THRIVING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: VOICES OF FOUR FEMALE GRADUATE STUDENTS

by

Nadia Arghash

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Education

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(March, 2018)

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Abstract

This study explored thriving in the context of graduate studies as perceived by four female students attending master’s and doctoral programs in a Canadian university. Thriving is an all-encompassing approach that extends beyond meeting the academic objectives (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009). Recently, there have been extensive studies regarding thriving in the undergraduate context (e.g. Berea, Tsvetovat, Daun-Barnett, Greenwald, & Cox 2015; Schreiner, 2010a; 2013; Schreiner, Kammer, Primose, & Quick, 2011). Despite the uniqueness of the graduate demographic compared to the undergraduate (Gansemmer-Topf, Ross & Johnson, 2006), little is known about graduate students’ thriving processes and their fulfillment with their academic experience. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand graduate students’ perceptions and experiences of thriving, as well as the factors that influenced their thriving in graduate school. Data were collected from four female graduate students through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a deductive thematic approach. Thriving Perceptions and Experiences, Supports for Thriving, and Barriers to Thriving were the predetermined themes utilized for this study. Supports and barriers were further branched into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional factors.

The findings of this study are presented in two sections. The first section highlighted thriving conceptualization in graduate studies through individuals’ perceptions and experiences. These findings illustrate that thriving in graduate studies is unique, multi-faceted, and malleable. For master’s participants in particular, thriving additionally signified a profound academic transition. In the second section, I presented the conditions that affected thriving, which included notions of connectedness, contribution, mentorship, compartmentalization, and imposter syndrome. Although similar to undergraduate students in many ways, there were distinct characteristics pertaining to thriving among the participants of this study, leading to implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: graduate students, graduate school, positive mental health and well-being, thriving
Acknowledgements

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of Dr. John Freeman. John was more than a graduate supervisor; he cared deeply about his students and provided them with unlimited support that surmounted anyone’s expectations. To me, he was a confidant, a mentor, and a true friend. John has profoundly changed my view of life in his teachings of empathy, integrity, and genuineness. He was relentless in his giving, unwavering in his caring, and inexhaustible in his kindness. John, words fail to describe the depth of my appreciation and gratitude for all that you have done for me. You have given me the opportunity of a life-time and for that I am eternally grateful. It is truly an honor to be your legacy.

I would like to extend gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Theodore Christou who took on the great task of guiding me after John’s passing. Ted, when I asked you to be my supervisor you did not even blink. Your continuous support has made this journey so much easier. I also would like to thank Dr. Liying Cheng, my committee member. Your timely and consistent feedback guided me through some of the most difficult stages of writing. Without you, this thesis would not have been a reality. To the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at Queen’s University, Dr. Marta Straznicky, finishing this degree is a direct result of your support when I was most vulnerable. Thank you for your compassion and understanding. To my examiner Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, thank you for your genuine interest in my research. Your critiques challenged my thinking and brought a fresh perspective into some of the most fundamental aspects of this thesis and for that I am grateful.

To my fellow graduate students, this study is built around your voices that I feel truly privileged to be able to present. I found solace in your words when I felt alone in this journey. Thank you for your courage to participate in this study and share your stories with me.

Ultimately, this experience would not have been possible without my parents’ and siblings’ endless love and support. To my father, you are a symbol of perseverance and determination. Wholeheartedly, you have supported every decision that I have so far made in my life. I feel close to you, even though we are so far apart. Thank you for being the kind and understanding person that you are. To
my mother, you are an ocean of compassion and tolerance. Thank you for your relentless encouragements. To my brother and sister, you inspire me every day. Thank you for believing in me every step of the way.

Last but not least, I would like to thank a special person for his incomparable kindness and immeasurable support. Rafael, you have seen me through the best and the worst. You were my rock when times were hard. This accomplishment is partly yours. Thank you for your patience, generosity of spirit, and loving heart.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

When I started graduate school, I had no idea what awaited me. I found myself in two separate worlds, both of which I had to learn and adapt to. As an international student, I had my own set of challenges to tackle; where to buy things, how to get around, how to handle my finances, and so many other daily and mundane tasks suddenly became difficult. More importantly, I had to learn how to navigate the cultural and geographical paradigms of an utterly new place. I was bombarded with new information on a daily basis that continuously challenged my way of living and doing things. For instance, when opening the door, I had to learn to pay attention to the sign on the door directing me to avoid my first instinct of pulling. In winter, for example, I had to learn not to be deceived by the sunny day that would normally justify a lighter coat. Manageable on their own, but combined, these challenges slowly took a toll on my well-being and I began to feel socially isolated and lonely.

