class |
| 10 | 3.58% | I don't feel any barriers |
| 7 | 2.50% | Opportunities are not physically accessible to me |
| 279 | Respondents |  |
| 958 | Responses |  |

In order to learn what impacts students’ ability to engage, we asked students to identify any barriers to engagement they may experience. Our list of possible barriers included: commuting, too many off-campus responsibility, focusing on academics, feeling disconnected from the institution, being shy/introverted, being unaware of the opportunities, feeling excluded of unrepresented, lack of involved opportunities based on interests, opportunities being physically inaccessible, and not experiencing any barriers. There was also an option to describe “Other” barriers with an open-answer, and those results are described in detail below. Overall, the answers provided related to the list we had originally provided and students used the space to expand upon the barriers and describe their experiences.

“My commute” was the highest ranking barrier as 53% of respondents (148/279) indicated that their travel to campus impacts their ability to engage. Having too many off-campus responsibilities ranked the second highest barrier experienced by students with 52% (144/279) respondents. The results also showed that students feel that focusing on academics was a barrier to engagement, as this ranked the third highest barrier to students by 45% (126/279) respondents. Similarly, students also felt a disconnectedness to the university and this was expressed as a barrier by 44% (124/279) of respondents.

When students took the opportunity to describe their barriers to us in their own words, the responses became more discrete, but still maintained some of the wider trends we recognized through the survey. Above all, responses we received alluded to students having a poor sense of community with the university or lacking the personality traits or interest necessary to engage. Some students cited personal reasons, social anxiety and cultural differences limiting their ability to engage. Another describes a lack of on-campus events people can participate in, describing that as “a symptom of commuter culture.” Inaccessibility—that is accounting for opportunities to engage that are not inclusive, not representative of the respondents identity, or not available at accessible times—was also alluded to as a defining barrier to engagement. One student claimed they “don’t have time because of academics” while another said that most activities, conducted during business hours, simply do not fit in their work-school balance.

There were many barriers that were described or implied throughout the open-ended answers. Students surveyed articulated that engagement is something that happens on campus, and so being able to access Ryerson physically and spend time in the space is important, especially for extracurricular activity and developing a sense of community. One student mentioned specifically that “Student engagement to me is for [students] who live [on campus] and have [spare] time.” Given that the two most common barriers to engagement in Q4 were students’ commute and off-campus responsibilities, this on-campus emphasis limits further which students can be a part of engagement, or at least which have the belief that engagement is possible for them. Additional barriers expressed in the open-ended response include issues of shyness and being a mature student, which are also expressed in Q4 and were reflected in our interviews with student participants.

**Table 7: Question 5 Results - “To what degree do you feel like you have the characteristics of a model student - the kind of student that the university finds desirable?”**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 7: Q5 Results  To what degree do you feel like you have the characteristics of a model student - the kind of student that the university finds desirable? | | |
| Count | Respondent % |  |
| 172 | 61.64% | I have some of these characteristics |
| 90 | 32.25% | I have many of these characteristics |
| 15 | 5.37% | I have none of these characteristics |
| 12 | 4.30% | I have all of these characteristics |
| 279 | Respondents |  |

62% (172/279) of the respondents believe they have some characteristics of a model student and 32% (90/279) believed they have many of these characteristics. Of note, 15 students (5.37%) reported feeling like they have none of these characteristics. We did not define any of these characteristics for students in the survey.

**Table 8: Question 6 Results - “Do you ever feel like an undesirable student?”**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 8: Q6 Results  Do you ever feel like an undesirable student? | | |
| Count | Respondent % |  |
| 143 | 51.25% | Rarely |
| 79 | 28.31% | Frequently |
| 59 | 21.14% | Never |
| 10 | 3.58% | Always |
| 279 | Respondents | |

We learned that 51% of respondents *rarely*feel like undesirable students (143/279) while 21% of students *never* feel like an undesirable student. 28% of respondents *frequently* feel like undesirable students (79/279) and approximately 4% of students surveyed disclosed that they *always* feel like an undesirable student (10/279).

**Question 7 Results - “Please elaborate on any of the above questions and your answers. For example, what do you think when you hear the term "student engagement"? What do you think makes a student desirable to the university?”**

Analysis of Question 7, the open-ended question, is provided in detail below after we describe our coding process and cross-tab analysis.

### Cross Tab Analysis of Questions

Based on the findings above, we cross-referenced four questions to allow us to identify trends in the data. When selecting the questions to cross-reference, we traced back to our research question in order to ground us in our intended inquiry. After reviewing the data, we determined the questions to cross-reference. Our cross-tab analysis was guided by a two-pronged approach to our research question, as we sought to find if students’ definition of engagement impacts how they feel about their level of engagement. We explored the following: How is student engagement defined by those who do feel engaged (and by those who don’t?)? (Q2+Q1); and what relationships exist between barriers experienced and how students feel about their engagement level (Q2+Q3 and Q3+Q4)?

#### How is student engagement defined by students who do feel engaged? Those who don’t?

Results showed that out of the 125 students (See Table 5) that had chosen “yes” to feeling like they are engaged students, 70% (87/125) of them said that student engagement is defined as getting involved in extracurricular or leadership activities on campus. Out of the 160 students that answered “no” to feeling like an engaged student, 80% (128/160) students responded the same, suggesting that regardless of engagement levels, students have a dominant understanding of what engagement “is”.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 9: Q2+Q1 Cross-Tab** | | | | | | | |
|  | | **Q2. Do you feel like an "engaged" student?** | | | | | |
| Yes | | No | | Total | |
| Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent |
| **Q1.**  **Pick two from the list below that best describe your idea of what "student engagement" is.....** | Getting involved in extracurricular or leadership activities on campus | 87 | 34.80 % | 128 | 40.00 % | 215 | 37.72 % |
| Actively participating in classes | 40 | 16.00 % | 47 | 14.69 % | 87 | 15.26 % |
| Accessing resources for success on campus | 19 | 7.60 % | 35 | 10.94 % | 54 | 9.47 % |
| Having an active social life | 19 | 7.60 % | 19 | 5.94 % | 38 | 6.67 % |
| Getting a job on campus | 16 | 6.40 % | 21 | 6.56 % | 37 | 6.49 % |
| Applying what I'm learning to my pursuits off-campus | 15 | 6.00 % | 17 | 5.31 % | 32 | 5.61 % |
| Applying what I'm learning to my pursuits off-campus | 15 | 6.00 % | 17 | 5.31 % | 32 | 5.61 % |
| Getting good grades | 10 | 4.00 % | 10 | 3.13 % | 20 | 3.51 % |
| Hustling all the time | 6 | 2.40 % | 2 | 0.63 % | 8 | 1.40 % |
| Total | 250 | 100.00 % | 320 | 100.00 % | 570 | 100.00 % |
|  | | | | | | | |

#### Do students who feel engaged feel good about their level of engagement? What about students who don’t feel engaged?

Results showed that out of the 125 students that answered “yes” to feeling like an engaged student, 75% (95/125) of them said they feel good about their level of engagement while 25% (31/126) said “no” they don’t feel good about their level of engagement. This indicates that even students who identify as engaged consider themselves perhaps “not engaged enough.” Out of the 161 students that answered “no” to feeling like an engaged student, 81% (131/161) answered that “no” they do not feel good about their level of engagement.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 10: Q2+Q3 Cross-Tab** | | | | | | | |
|  | | **Q2. Do you feel like an "engaged" student?** | | | | | |
| Yes | | No | | Total | |
| Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent |
| **Q3. 3. Do you feel good about your level of engagement?** | Yes | 95 | 75.40 % | 30 | 18.63 % | 125 | 43.55 % |
| No | 31 | 24.60 % | 131 | 81.37 % | 161 | 56.45 % |
| Total | 126 | 100.00 % | 161 | 100.00 % | 287 | 100.00 % |