Graduate school was as an entirely new place of its own. A place where, regardless of backgrounds, people seemed to share a common understanding and language. I embraced change in graduate school and felt encouraged to explore new ideas and tap into the unknown. Most importantly, I had a guide who promised to mentor me throughout this journey. I was in an exciting new world, which unlike the outside world, I felt comfortable and intrigued to explore.

This magical place we call graduate school was so fascinatingly complex it was easy to lose sight of what I was looking for. I often stopped and asked myself, “why are you here?” and the answer was not always easy. In fact, I was not the only one; I came to understand later on that my peers were not exempt from feeling uncertain every now and then. On many occasions, I found myself spiraling down what felt like an academic abyss, or just a very, very dark place. That is, of course, until the next day when a series of (un)anticipated events would take place and
I would, once again, feel the magic. ‘How do we do it,’ I wondered, ‘how do we make it?’ What makes us thrive in this environment, where stability is farfetched and our dreams seem so far away but at the cusp of our reach all the same?

It is very easy for me to speak about the difficulties of graduate school. In fact, everyone understands it could be a backbreaker. I remember once when I was passionately complaining to one of my friends about something or the other that had made me very frustrated with graduate school, to which she said: “if it was easy, everyone would have done it, everyone would have a master’s or a Ph.D.” Indeed, the challenges of graduate school is not obscure in our community. What interested me the most was the positive side of graduate school that makes us feel capable, accomplished, and special, despite all of its inherent or perceived challenges. It was time, I thought, we understood how we thrive, not just survive.

When my supervisor at the time, Dr. John Freeman, made the proposition to join the research team that studied graduate students, I figuratively jumped at the idea. I might have even physically leaped forward in attempt to conceal my excitement. This moment defined my academic trajectory; it gave it purpose, context, and direction. The opportunity was undoubtedly the turning point in my journey and it might have even changed my life forever. I was truly active in this research, not merely by the means of being the person who conducted it but because I was able to find a meaning to my day-to-day experiences as a graduate student in the voices of my participants, the journal articles I read, and the books I studied.

I began this thesis with the purpose of studying the complexities of thriving in graduate school. I viewed thriving as a pathway that unites us all graduate students from all disciplines, fields, degrees, and geographies in a positive way. What intrigued me most about thriving was that it does not undermine the difficulties and failures of this journey, but rather celebrates them. Therefore, at the very least, I hoped the topic of thriving would become a podium for graduate students to share the good and the bad, academic-related or otherwise.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis study was to examine graduate students’ thriving in their programs in a small Faculty within a mid-sized university in Eastern Ontario, Canada. This study had two objectives. The primary objective was to understand graduate students’ perception of thriving and their relative experiences. The second objective was to gain a better understanding of possible supports or barriers to thriving in graduate studies.

Three questions guided this study:

1) How do graduate students perceive and experience thriving in their programs?
2) What barriers are present in relation to their thriving?
3) What supports do they have to facilitate their thriving?

Definition of Key Terms

Graduate Students

According to the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) (2012), “Many students pursue graduate studies for the love of learning and discovery” (CAGS, 2012, p. 4). The most important duty of a graduate student is “the development and the responsible conduct of original, important research and scholarship” in a detailed manner that encapsulates the “spirit of creative and imaginative inquiry” (CAGS, 2012, p. 4). Graduate students are intensively engaged in expanding their learning horizons through research while providing new insights that enrich the society with “new ways of looking at the world’s complexity, problems and beauty” (CAGS, 2012, p. 4).

Students who are enrolled in a post-baccalaureate degree programs, master’s and doctoral, are referred to here as graduate students. Typically, graduate students prepossess a baccalaureate degree (undergraduate education) at the point of entry to graduate studies. Although professional students fall in this category, they are not included in this definition.
Graduate School

Also referred to as grad school, graduate schools award the highest educational degrees of master’s and doctoral to students wishing to pursue their education further than the baccalaureate degree. According to CAGS (2012):

Graduate school can be, and often is, one of the highlights in a student’s life. Students are provided with the opportunity to work in exciting environments and share experiences with like minded colleagues that can result in lifelong friendships. Many former graduate students look back on this time in their life with fondness and the realization that it represented an important period of personal development that laid the foundation for a rewarding career (p. 2).

The type of education offered in the graduate studies program is distinct form the undergraduate degree and is described as “advanced,” “focused,” and “scholarly” (CAGS, 2012, p. 5). The most prominent aspect of graduate school is the production of thesis or dissertation although a non-thesis (project-based) master’s degree programs are also available in Canada. A combination of course-work and research are utilized in graduate schools to provide specialized training for master’s and doctoral students (CAGS, 2012). The duration of graduate studies is often two to three years, while doctoral studies can last anywhere between four to six years in Canada (CAGS, 2012).

Positive Mental Health and Well-being

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined mental health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease” (WHO, 2014). Positive mental health, also known as well-being, is therefore seen as a state of balance across all psychological domains (Canadian Mental Health Association [CMHA], 2016). Such balance allows individuals to feel, think, and act in ways that foster life enjoyment and enhances their ability to deal with challenges (WHO, 2016). Positive mental health therefore does not simply
refer to the absence of mental illness, but rather a combination of high levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being that allow individuals to flourish and thrive (Keyes & Haidt, 2003).

**Thriving**

The term thriving is closely intertwined with the concept of flourishing. Conceptualized as “living within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 678), flourishing is attributed to individuals who are genuinely happy; they accept themselves as they are and feel constant personal growth; they have a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and productiveness in their lives and towards their society; they choose their own fate and thus possess high degrees of control and autonomy (Keyes, 2002). Finally, flourishing individuals are resilient in the face of daily personal challenges and highly successful at developing coping mechanisms to tackle those challenges (Keyes, 2003).

Schreiner and her colleagues (2009) proposed the use of the term ‘thriving’ when referring to flourishing in higher education contexts. They did so to build on the psychological well-being concepts implied in flourishing and deliver a more holistic view of all the aspects related to student success. In such a context, a thriving student is described as:

One who is engaged in the learning process, invests effort to reach important educational goals, manages time and commitments effectively, connects in healthy ways to other people, is optimistic about the future and able to reframe negative events as temporary setbacks, is appreciative of differences in others, and is committed to enriching his or her community (Schreiner, 2014, p. 11).

Thriving in graduate school then encompasses resiliency in the face of adversity, positive mental well-being throughout academia, and flourishing and personal growth, resulting in thriving and academic success.
Rationale

According to the 2016 report published by CAGS, graduate student enrollment has been on the rise from 1992 to 2013, with twice as many full-time graduate students enrolled in 2013 compared to 1992 (CAGS, 2016). Between 2012 and 2013, the number of master’s and doctoral students enrolled in universities across Canada has increased at a rate of 4.6% for master’s students and 1.5% for doctoral students (CAGS, 2016). Female graduate students have taken up to 54.4% and 47.2% of the entire graduate student population in the master’s and doctoral degree programs. Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) estimated that in 2010 about 31% of full-time master’s students and 56% of full-time doctoral students aged thirty years or more (AUCC, 2011). Despite these rates, the number of graduate degree holders must increase even more in order to meet the demands of the current job market (CAGS, 2004). To that end, “close attention needs to be paid to the education of graduate students in Canadian universities” (CAGS, 2004, p. 1).

Despite the ever-growing and evolving graduate student demographic, there have been concerning reports regarding their well-being and academic experience. According to the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), 37.5% of post-secondary students “felt so depressed” that it became “hard to function,” 56.5% “felt overwhelming anxiety,” and 63% “felt very lonely” (CACUSS, 2013). Moreover, the data confirm that only 12.3% of these students had sought professional help for anxiety disorders and 10% for depression. Additionally, 45.5% indicated having more than average stress and 12.1% having tremendous stress within the past year (CACUSS, 2013). A total of 56.5% reported that dealing with the academic requirements had been “traumatic or very difficult to handle” (CACUSS, 2013). The high prevalence of mental health problems among students in graduate studies calls for more in-depth and comprehensive investigations of all facets pertaining to the graduate school experience.
That said, much of the research on academic experience in post-secondary has been built around the constructs of attrition (e.g. Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Seymour, 2000), retention (e.g. Bean, 2010; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2010), and performance (e.g. Cassady, & Johnson, 2002; Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2008; Hancock, 2001; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). Very little attention has been dedicated to combining these instruments to offer a holistic view of the higher education experience. The implications of these singular approaches cause institutions to prioritize “intellectual coherence” over the reality of their outcomes, which undermines the diversity of the contributors to student success across various contexts, disciplines, and groups (Perna & Thomas, 2008, p. 63).