#### What barriers do students experience and how do they feel about their engagement?

In order to investigate the factors that are impacting how students feel about their level of engagement, we also cross-referenced Question 3 “Do you feel good about your level of engagement” with Question 4, which asked students to identify barriers to their engagement. The results showed that out of the 125 students that answered “yes” to feeling good about their level of engagement, 47% (59/125) cited their commute as a barrier to engagement, 47% (59/125) indicated that they have too many off-campus responsibilities, 40% (51/125) selected academics as a barrier, and lastly, 28% (36/125) indicated that a feeling of disconnectedness from the institution is a barrier to engagement.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 11: Q3+Q4** | | | | | | | |
|  | | **Q3. 3. Do you feel good about your level of engagement?** | | | | | |
| Yes | | No | | Total | |
| Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent |
| **Q4. 4. Do you experience any of these barriers to being an engaged student? Check all that apply.** | Too many off-campus responsibilities | 59 | 17.05 % | 86 | 13.94 % | 145 | 15.06 % |
| A feeling of disconnectedness from the institution | 36 | 10.40 % | 88 | 14.26 % | 124 | 12.88 % |
| I am too focused on my academics | 51 | 14.74 % | 76 | 12.32 % | 127 | 13.19 % |
| My commute | 59 | 17.05 % | 91 | 14.75 % | 150 | 15.58 % |
| I'm shy and/or an introvert | 36 | 10.40 % | 73 | 11.83 % | 109 | 11.32 % |
| I don't feel included and/or represented | 19 | 5.49 % | 39 | 6.32 % | 58 | 6.02 % |
| I am not aware of the opportunities | 28 | 8.09 % | 66 | 10.70 % | 94 | 9.76 % |
|  | **Total** | **346** | **100.00 %** | **617** | **100.00 %** | **963** | **100.00 %** |

For the 158 students who answered “no” to feeling like an engaged student (See Table 5), 57% (91/158) said they consider their commute is a barrier to engagement, 55% (88/158) cited that feeling disconnected from the institution impacted their engagement, 54% (86/158) said they have too many off campus responsibilities and 48% said that being too focused on academics prevented them from engaging. So, we saw that both those who feel good about their engagement levels and those who don’t feel good about it experience the same barriers to engagement overall, with those who don’t feel good citing the same barriers, but at higher rates.

### “What do you think when you hear the term student engagement? What do you think makes a student desirable to the university?” Open-Ended Survey Question Responses

#### Coding Process

The coding process for the survey’s open ended question (*Please elaborate on any of the above questions and your answers. For example, what do you think when you hear the term "student engagement"? What do you think makes a student desirable to the university?*) began with each of the researchers identifying key themes across the answers to develop a rough idea of potential codes. Coming together we found that we identified similar themes throughout, though our language differed in many cases (e.g. “success” and “academic performance” both being used in cases where the student discussed the importance of grades). From these rough sketches, we developed an official list of codes and subcodes (See Appendix C for our coding dictionary). There were 183 written responses to the open-ended question and 8 audio recording responses, representing 68% of our total survey respondents (191/279).

After determining and defining the codes and subcodes, two team members independently re-coded the data using our coding scheme. Each of the codes was identified by whether it was being used in the student’s answer to describe the nature of student engagement, desirability, or without specification (general). We coded based on what was written in the text itself, not extrapolating any other themes we may see as being implied by the answer. We then compared our results to determine our inter-rater reliability (IRR). We had an initial IRR of 59.7%, and re-coded collaboratively to find the discrepancies. Moving through the data, the majority of the differences were due to clerical errors and were otherwise easily remedied.

Two instances where our interpretations of the codes differed greatly were concerning “Belonging” and “Image.” “Belonging” was used by one coder when a student referred to anything related to being in community on campus. We decided to instead use it for when an affinity for campus was emphasized. “Image” was being used by one invigilator to refer to both the institution's desire for students that publicly make the university look good, as well as students needing to look good on campus itself. We decided to use this additional interpretation of image in our coding and adjusted our definition accordingly. We also added the subcode “Giving Back” in “Institutional Values” while re-coding.

We concluded the coding process by organizing the results into charts with the top 5 most used definitions for engagement, desirability, and general answers. The following results include subcodes. Though we received 191 responses (183 written, 8 audio from the SARB), we only coded 174, as some responses were too vague to interpret or not related to the question (e.g. providing an email or nonsensical comment). The following percentages come from the total number of coded answers (174) rather than the total number of answers (191).

#### Q7 Results: Students’ Definitions of Student Engagement and Desirability

**Table 12: Top 5 Definitions of “Student Engagement” in Q7**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 12: Top 5 Definitions of “Student Engagement”** | | | |
|  | **Number of Instances** | **Code and Description** | **Representative Example (Quote)** |
| 1 | 58  (33%) | Extracurricular | “When I think of student engagement I typically think of extra curricular groups, participating in student unions or course unions that go beyond just class participation.” |
| 2 | 21 (12%) | Effort | “Student engagement: active participation at Ryerson and with Ryerson affiliated programs, services, activities that are not only academically related.” |
| 3 | 20 (11%) | Belonging | “student engagement looks like a student who actively TRIES to get to know the community around them, no matter the program, the year, areas of interest, etc., and looks like a student who actively seeks new connections and opportunities.” |
| 4 | 17 (9%) | Access | “There are many barriers as a student who has 2 hours of travel a day, works 30 hours a week and is a parent. I try my best to finish assignments and join student groups but everything that an engaged student needs to do requires time that I do not have.” |
| 5 | 16 (9%) | Opportunity & Resource Seeking Behaviours | “I believe Ryerson has many opportunities that increase student engagement but due to my commute, work and family commitments I am unable to stay on campus for long.” |
|  | 174  (100%) | Total Open-Ended Responses Coded |  |

Engagement is defined overwhelmingly by the code “Extracurricular Activity,” with 33.33% (58/174) of respondents incorporating it into their answer. Also important were notions of “Belonging” (11%), “Access” (9%) and “Opportunity & Resource Seeking Behaviour” (9%), all of which require action on the part of the student. All of these definitions are relational, centred around who they can be on campus, how they fit in and what programming they can connect with. Engagement is also defined by “Effort” (12%), or the capacity for work, which is in contrast with the other codes as it is an intrinsic trait, but it is the one “Personality” subcode that is assessed most by a student’s actions.

**Table 13: Top 5 Definitions of “Desirability” in Q7**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 13: Top 5 Definitions of “Desirability”** | | | |
|  | **Number of Instances** | **Code and Description** | **Representative Example (Quote)** |
| 1 | 34 (19%) | Academic Performance | “University wants "smart" students to graduate from their programs, while leaving students that struggle in their courses in the shadows.” |
| 2 | 28 (16%) | Effort | “I know I'm still a desirable student because I am always trying to stay afloat, and sometimes trying is the best a person can do, but my brain does not always feel the same way about my 'desirability'.” |
| 3 | 18 (10%) | Extracurricular Activities | “I feel like a desirable student is one that does well in their program, goes to sporting events and other campus activities, that actively encourage people to attend our university.” |
| 4 | 13  (7%) | Image | “A desirable student to the uni is one who brings them attention and money and statistics, like "X people used Y facility, woo hoo look at what a great university we are for having so much useful facilities". students that do things that are linkedin-post-worthy are also desirable” |
| 5 | 10 (5%) | Social | “I feel like desirable students may be those who are more extroverted, as they are the ones who get recognized more often.” |
|  | 174  (100%) | Total Open-Ended Responses Coded |  |

Desirability was defined most by “Academic Performance” with 19.54% (34/174) of respondents suggesting that students feel the institution most desires academically successful students. Although “Extracurricular Activity” was referenced 18 times (10.34%), the rest of the most common codes were “Effort” (16.09%), “Image” (7.47%), and “Social Personality Traits” (5.75%), which suggest human qualities define one’s “desirability”. The student who receives excellent grades, gives the school a positive image and has a social personality is not a profile that every student can fit into. This suggests that students feel that there is a certain kind of student who is desirable, that desirability is not accessible to everyone, and that desirability is determined by traits largely intrinsic to the individual.