The above evidence warrants re-evaluation of academic success criteria. One approach to untangling academic experiences of graduate school in a holistic manner is understanding the underpinnings of thriving in this context. Thriving stretches beyond the academic objectives; it encompasses all the facets that facilitate high social and emotional investment in the learning environment (Schreiner et al., 2009). Consequently, gaining an understanding of how students thrive in this environment is critical to understanding their overall experiences in academia (Schreiner et al., 2009).

While the topic of undergraduates’ and college students’ thriving has been examined in a number of studies (e.g., Berea, Tsvetovat, Daun-Barnett, Greenwald, & Cox 2015; Schreiner, 2010a; 2010b; 2013; 2014, Schreiner et al., 2009), graduate students’ thriving processes and their consequent psychological effects remain relatively untouched. Specifically, graduate programs are the foundation of the next generation of the scholars in their respective fields; their research can influence the relevant practices through the formation of policy, professional development, and by contributing to practice (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006). While undergraduate students are frequent subjects of research in topics such as student success in academia (e.g.,
Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Pritchard, & Wilson, 2003), their precursors, graduate students, remain understudied in terms of their fulfillment and thriving in their respective programs.

Graduate students represent a unique demographic for their challenges as well as needs. The not-so-healthy environment of graduate school does little to help with their challenges (Fogg, 2009). University students are extremely prone to mental health problems as a result of transitioning and adjusting to university academic life (Bitsika, Sharpley, & Rubenstein, 2010). Graduate students’ lives in particular are even more vulnerable and susceptible to change. Echoed in Gansemer-Topf and colleagues’ (2006) study “adjusting to new environments; juggling multiple roles of student, teacher, and researcher; and attending to personal relationships” are some of the distinct challenges of graduate studies that “require more than simple mastery of the disciplinary materials” (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006, p. 28). In contrast with undergraduate students, graduate students operate in significantly less structured environments and thus require additional self-motivation and drive (Peters, 1997). The graduate student demographic is more likely to have additional familial and professional obligations, adding to these students’ existing academic responsibilities (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006).

Despite these complexities, very little attention has been dedicated to graduate students themselves and their experiences, especially their psychological development (Gardner, 2009). In their article The Education of Graduate Students, Hartnett and Katz (1977) argued that our understanding of “the processes by which students become scholars and the environmental factors which help or hinder these processes” is severely limited (Harnett & Katz, 1977, p. 647). In their upfront and objective review of the graduate student development, they concurred that such gap in literature exists mainly because of the explicit focus of graduate schools on research and the presumption that “motivation and task-orientedness” is a pre-existing quality in graduate students.
(Harnett & Katz, 1977, p. 647). Although this study dates back to nearly forty years ago, it is still relevant to graduate students today.

Scarcity of exclusive exploration and examination of all components of the graduate education experience, therefore, justifies the need for this study. Hence, to deepen our understanding of the factors that foster growth and all-encompassing graduate experience and contribute to advancement of research in all respective fields of study, the current study is centered around thriving in the context of graduate studies for graduate students.

**Context**

The Faculty where the current study took place is located in a mid-sized university in Eastern-Ontario, Canada. Academically, this faculty educates scholars in the humanities and social sciences fields of study, with both master’s and doctoral programs available. For the purposes of this research and to facilitate a distinction, the word Faculty (upper-case first letter) refers to the academic discipline, structure, and building, whereas faculty (lower-case first letter) is used to describe the teaching members of the institution.

Perhaps what set this Faculty apart from the remaining academic Faculties is its demographic and location. With less than 200 graduate students (both master’s and doctoral) and less than twenty faculty members, this Faculty is fairly small in size compared to other academic Faculties within the university that are much larger. There are more female graduate students at this Faculty than male. Moreover, the locale of this Faculty is somewhat particular as it is distanced from where the remaining Faculties and departments are centered around. Therefore, a number of basic student services such as counselling, graduate student space, library, cafeteria, and physical activity facility are located within the building.

The size and the reserved location of this Faculty result in increased interactions between students and faculty. Students are often familiar with each other as well as faculty members and see each other on a daily basis. The distance between the main campus and this Faculty, along
with the availability of on-site services and facilities render the commute to other parts of the university campus daunting for many of the students. Therefore, graduate students mostly prefer to live close by and remain on the premises of their Faculty. These contextual characteristics facilitate building relationships that often extend beyond collegial or professional relationships, as students and faculty often participate in social and informal events that strengthen their bonds. Therefore, physical isolation from the larger academic institution has brought students and faculty closer. Naturally, the residents of this Faculty often consider themselves a small and special community.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is organized in five chapters. This chapter has introduced my personal reasoning for conducting this study, definition of key terms used throughout the study, research purpose and questions, as well as providing the rationale and contextual background. In Chapter Two, I proceeded to provide an overview of the theoretical constructs of thriving, followed by a review of the related literature as personal and contextual characteristics that influence thriving in higher education. I then provided the methods and methodology that informed this study in Chapter Three; the methodological framework, the research design, data source, and the approaches to both data collection and analysis were described in this chapter. The results of data analysis, Chapter Four, are presented in four separate sections dedicated to each participant individually. In the final Chapter, I revisited my research questions and presented the findings of this study in relation to previous research. Finally, the existing limitations of this study were presented, after which I made recommendations for both future research and practice.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Psychologists have long sought to examine, observe, as well as determine what makes a person endure adverse conditions and come out of the other side of the tunnel stronger, more experienced and better equipped to tackle similar conditions. Most notably the work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) titled *Trauma and Transformation* spiraled a series of literary work in the field of post-traumatic growth (e.g., Aldwin, 2007; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). The positive outcomes of traumatic experiences have been classified as resilience, flourishing, and thriving. I will proceed to review from the evolutionary standpoint how thriving has been studied; the process that guided my study on thriving in graduate studies.

Ryff and Singer (2003) described the phenomenon of thriving as a “positive human functioning” (Ryff & Singer, 2003, p. 15). Thriving manifests in extreme conditions because, as authors believed, “It is then, when individuals are being tested, that much becomes known about human strengths—what they are, how they come about, how they are nurtured or undermined.” (Ryff & Singer, 2003, p. 15). Much like Ryff and Singer (2003), scholars within the field of psychological growth were interested in understanding why some individuals reportedly experienced personal growth and resilience after suffering the devastating consequences of a variety of types of trauma, to the point of viewing this experience as an opportunity (Affleck, Tennent, Croog, & Levine, 1987; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993; O’Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998). This prescription for thriving—also referred to as flourishing at this point in time—was closely intertwined with developing resilience because, like flourishing, resilience “draws on the negative in human experience by articulating the many ways in which life can be hard, but it also emphasizes the positive in describing how some, despite (or because
of) their travail, are able to love, work, play— in short, embrace life” (Ryff & Singer, 2003, p.15). Although cultivating resilience is inherently a positive outcome, it does not occur under positive conditions.

That said, Carver (1998) speculated that thriving “probably does not depend on an occurrence of a discrete traumatic event or long-term trauma, though such events may elicit it” (Carver, 1998, p. 245). While scholars have historically referred to thriving as the positive psychological aftermaths of a trauma, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) proposed an alternate view of thriving. They suggested a fundamental perceptual shift in attempt to move psychologists’ focus from “victimology” to “psychology”, that is understanding how ordinary humans thrive in their ordinary milieu instead of extreme stressful circumstances (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6).

Thriving was not the after-effect of healing; the aim of positive psychology perpetuated the ability to “begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). In that sense, the link between thriving and resiliency was no longer necessary; by stepping away from the constructs of flourishing and resilience, we were able to understand thriving as the ultimate desirable outcome of an already positive condition. Under positive psychology, human thriving is the ability to maintain a momentum of positivity consisting of well-being, experiencing an overall satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment throughout all stages of life. This approach is preventative in comparison to the treating mentality of the past empirical work (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Viewing humans as functioning organisms within a society who are constantly interacting with their environment as well as each other regards “social well-being” to be existing alongside “emotional and psychological well-being” (Keyes, 2002, p. 209). In the educational context, positive psychology provides a basis to “look beyond adequate or normal functioning and examine factors that lead to success” (Marks &
Wade, 2015, p. 12). With less emphasis on flourishing and resilience, positive mental health and well-being became a strong indicator of the individual’s ability to thrive and vice versa.