**Table 14: Top 5 General Definitions of “Student Engagement” and “Desirability” in Q7**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 14: Top 5 General Definitions of “Student Engagement” and “Desirability” (when it wasn’t explicitly named as one or the other)** | | | |
|  | **Number of Instances** | **Code and Description** | **Representative Example (Quote)** |
| 1 | 30  (17%) | Extracurricular activity | “Join clubs, boot camps or extracurricular activities or you won't succeed.” |
| 2 | 16  (9%) | Effort | “Just people being involved with their community and making an active effort to their education and university and even peers.” |
| 3 | 9  (5%) | Peer Connection | “Just people being involved with their community and making an active effort to their education and university and even peers.” |
| 4 | 6  (3%) | Opportunities and Resource Seeking Behaviours | “Having access to all opportunities available, and being properly notified of those said opportunities. Also using those opportunities to gain skills for me to succeed.” |
| 5 | 6 (3%) | Belonging | “I think it means being part of the Ryerson community in some capacity. It can be done through being part of clubs and societies on campus, or simply making friends in the campus that makes a positive helpful environment.” |
|  | 174 (100%) | Total Open-Ended Responses Coded | |

The top codes of the General category are “Extracurricular Activity” (17.24%), “Effort” (9.2%), “Peer Connection” (5.17%), “Opportunities and Resource Seeking Behaviours” (3.45%), and “Belonging” (3.45%). The similarity of this list to the top definitions of student engagement suggests that the responses coded generally were often answers to the first prompt of the survey’s open-ended question, *what do you think when you hear the term "student engagement"?* rather than the second prompt concerning desirability.

#### Engagement vs Desirability

When viewing students’ definitions of Engagement and Desirability specifically, the emerging theme is that desirability is defined in terms of qualities the student intrinsically possesses, while engagement is based on the actions that the student performs. This suggests that students’ feel that it is possible for any student to be engaged, but not all can be desirable.

The code “Effort” is the second most common code used in definitions of both desirability and engagement. This suggests that students have the belief that putting in hard work is core to both being engaged and being desired. While this code was defined as an intrinsic personality trait, it is the one trait of the four (also including “Social”, “Knowledge” and “Interest”) that requires outward performance. “Effort” thus overlaps between action and trait, and can be seen as the link between engagement and desirability.

The majority of the answers place the burden of engagement on the student to foster and access, as demonstrated in the following quote “I feel like an engaged student is someone who is able to connect with the institution and the way they conduct themselves as a student.” This idea falls into the neoliberal definitions of engagement (Zepke 2015; Macfarlane and Tomlinson 2017) with the majority students having the impression that they have the independent responsibility to make themselves engaged. A neoliberal conception of student engagement also emerged in the coders’ struggle to differentiate between “access” and “effort” in many of the answers. While there are some answers that articulate the university’s responsibility in providing students opportunities to engage, (“I don't believe I meet the criteria of being an engaged student because I am not adequately provided opportunities to become one. I believe our community should provide us with more opportunities to participate.”), the vast majority of responses place the responsibility to engage on the individual student rather than the institution.

Surprisingly, some of the most revealing responses proved the trickiest to code. For example, one student’s response, “i feel being a mature student i am an undesirable student, my lack of engagement leads to feelings of being undesirable, and feeling undesireable *[sic]* leads to avoiding engagement,” does not fall within any of the coding categories.

However, it captures an example of a possible model of the relationship between engagement & desirability that is felt by students, which we called the “vicious cycle.” This model became more complicated after the followup interviews.

## Interview Results

In keeping with our ethos of not assuming we could collect any one “truth” from our participants and not to reduce stories to objects (ever inspired by Petra Munro Hendry whose 2007 “Future of Narrative” has become an important part of the SERT toolkit), we crafted a method to analyze our four interviews that involved us each viewing the interview recording and transcript individually, looking at each student and considering what they showed us, what they said and what they did not say, and then coming together to discuss what stood out, what surprised us, and in what ways they were elaborating on any number of topics. We pushed assumptions aside and yet we talked at length about the way each interviewee also uniquely impacted the narrative that revealed itself in each interview. Our Google Maps “walking tours” didn’t end up revealing much to note about space and belonging on campus, and yet it was still a useful observation on the way conversations unfold and the ways we fill or manipulate space and time when we’re in deep thought or moments of connection. In each of our SERT sessions to consider our interview data, we practiced “broadening”, “burrowing”, and “storying” the experiences shared with us - a process Kim (2016) calls “flirting” with the data (p. 206).

### Individual Interview Results

**Participant #1: “There's no hobby, no other human process that I spend more time doing than school.”**

Our first interview highlighted a student who was torn between prioritizing their studious endeavors and building relationships. This student spends most of their time studying and explained that this prevented them from engaging and connecting with people on campus. They express seeing “a direct correlation between like, my happiness and how much I talk to people”. Daunted by this pressure to build relationships, they feel they missed their chance to connect with students in their own program because they formed most of their first year friendships with other students living in residence.

This student understands that Ryerson has a lot to offer, but the concern of maintaining grades, ensuring they graduate on time and secure a co-op placement remains at what they describe as the “forefront of their minds”. While they feel academically “desirable”, they also felt like the opportunity to increase academic desirability was fostered more for first year students. The question of desirability for this student did not transcend beyond academics, but engagement certainly did.

To this student, being an engaged student signified having a relationship with the university to some degree. “I feel like you need to know what the university is doing for the community or for its community members.” By assessing their own level of investment in the university’s work, the student said they are “vaguely on a line of knowing what's happening with the university.” Engagement signifies a personal affinity to the university’s reputation as well, similar to how they took ownership of their academic pursuits, they did not attribute their level of engagement to a lack of opportunities offered by Ryerson. Instead, having to prioritize academics impacted their level of engagement and subsequently their level of belonging.

**Participant #2: “So I've been, generally been, a helper in my classes.”**

Our second interview revealed a student’s desire for connection. Beginning with our very first interview question, where they were asked to use google maps to show us a place on campus of significance to them, they brought us to the South Bond Building because it’s “been good for seeing people”—fitting, for a student who feels most desired in class. As a mature student, with a background and a passion for their field (urban planning) they are uniquely equipped and self-identify as a “helper” to their peers and even professors. They are keen to learn and ask questions and also expressed a desire to create a space in class for their classmates to contribute too.

Next, our participant led us to the library building where the computer labs are. The conversation shifted to the topic of engagement, and what emerges is the students' excitement and eagerness to connect with their peers outside of class coming into conflict with the unmitigated stresses of battling financial debt, living alone and supporting themself. They describe that they don’t have the resources to be engaged. It is clear they have given a lot of thought to the possibility of engaging with Ryerson, mentioning they would have loved to join a maker club or the concert band. But the anticipation of having to make concessions financially, in service of engagement, is in their words: “paralyzing”. The conversation turns to the pandemic. How does Ryerson’s shut down affect a student who already feels disengaged? The participant maintains a hopeful outlook, returning to positive experiences with faculty and classmates that ground them. Their commitment to school is unwavering, even mentioning they stayed up until 5 am the previous night working on a group project. And they're here, participating in an interview unrelated to their course work, eager to help the researchers as fellow students, carefully expressing not wanting to “derail the interview by getting off topic”; they want to share, to connect.

**Participant #3: “I'm just always looking for, like, opportunities”**

This interview tells the story of a student who found their place at Ryerson and believes that a place exists for every student at Ryerson, they just need to take the initiative to engage. The participant easily locates the Ryerson Career and Co-op centre and the Tri-Mentoring Program office as the places they feel at home on campus. The participant speaks self-assuredly about their work as an RU Leadership assistant. The experience has provided them with a sense of belonging and purpose. Here, tucked away in POD 54, they can feel like their truest self. This student was introduced to the world of student affairs and “engagement” through their older sister, a recent Ryerson grad. Our participant’s sister had worked at Ryerson’s Career and Co-op centre for a couple of years, opening the door for the participant in turn to view it as a welcome place. The participant describes themself as more engaged than most students because of their work this past year at Ryerson. RU Leadership gives them an intimate understanding of the benefits students experience as a result of engaging and the throughline of the interview seems to be the participants’ interest in finding new ways to motivate students to take advantage of the opportunities Ryerson provides. The interviewee views engagement as a student’s capacity to go the extra mile, to seek out opportunities for advancement the university has to offer. They find opportunities for engagement in their newsletters and emails, a channel of communication they diligently check while recognizing not every student prioritizes these emails. Due to the pandemic, the participants' work and school responsibilities have transitioned entirely to an online platform, but this hasn’t compromised their level of engagement with the school. They were engaged long before the arrival of COVID-19 and make it clear they will remain engaged long after.

**Participant #4: “In order to feel like I belong somewhere I have to have some good, meaningful, and unique relationships”**

This student told us their story of first-year anxieties, self-criticism and the importance of engagement to be meaningful. It takes a couple moments for the student to find the Student Learning Centre on Google Maps. Our virtual interview takes once familiar routines, like making your way to class, to online territory. Once oriented at the top of the SLC steps, in front of the library, the building's eerie emptiness is felt; the doors to the library are closed. The participant spends the majority of their time at Ryerson in the library studying but it doesn’t provide them a sense of belonging. They feel a part of the Ryerson community a few steps outside of the library doors, towards the entrance to the SLC, among student groups and people studying, around the Starbucks they feel a part of something bigger. The student views belonging as forging “good meaningful and unique relationships with the people around them”. The conversation moves to the question of engagement and there’s a pause before the participant answers. They seem somewhat hesitant to claim the title of “engaged student”. Although admitting they have tried to join some student groups and are a part of the pre-medical society, they feel like they might only be “semi-engaged”. Here, a point of connection is uncovered between interviewer and interviewee, who as it turns out, both belong to the same program (biomedical sciences) and the same student group (the pre-medical society). The participant expresses a desire to further engage at Ryerson, striving for an opportunity to contribute towards the Ryerson community, citing mentorship as a possible way of doing so. The conversation shifted to a less optimistic note, when asked what Ryerson might consider a “desirable student” and if they consider themselves to be one. The student stated that they do not feel like a desirable student because a desirable student is one who is “formidable” and can manage their time well, articulate their ideas and be steps ahead in planning for their future.

### Themes and Connections Across Interviews

At the outset of our research, we hypothesised that if students feel like they are desired by the university, they might be more likely to be engaged students. But the data collected in our research suggests otherwise. All but one of the students (3 out of 4) participating in our interviews identified feeling like a desirable student or at least in diligent pursuit of those qualities (academic persistence). But it's worth noting, the student (Participant #4) who didn’t feel like they met the definition was admittedly quite self critical: “I would consider myself an undesirable student. But I think the main reason I would do that is because I'm a little too tough on myself, right? Like, my friends told me that a lot, right?”

Despite feeling like desirable students, three of our four interview participants didn’t feel like they engaged enough with the university. This is consistent with our survey results, where again most students, 57% of respondents (158/279) do not feel good about their level of engement. It is worth noting that students, like these, who agree to participate in voluntary research interviews, may typify a more “engaged” approach and highlights the difficulty in representing the stories of more typically “disengaged” students, since they would presumably be less likely to participate in interviews like this. However, we also wonder whether the call-in nature of our interviews offers the potential for typically disengaged students to access more opportunities to share their stories.

#### Theme 1: The Pursuit of Academic Desirability

If we compare Participant #3, the only student who articulated feeling both like a desirable student and one who is content with their level of engagement (saying “compared to most students, I am more engaged...”) with Participant #4 whose responses tell the opposite story, mentioning they feel like an “undesirable student” and only “semi-engaged”, it tells us something about the role the pursuit of academic desirability has in students' lives. A common theme of Participant #3’s interview is their belief that every student is capable of accessing engagement opportunities. However, upon further reflection they remember in their first year of university, before they started working on campus, attempts at engagement were fraught with anxiety, “I was like, "I don't know, should I be even taking time for, like, this event?" I was—I wanted to attend a conference—but I was having so many last-minute thoughts about whether I should attend or not because I'm like, I was playing, I felt guilty, should I be doing my work right now or should I be attending this event? Like, how's this going to help me? Should I—like all those just mixed feelings.” This mix of conflicting feelings can be seen in participant #4 as well who feels being “an undesirable student has affected my level of engagement with the campus, because, you know, I don't think that I'm scheduling my time or being as efficient as I can. And as a consequence of that, I don't think that I'm, one, searching for the appropriate student groups that I could join that would be of interest to me. And then, two, setting aside the appropriate time to, let's say ferment myself within those groups and then also to make a valid — well not a valid, but a meaningful contribution.”

#### Theme 2: The Tug o’ War Between Academics and Co-Curricular Engagement

All of the interview participants make reference to the subtle force the pressure to remain a “desirable student” can have in drawing students away from co-curricular engagement opportunities. Notably, Participant #1 said: “I mean I definitely spend most of my time like doing school. Like, there's no other hobby. There's no other human process that I spend more time doing than school.” This sentiment was echoed by Participant #4, who described themself as only “semi engaged”, spending the majority of their time as a student studying in the library (which, of course, is its own kind of engagement).

Participant #2 describes several barriers to their engagement that extend beyond academic demands, saying “I don’t feel like I have the resources to be engaged. I do admit that I have very, very high levels of daily stress just in terms of managing my own life outside of school, because I'm 28, I live alone. I pay my own rent. For the first half of the year I did — I was serving part-time as well, but I had to drop that because I couldn't handle both things, running back and forth between work, campus, home, making sure that I was taking care of my daily life in terms of exercising properly, eating properly, doing my dishes.”

#### Theme 3: “It’s all about grit” *-* Personality and Academic Desirability

Almost all participants made reference to innate personality characteristics that make students desirable. However, only two students made direct reference to academic performance and personality in measuring their sense of desirability. These findings were consistent with our open-ended survey responses where trends indicated that while all students can be engaged, only some students who have specific characteristics can be considered “desirable”. Interestingly, while academic structure (study groups, co-op/internships, good rapport with faculty, support from faculty) can foster desirability, how students apply their personal traits to their academics (being more extroverted, disciplined, focused, outspoken in class) defines academic desirability. Participant #2 felt that academic desirability was shaped by faculty expectations, and took active leadership roles which they attributed to their extroverted nature. For Participant #3, the personal determination and initiative to actively seek out opportunities for engagement was a consistently distinguishing feature of the desirable student, who must do more than excel academically. Interestingly, Participant #4, who did not identify as a desirable student and expressed a sense of self-criticism, felt that a desirable student was one who was able to “articulate their ideas well”, was organized, and planned their future endeavors but not in an “aggressive way”. It was striking to researchers that this interviewee admitted to having limited knowledge and exposure to Ryerson as a first year student, but presented a heightened awareness and specificity in naming the characteristics of a desirable student.