**Conceptualization of Thriving**

Increasing focus on positive psychology called for revising previously established conceptualizations of thriving and its mechanisms within a social homogeneity. Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, and their colleagues (2005) sought to do so by envisioning thriving within a work environment. In their article *A Socially Embedded Model of Thriving at Work*, they proposed the two main characteristics of thriving as “vitality (aliveness)” and “learning (greater understanding and knowledge)” (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005, p. 1). Under such conceptualization, thriving is neither resilience nor flourishing, but rather a combination of both experienced through vitality and learning. While resilience is stress-related and flourishing psychologically focused, the Socially Embedded Model of thriving (SEMT) is an everyday structure that demonstrates individual’s resilience and well-being over a prolonged period of time. In that sense, thriving was conceptualized as “a desirable subjective experience that allows individuals to gauge whether what they are doing and how they are doing it is helping them to develop in a positive direction” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 1).

Conceptualization of thriving within the social settings of a workplace is closely connected to individual’s internalized level of control, confidence, and sense of belonging, all of which constitute self-determination (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Self-determination theory (SDT) suggested that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three internal components of individuals’ motivation and movement towards growth and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a social setting, the components of SDT, i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the indicators of thriving, i.e., vitality and learning, are in constant interaction. When an individual is working in a place that supports freedom to explore knowledge, promotes confidence to perform a given task, and increases capability to cultivate relationships with other individuals, that
individual is more inclined to feel increased levels of learning and vitality. “Agentic enablers of thriving”, whether originating from within a person or the environment, are created and disseminated through the interactions of individuals within a singular workplace and, thus, “reconstituted in the doing of the work,” replaceable, and permanent (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 8). Under this model, thriving is both internal and dependant on the individual’s skills, as well as external and reinforced by the contributions of the environment.

The above conceptualisation of thriving is arguably easily transferable to the educational context. Like a workplace, colleges and universities are social settings that comprise of individuals who are socially bound by their mutual goal of growth and development. In her article *The Thriving Quotient*, Schreiner (2010a) pursued to create a “holistic measure of student success” that would offer a better insight into all components of the higher education experience, not just academics (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 5). Much like the SEMT, the thriving quotient sought to build on the psychologically driven models that emphasized flourishing, which incorporated the frameworks of retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000) and persistence (Braxton et al., 2011). Moreover, a thriving student does not simply give up when facing failure, but is rather able to strategize and plan ahead, a quality that is consistent with long lasting effects of thriving within SEMT.

According to Schreiner (2010a), “thriving college students not only are academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college” (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 4). Much like the factors reinforcing thriving within a workplace, Schreiner’s model of thriving in higher education embodied learning and vitality; “engaged learning” within academia, “developing healthy attitudes towards self and the learning process” on the intrapersonal level, and cultivating “meaningful connections with other people” through helping others and getting involved” all connote vitality and learning and are influenced both internally and environmentally (Schreiner, 2010a, pp. 4-5). Thriving within the context of
higher education as prescribed in the thriving quotient is deeply rooted in Seligman’s (2011) theory of well-being and closely interrelated with the socially embedded model of thriving, which in turn was inspired by self-determination theory.

This study is primarily inspired by Schreiner’s work in the field of thriving in higher education whereby she pursued to define thriving and identify the conditions that facilitate it in college (Schreiner, 2010a; 2013). Due to the context-specific differences between undergraduate and graduate studies, the above literature is not fully representative of the demographic of this study, i.e., graduate students. Moreover, much of the research in hand regarding students’ experiences in higher education and the factors contributing to their growth and development, such as the Thriving quotient (Schreiner, 2010a) and the relating studies, have been directed towards undergraduate students. The majority of the research literature reviewed in this section addressed the undergraduate population. However, it provides a solid baseline for building a general understanding of thriving in the context of graduate studies. Based on the guidelines of the SEMT and in reference to the thriving quotient, the below review of literature explored a wide range of factors contributing to student success and, by extension, thriving.