#### Theme 4: Nuancing the Concept of Belonging

Desirability adds a level of complexity to our ideas of belonging as an outcome of engagement - it’s not a clear pathway. Based on what we unearthed from our interviews, we extended this model by questioning if a sense of belonging also results in increased feelings of desirability. Our interviews yielded interesting insights on the impact that desirability has on students’ sense of belonging. Two of our four interview participants felt academically desirable, though to different degrees (Participant #2 felt certain of their academic desirability while Participant #1 felt somewhat certain of their desirability). Interestingly, the student who considered themselves a desirable student experienced a strong sense of belonging to their academic program, while the student who wasn’t as sure about their desirability experienced a sense of isolation from their academic program.

For the students who didn’t attach desirability to academics but rather their level of engagement and personality traits, the trend was similar. Participant #3, who strongly believed their engagement is what made them desirable, felt a sense of belonging in the spaces and groups that they occupied on campus. Their high level of engagement not only resulted in a sense of belonging but also a sense of desirability. In contrast, Participant #4, who did not consider themselves desirable, thought of themselves as “semi-engaged” due to their involvement in some extracurricular activities. For this student, they felt both anxious for and hopeful towards the potential of belonging.

According to the interviews, it can be said that there is a connection between belonging and desirability. While engagement is believed to increase a student's sense of belonging, desirability can be considered an additional complicating layer. Students who considered themselves desirable (Participants #2& #3) felt like they belonged, while students who were unsure of their desirability (Participant #1) or did not consider themselves desirable (Participant #4) experienced isolation (Participant #1) or uncertainty in their ability to belong (Participant 4). In this way, desirability can offer a more nuanced understanding to the concept of belonging as it is commonly understood.

# Discussion

We know the traditional model of student engagement is commonly defined as “both the time and the energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and effort institutions devote to effective educational practices” (Kuh et al., 2007, p. 2). Student success and increased feelings of belonging are the positive outcomes of this time, energy and effort. The ideas expressed in this definition inform the lens that institutions work through when developing programming to increase student success, and is the ideological backbone of the NSSE for example. The main problem for those who work through this lens is increasing student access to and awareness of those “educationally purposeful activities”.

However, we wondered whether this definition captured the complexity of how student engagement really works or how it really feels, even. When presented with Kuh et al.’s (2007) definition we also considered Zepke’s (2015) call to consider engagement “beyond the mainstream” and to remain critical of the ways in which “engagement” is commodified at institutions that may serve and reinforce neoliberal ideologies. Finally, we wanted to know if students’ personal understandings of student engagement reflected what is discussed in the literature.

In the survey we primarily were interested in getting a base understanding of students’ thoughts about student engagement and desirability or “the model student”. As discussed, our survey respondents overwhelmingly defined student engagement as “extracurricular activity on campus” and “desirability” was defined in terms of academic grades and persistence. In the discussion that follows, when we refer to “student engagement” as “co-curricular engagement” we do so to clarify this distinction provided by our survey respondents. In the literature, for example, academic and in-class experiences are also examples of “engagement” so we want to make this distinction clear for the purposes of our work with this idea of desirability.

## Student engagement understood along a continuum

Question 7 of our survey asked students “what do you think when you hear the term “student engagement?” The question elicited very diverse responses. As much as instinctively we want to find some kind of pattern in our data that could provide it with meaning, the question yielded such varied responses that we felt the best way to analyze the data would be to highlight its multiplicity. Our continuum displays the spectrum of students' responses ranging from more open, broad conceptions of engagement to more narrow, closed, and even critical definitions.

At the top, open definitions include descriptions of engagement: from the catch-all term used to describe “all the activities of a student” to engagement as “an active sense of belonging, community and shared purpose on campus”.

The centre of the continuum focuses on more traditional understandings of engagement like “how well an individual can participate in their respective classrooms, their community, and social groups”. This answer blends what Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) describe: “The measurement of student learning focuses mainly on what is visible and easily observable (e.g. class attendance; asking a question in class) as opposed to forms of engagement that may be more difficult to observe and record (e.g. note taking, listening or thinking)” (p. 12).

At the bottom of the continuum we included students' criticisms of engagement at Ryerson. Their evaluations of student engagement reflect a common critique of engagement, referred to as “engagement as opposition”, which includes “defying the conventional boundaries and expectations of institutional student engagement initiatives” (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017, p. 17).

You’ll see embedded in the continuum drawings, doodles. Question 7 holds particular significance to us because it’s a question we asked ourselves during the preliminary stages of developing our research subject. Instead of solely writing what came to mind when we considered “student engagement”, we drew little sketches. Upon examining our participants' responses to this question we revisited our own. Our drawings varied quite a bit, each of them painting engagement in a different light, not unlike the variations of the participants' responses. We thought that the addition of our responses could add a multidimensional element to what would otherwise be a standard continuum. It also serves as an essential reminder of our status as researchers, students and peers of each of the participants in our study. Every question we pose is a question we attempt to answer ourselves.

**Image 1 - Student Engagement Defined - A Continuum**Image description: In our “model” or “continuum” of student engagement, a wiggly line stretches vertically along the centre of the image with arrow points at each end; the heading “Broadly Defined” is seen at the top of the arrow, and “Narrowly Defined” at the bottom. Drawings of people holding hands in community, a student with an arm outstretched to answer a question, an A+ smiling face in a picture frame, and a school bell ringing are mixed in with text. In order from “Broadly Defined” to “Narrowly Defined, comments from our survey respondents move along the continuum: 

“The activities of a student”;
“The social aspects of being a university student”;
“Transcending beyond just basic academic potential and expanding into real life experiences and professional development outside the classroom”;
“Soaking up all that your university has to offer”;
“An active sense of belonging, community, and shared purpose on campus”;
“How well an individual can participate in their respective classrooms, their community, and social groups”;
“Contributing to Ryerson’s reputation”
“Being in school without being depressed about school”;
“For students who live on campus and have spare time”;
“University initiatives to throw people together at an event and provide superficial level of connection without fostering any real interpersonal engagement”;
“A buzzword made up by consultants. There’s a lot of socially-minded rhetoric...but where’s the actual encouragement to put our skills and education to use in making a more just world?...Does engagement start and stop at going to gimmicky “spirit” events?”


## Considering “desirability” in student engagement

In our discussions on the topic we introduced a new concept of desirability that we hypothesized we could use to be able to convey with more nuance the varieties of students’ experiences of engagement. Our concept of desirability was adapted from the work of disability scholar Mia Mingus (2011), and can be summarized as: the sense a student has that they are wanted by the institution. Out of this emerged our research question: Is there a relationship between engagement and desirability? Our hypothesis was that if a student feels desired by a university, then they will feel compelled to engage more fully, resulting in more opportunities and feelings of belonging. This would in turn result in an increased sense of desirability. We called this possible relationship between engagement and desirability the virtuous cycle. We were curious, too, to know what might happen when that cycle was broken or how a negative relationship between desirability and engagement might impact students.

**Image 2: The Pursuit of Student Desirability - Complicating the Narrative**

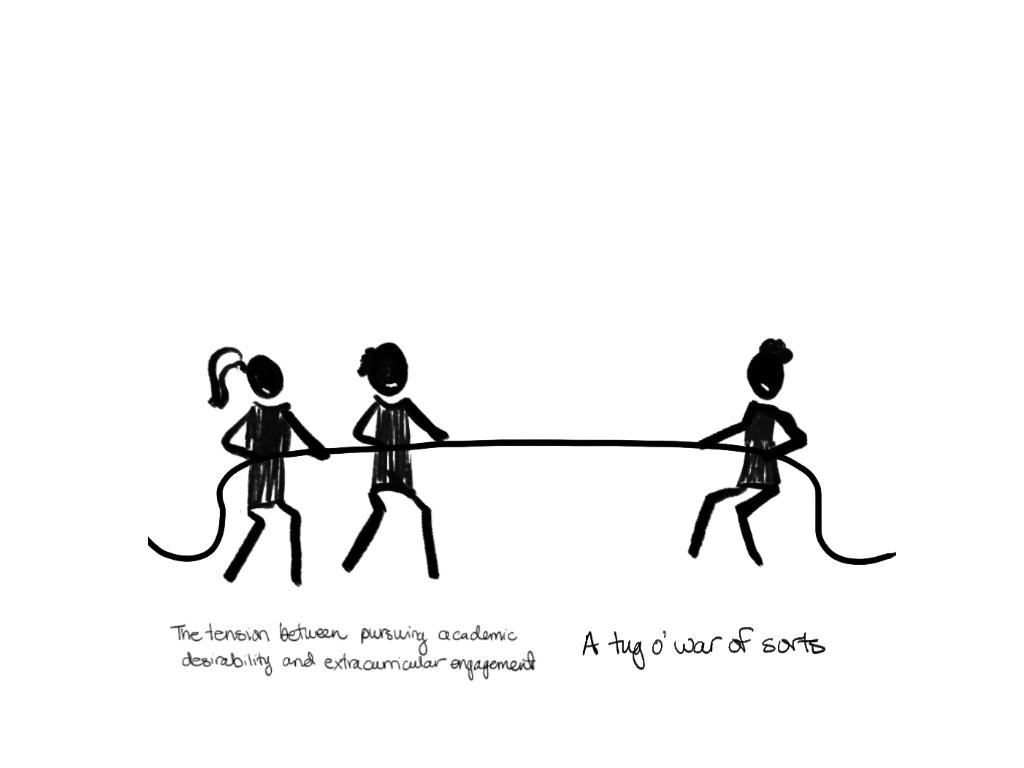
**Image description: In our “cycle” or “model” of student desirability, the heading “Perception of one’s desirability” branches off into two directions:
On the right, beginning with “more desirable”, a circle/closed loop leads from “more desirable” to “engagement” to “belonging” and back to “more desirable”
On the left, beginning with “less desirable”, a broken loop leads from “pursuit of desirability” to “lack of engagement” - from there, lack of engagement branches out into question marks ?? and out again towards “less desirable” without meeting it to close the circle.
**

Branching off to the right of “sense of one’s desirability,” the virtuous cycle between desirability, engagement, and belonging plays out. This cycle closely aligns with what was learned in Participant #3’s interview. Her sense of desirability came from her work on campus, which also is the source of her community and how she engages. For her, engagement, desirability and belonging all connect and lead to one another; where desirability ends and engagement begins is not separate. As she already has a strong sense of desirability from the institution, her academic performance was not a central feature of the interview, unlike the others. Her strong sense of her desirability as informed by her engagement makes it so she does not have to more actively pursue desirability by only achieving good grades, compared to the other interviewees. So, our initial hypothesis seemed to be in play when applied to a student who is already actively engaged.

However, we thought we would be able to map an inversion of the virtuous cycle onto a student who perceives themselves lacking those qualities of a “desirable student”. We imagined that a student’s lack of desirability would lead to a lack of engagement and it would turn into a vicious cycle, a mirror image of the virtuous cycle described above. This idea was articulated in a survey open-ended answer (“I feel being a mature student I am an undesirable student, my lack of engagement leads to feelings of being undesirable, and feeling undesirable leads to avoiding engagement”). However, this is not what we learned from the other three interviews. We ended up privileging this assumption that the model would be two symmetrical cycles, and it took much time before we could break free of this and realize the interviews were pointing to a model that was more complex. This, again, highlights the tension between our desire as researchers to “make sense”, to codify or model our findings and the inherent complexity of the human phenomena under question that defies such simplifications.

We found instead that it was the *pursuit* of desirability (the pursuit of high grades; a student’s academic persistence) that interfered with their engagement in co-curricular activity. Our participants have a keen understanding of the value of co-curricular engagement and what it could offer them as students, but three of the four participants identified that they did not have the resources, energy, or time to participate. They feel they must stay focused on maintaining or achieving that sense of “desirability” as defined by academic persistence and performance. While there is no shortage of a willingness to participate, their academics remain the priority, leaving little time or energy to engage with the university outside of their schoolwork. Therein lies the tension between lack of desirability and lack of engagement. Students feel pulled towards engagement, and want to become examples of model students: students who are engaged and who feel a sense of belonging. However, they are instead tugged towards spending all their time on academics in order to be desired, making engagement difficult, inaccessible. We’ve represented this below in Image 3: The Tug o’ War.

**Image 3: The Tug o’ War**



In Image 2, a divergent path then stems from the lack of engagement and we posit this could lead to any number of possibilities. The cycle is broken, and where it leads depends on the student in question. Some possibilities were found in our respondents’ stories—students could feel disconnected from the institution, for example, which in turn could result in mental health challenges or general frustration; students could also develop an antagonism directed towards the institution. Some literature includes students’ critical attitudes as evidence of engagement (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017). We had one such example in our survey, when a respondent shared that an engaged/desired student is “a student that would be a strong representative of the University even though they might critique the institution.” Other students felt the opposite, with one stating “I feel like I do not meet the characteristics of a model student because I try not to be complacent within the institution of Ryerson.”

Another possibility is that off-campus responsibilities and opportunities take precedence in their lives. Students identified with those barriers to co-curricular engagement in our survey. In possibly the “worst case scenario” as far as educators are concerned, the loop does close. This sequence plays out where lack of engagement leads to further feelings of being undesirable, so the student continues pursuing academic desirability and sacrificing co-curricular engagement opportunities, but the institution’s demand for engagement creates an unattainable expectation. They cannot “be” desirable - we repeat here one respondent’s experience: “I feel being a mature student I am an undesirable student, my lack of engagement leads to feelings of being undesirable, and feeling undesirable leads to avoiding engagement.”

When this broken cycle is related back to the survey, the key distinction between desirability and engagement makes this broken cycle even more dire. Desirability was linked by students to intrinsic traits, for example their studiousness and social extroversion and personality characteristics. Desirability is marked by who a student is as an individual, and so when they have a poor sense of desirability and feel a lack of academic persistence, they may feel they are wholly to blame for this. Engagement is seen as relational, but if only certain students have the intrinsic qualities that make them desirable and can benefit from the virtuous cycle, then only certain students can enter into the relational parts of being an engaged post-secondary student. How are we addressing those left behind? Questions of equity and who is seen as possessing these qualities abound.

Just as discussed in SERT’s “Stuck Narratives” project, there is no monolithic experience of students, and as such this is not meant to be a conclusive model. Instead what we have developed is an idea that broadens the traditional model to reflect the diverse experiences of the students we talked to. There is still room left for this concept to grow, to be further tested, questions still needing to be answered. Others may test this model at their own institutions, or explore those question marks left unnamed. Our exploration of the relationship between desirability and engagement serves simply to deepen and diversify the traditional narrative of the student experience.

## Limitations and Complications

The SERT team experienced some conventional limitations which makes the data ungeneralizable, like our small sample size. Additionally, aspects of the responses are specific to Ryerson University, like being a “commuter school.” How much Ryerson students’ definitions of engagement and desirability would overlap with students from other institutions is uncertain. It is possible that students from Ryerson make such wide distinctions between engagement and desirability because of Ryerson’s emphasis on innovation and application, rather than purely on academics. Perhaps this would not be necessarily true for an institution that prioritizes producing academic scholars.

The fact that the COVID-19 shutdown/quarantine happened right in the middle of our research also led to complications in our method and analysis. Having to change our interview process to an online method amidst a crisis meant that some of our preparations needed to be left behind and a new method had to be developed quickly. While we were very satisfied with our use of Zoom and Google Maps, the new style of interview method changed the dynamic between researcher and subject. The conversations would of course have been different if our research took place in person, on campus as planned. We were not able to conduct as many interviews as we were hoping, as fewer students responded to our follow-up invitations. This was understandable; even the students who did participate seemed very stressed. We are very grateful to our four interview participants for taking time to share their stories with us.

In our analysis we experienced a problem that one team member described as “not being able zoom out.” Having spent months discussing and developing the desirability concept, it was difficult at points to know by the end of the project if the ideas we were reaching for were actually coherent to those outside our group. Developing our model of engagement was an extensive process, with each team member creating at least one draft before we reached our final version. The fact that we were all physically isolated from one another during this time impacted our process. There was some difficulty in having the kind of fluid conversations that had marked the SERT experience until that point. We possibly would have achieved even further depths if we had been able to meet and work in person, as we all would have preferred. We will, as will all, undoubtedly continue to discover and unravel the ways the pandemic is, as we write this, shaping our team, our community, our participants, and our research results for the time to come.

# Further Considerations - What’s Next?

While not directly related to our initial research questions about the relationship between desirability and engagement, there was much to be learned about how students overwhelmingly define engagement - particularly this idea that it is what happens *on-campus* and in the *extra-curricular.* One of our researchers remarked: “The fact that engagement is only thought of as happening on campus provides an immediate barrier into who can engage and when. Many students are left isolated year-round at Ryerson, simply because they do not have access to campus. Especially in a “commuter school” like Ryerson, there is immense friction between the reality of students' lives and their perception of engagement. There is potential to empower students to feel as though they are doing things relevant to their education and career even if it isn’t directly connected to school, and they could therefore reach a more holistic understanding of themselves as a student.”

There are also many further avenues to explore when it comes to the barriers students express as related to engagement - clearly the third-highest barrier “I am too focused on my academics” links to our theory of the pursuit of desirability, but there is much more to be known about students’ sense of “disconnection” from the institution, the answer that came in at a close fourth. This area is of particular concern for student affairs professionals who seek to create and invite students into spaces of belonging and community. What is it that perpetuates students’ feelings of disconnection? What is the relationship between a students’ engagement levels and their feelings of disconnection - does it take just one touchpoint, as Interview Participant #3 described, and then you’re “in”? If students overwhelmingly define and associate “engagement” as extra-to their in-class experiences, in what ways can we more intentionally integrate “engagement” opportunities, creating a more seamless experience for students in both their academic and “extracurricular” worlds?

In our rush to adjust our methodology to accommodate physical distancing measures during COVID-19, we almost took for granted that we captured students' first responses to Ryerson’s shift to an online model. For students who identified as already feeling disengaged on campus, “physical” or “social” distancing only widens the gap between students and the institution. Our survey data confirms that many of us picture the university experience as being inextricably linked with the experiences students share *on* campus. As researchers, some of our warmest memories of our undergrad experience can be found at Ryerson—staying up all night studying in the library, or hanging out on the front steps of the Student Learning Centre or grabbing a drink at the Ram in the Rye. Nothing can replace the freedom, promise and vulnerability felt when students enter university for the first time. But for the first time in Ryerson’s history, fall 2020 will usher in a new class of students who will have the shared experience of attending university during a pandemic. This represents a particular urgency for student affairs professionals to protect the health and well-being of their students by utilizing new and emergent technology to provide student engagement opportunities in an online format. Further lines of inquiry should include the insight and experiences of returning Ryerson students who already report experiencing barriers to engagement.

The way students described engagement as relational and desirability as individual says much about how we might better position engagement opportunities as connected to communities extra to the institution. The way we invite students to participate and the language we use to describe engagement matters - the continuum and the tug o’ war potentially provide useful tools for reconsidering the ways in which educators and student affairs practitioners in particular frame our expectations of students and opportunities for them.

Other areas that are worth noting are relevant to our initial instincts about the “performance” of engagement and desirability. Another of our team notes: “SERT’s research on engagement and desirability only begins to scratch the surface of the richness of student knowledge. Even after hours and hours of coding, I am still blown away by the amount of insight there is in just 174 open-ended survey answers. Consider ‘Image’ and ‘Status Quo’ as defining features of “desirability” — there were a few survey comments that really stuck out to me, such as “it feels like I’m desired for what I represent not really who I am” and “student engagement is an opportunity to exhibit Ryerson University.” Some respondents identified the desirable student as “a student that gives the school a good image” or a student “who brings [the university] attention and money and statistics... do[ing] things that are linkedin-post-worthy,” while others identified the desirable student as a student who “sticks to the status quo,” one who does not try to “push back against” or “hold the school accountable.” This focus on appearance and performance connects to Zepke’s (2015) claim that the dominant conception of student engagement shares an “elective affinity” with neoliberalism.”

## What questions remain?

The inaugural SERT focused on student’s sense of belonging in the institution and the narratives that impact their expectations surrounding university life. Our current iteration settled into a focus on the relationship between and definitions of desirability and engagement that dominate students' understanding of involvement in school. In that settling down on a topic, many other facets we considered fell away, or were shelved for future probing. The insight that students see academic achievement (and the desirability that comes with it) at odds with engagement begs the question of whether the same survey, undertaken at schools beyond Ryerson, would reveal similar conceptions? Furthermore, we acknowledge that the bent of our research has been focused on students, whereas the relationship to faculty and administration is largely untapped. We recognize that understandings of student engagement are a largely individual phenomenon: that is, the effort it takes to engage is defined by and comes from the individual. How would faculty and administration conceive the relationship between desirability and engagement?

Even before we were required to work remotely and rethink our research methods, we had swirling considerations of commuter culture, and impact on student’s engagement levels and access. We questioned where the boundaries of university begin and end, especially for the students who bring their student identity and apply it to efforts in their community. For those students doing additional work in the community, or care work in the home, how, if at all, is that work acknowledged by the institution? Future phases of research would do well to consider this further: is it still student engagement when the knowledge is being applied beyond campus limits? Now that we are at the whims of remote learning for the indefinite future, how will engagement and desirability be adapted to the “campus-less” university? We hope that the seeds and scraps of our research will inspire future students, researchers, and student-researchers to further explore the impact of how we talk about and define “engagement”, where it happens, and who is recognized for it.

When we saw the reactions to our booth, we found that students already had an interest in student affairs research development, and many even offered their own ideas for possible areas of research. One of this year’s team members recalls in his application letter writing about the potential of a “confessional booth” where students would offer their own opinions and experiences on the state of topics relating to school life. As the development of our research collection progressed, we naturally settled on a method similar to that, that would allow students to provide their unbiased thoughts. Concurrently, Sauer’s art installation mirrored the intention of the original idea, and almost as an act of serendipity, our primary method of data collection followed the instinct of two students acting independently. Responses from participants also showed interest in our research from the general population of students. There are likely many further avenues for researchers and student affairs scholars to consider the benefits of bringing research “to” participants, rather than doing research “on” students.

# Concluding thoughts

It’s no easy thing wrapping up a year-long research project let alone a year-long journey together. In the weeks spent analyzing, considering, reconsidering, and working through our insights we have come to understand several things not just about our participants experiences but about our own. We’ve come to understand there are different ways to “do” research; there are different ways to approach a research question; there are different ways to investigate participants’ lived experiences; and there are different ways to represent those to the world. We set out in our boat-without-a-map to make an attempt at some “theory-building” as we liked to call it. In the final days of our project, we asked each other what we’d learned; we asked each other what we know now that we didn’t when we began. “There’s a creative potential in research”; “If research is a closed wall, arts-based research is the breaking of the wall”, “It’s a process of trust”; “I learned that I am good enough.” These are just some of the things we know now. And the ideas presented here are just some that we explored—you should see our cutting-room-floor. And yet in so many ways we came full circle to those first drawings we made on day one, for we felt it in those moments of brilliance when everything seemed to connect, and we found a return to our first impulse in creating and participating in this project - to listen deeply, to feel deeply, and to connect deeply.

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# Appendix A: Interviewer Reflection Tool

### Pre-interview reflection prompts

Take a moment to think and ground yourself before your participant arrives (Lavallée, 2014)

* What assumptions do I have about the topic and/or the people involved (participants) in this research?
* How can I challenge my assumptions? Will I allow my assumptions to be challenged? What will I do to make the space for my assumptions to be challenged (some phrases/dialogue dynamic/who is speaking more/less).
* What privileges do I hold as a researcher? What oppressions do I carry? How do these privileges and oppressions intersect and affect the research and participants?

### Post-interview reflection prompts:

* Was there anything that surprised me in the interview? Did something challenge my expectations?
* What were some recurring ideas in the participant’s answers that you found interesting?
* Did I pick up on any non-verbal cues in the responses?

### Post-Interview Process Considerations

Consider writing a blog post for sert.ryerson.ca if you have something to say when it comes to the *process* and *design* of the interview.

## 

# 

# Appendix B: Survey Questions

We understand these questions may be tricky - Go with your gut

1. **Pick two** from the list below that best describe your idea of what "student engagement" is.....

* Getting involved in extracurricular or leadership activities on campus
* Getting a job on campus
* Actively participating in classes
* Getting good grades
* Hustling all the time
* Having an active social life
* Applying what I'm learning to my pursuits off-campus
* Accessing resources for success on campus
* Seeking opportunities for personal development and learning

1. Do you feel like an "engaged" student?

* Yes
* No

1. Do you feel good about your level of engagement?

* Yes
* No

## 

1. Do you experience any of these barriers to being an engaged student? Check all that apply.

* Too many off-campus responsibilities
* A feeling of disconnectedness from the institution
* I am too focused on my academics
* My commute
* I'm shy and/or an introvert
* I don't feel included and/or represented
* I am not aware of the opportunities
* There are no involvement opportunities I am interested in
* I am not interested in what I am learning in class
* The idea of engaging makes me uncomfortable
* Opportunities are not physically accessible to me
* Other (please describe):
* I don't feel any barriers

## 

1. To what degree do you feel like you have the characteristics of a model student - the kind of student that the university finds desirable?

* I have none of these characteristics
* I have some of these characteristics
* I have many of these characteristics
* I have all of these characteristics

## 

1. Do you ever feel like an undesirable student?

* Never
* Rarely
* Frequently
* Always

## 

1. Please elaborate on any of the above questions and your answers. For example, what do you think when you hear the term "student engagement"? What do you think makes a student desirable to the university? Please either type your response below or, use our survey-audio-recording booth. If you're recording your response in the survey-audio-recording booth, please begin your recording with the number on your ticket.
2. Thank you for participating in our survey, we're really grateful for the time and experiences you shared with us. Please identify which mode you used to fill in our survey:

* Online on my own
* Online in person at the SERT research activation event

## 

1. Did you use the SERT survey-audio-recording booth?

* Yes - Please indicate the number on your ticket here
* No

## 

1. Please indicate your faculty.

* Faculty of Arts
* Faculty of Science
* Faculty of Engineering and Architectural Sciences
* Faculty of Community Services
* Faculty of Communication and Design
* Ted Rogers School of Management
* Chang School of Continuing Education

1. Please indicate your current year of study.

* 1
* 2
* 3
* 4
* 5+

## 

# 

# Appendix C: Coding Dictionary

## Code Dictionary for Question 4: Barriers to Student Engagement

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Top-Level Code** | **Definition** | **Sub-Codes** | **Synonyms/Keywords** |
| Personality or no interest | Barrier named is a personality characteristic or trait |  | Shy, introverted |
|
|
| Inaccessible | Opportunities to engage are not inclusive, not available at times they can access, not inviting, not representative of the respondent’s identity or needs or lifestyle | Commute | Not designed for someone like me; commuting takes up all my time; events at bad times; curfew or family responsibilities; not the same age as everyone else; not included in messaging |
| Mature or part-time student |
| Lack of representation |
| Poor wellbeing | Does not engage because is not well enough to or does not have time or emotional resources to do so | No time/balance | Too much, drained, overwhelmed; I don’t have time; I don’t know why; anxiety; depression; Tired, no energy; lack of motivation |
|
| Poor sense of belonging/community | Does not engage because opportunities or communities are not welcoming; there is no felt sense of community or belonging |  | Cliques; not feeling welcome; not feeling accepted; no pride in institution; |
| Negative past experiences and/or poor quality of service | Does not engage because perceived poor quality or past poor experiences with engagement | Lack of awareness or clarity in opportunities | No incentive; not worth staying late for; not connected to my interests; poor past experiences; first year bad experiences; overwhelming choice |

## Code Dictionary for Question 7: Definitions of Student Engagement and/or Desirability

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Top-Level Code** | **Definition** | **Sub-Codes** | **Synonyms/Keywords** |
| Academic Performance | Referencing academic performance/achievement based |  | Success, grades, achievement, recognition, awards |
| Access | Student needing or being able to obtain resources, usually related to having time or being able to be on campus physically | Time | Spending free/spare time |
| Location/Commute | Commute, campus presence; proximity to campus specifically |
| Extracurricular activity | Limited to on-campus activity only; includes participating in events, clubs, sports, provided by the institution and on-campus |  | Clubs; on-campus; activities; events; sports; groups; participation; actively involved |
|
|
|
|
| Going Beyond Ryerson | Application of knowledge beyond campus and in the future;  Taking experience and education from Ryerson into one’s career, community, and other pursuits | Civic Engagement | In the community |
| Career | Related specifically to getting a job outside of/after school |
| Belonging | Feeling at home and in community with fellow students at Ryerson; Having a sense of belonging | Peer connection | Spending time with peers, being part of the community, active member |
| Wellness | Managing multiple responsibilities while maintaining good health and wellbeing | Balance | Time management |
| Financially responsible | Stability, paying tuition on time |
| Being-well | Mental health, lack of mental illness |
| Personality | Possession of positive personality characteristics and attitudes | Social | Outgoing, kind, confident, positive, well-liked, extroverted |
| Knowledge | Intelligent, aware knowledgeable |
| Interest | Passion, investment, caring |
| Effort | Actively involved, self-improvement, hard working, commitment, academic participation, present, busy, “tries their best” |
| Opportunity and Resource-Seeking Behaviours | Pursuing activities for the means of personal, academic, and career development specifically provided by the institution  Taking advantage of and accessing opportunities provided by the institution, on campus | Professional Opportunities | Networking, career development, campus jobs, accessing support services, institutionally provided |
| Academic Opportunities | Being brought on for projects, contributing to research |
| Teaching Staff/Faculty Relationship | Communicating, working with or accessing support from any teaching staff member |  | Recognition, connecting with professors |
| Institutional Values | Used when a student describes the importance of representing and adhering to the institution’s predefined values | Image | Representative, reputation, brings positive attention, “linkedin-post-worthy” |
| Leadership development | Leaders, professional development, career skills |
| Well-Rounded | Broad/diverse social circles, variety of activities, interests, etc. |
|
| Status Quo | Keeping head down, not being critical |
| Giving Back | Contribute, volunteering, leaving a lasting impact |
| Critical Thinking and Perspectives | Used when student describes making contact with Ryerson to give viewpoints and direct programming. Inverse of “Status Quo” subcode. |  | Vocal, provides feedback |