**Contextualization of Thriving**

Individuals’ level of thriving is mediated by both internal and external variables (Park, 1998). Moreover, individual backgrounds prior to entering higher education such as gender, ethnicity, and grades have substantially less effect on students’ ability to thrive within (Schreiner 2010a). Instead, thriving in social settings is jointly influenced by the characteristics of individuals and contexts (Spreitzer et al., 2005). With this knowledge in hand, I will proceed to review the literature addressing academic and non-academic thriving conditions for students in higher education based on personal characteristics of students and contextual characteristics of the institution.
Personal Characteristics

Thriving in higher education requires certain personal characteristics, which foster students’ thriving. Personal characteristics such as individuals’ personality, beliefs, race/ethnicity, and their behaviors during a stressful time are a few of the most studied traits and believed to be among the strongest determinants of thriving and psychological well-being (Carver, 1998). These characteristics define and shape individuals’ attitudes towards themselves and their learning environment. The process by which some people manage to maintain their psychological well-being towards thriving while others fail, can be partially attributed to their inner characteristics or intrapersonal elements. The most prominent personal characteristics that can produce thriving are conscientiousness, optimism, and religious faith.

Conscientiousness. There is a general consensus among researchers that the Five Factor Model (FFM) is the best representation for personal traits structure across a variety of contexts, including higher education. FFM analyzed personal characteristics with respect to five dimensions, labeled Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Among these traits, Conscientiousness received particular amount of attention.

McCrae (2004) defined conscientious individuals as those who are “methodical, purposeful, and deliberate” as opposed to being “disorganized, lazy, and hasty” and further associated high levels of conscientiousness with academic achievement. (McCrae, 2004, p. 469). McCrae and Costa (1992) suggested that Conscientiousness increases the likelihood of achievement of goals and, thus, directly influences life satisfaction. This theory was further examined resulting in similar results where Conscientiousness was positively related to subjective well-being (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008) and motivation (Judge, & Ilies, 2002). In conjunction with other factors, Conscientiousness was found to be a “positive and proactive personality” that enables high-achievers to thrive in challenging situations (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). That means
that individuals who have higher levels of Conscientiousness are more likely to be “motivated and persistent” in pursuing their goals (McLarty, Liguori, & Muldoon, 2012, p. 201) and, therefore, thrive. Moreover, Conscientiousness coincides with self-regulated learning, that is the ability to set goals and monitor one’s progress throughout the learning process (Pintrich, 2004). In turn, self-regulation is believed to be one of the constructs of thriving in higher education (Schreiner et al., 2009). In the context of higher education, Conscientiousness is attributed to a dependable, hardworking, and committed student who possesses the will and discipline to achieve their academic goals.

As a personality trait, Conscientiousness has been examined in the academic context among college and university students, with the majority of focus being dedicated to academic achievement and performance. Several studies have indicated Conscientiousness as the strongest predictor of academic achievement in comparison to the remaining factors within FFM (Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Roberts, Schnyder, & Niggli, 2009; Wagerman & Funder, 2006). Conscientiousness is, therefore, found to be strongly and consistently associated with academic success across empirical literature (O’Connor & Paunonen, 2007). In meta-analysis of the FFM, Poropat (2009) found that when tested independently from the other four factors, Conscientiousness was as significant as intelligence in predicting academic success. Kappe and Van Der Flier (2012) further confirmed this finding stating that Conscientiousness can explain five times more variance than intelligence in predicting GPA.

**Optimism.** Additionally, people possessing higher levels of optimism and hope also more likely to experience growth as a result of a stressful situation (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996) and have a better chance of thriving (Park, 1996). Optimism was positively correlated with undergraduate students’ ability to form social networks (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). Similarly, Schreiner (2010a) conceptualized intrapersonal thriving as having a “positive
perspective,” an optimistic view of the world and the future and emphasized that such a positive view is not a simplistic one, nor is it unrealistic (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 5). In fact, this “glass half-full approach” enables students to have a broader, more long-term view of their situation and proactively cope with it and, consequently, be more satisfied with their lives and their college (or university) experience (Schreiner, 2010a, p.5). Similarly, Carver, Scheier, Miller, and Fulford (2009) described a positive lens through which optimistic individuals assess their experiences and take positive steps towards achieving their desired future outcomes.

**Religious faith.** Individuals’ belief systems are unique constructs that directly contribute to thriving (Aldwin, Sutton, & Lachman, 1996; Llamas & Morgan Consoli, 2012; Park et al., 1996). Religious faith tends to encourage individuals to appraise and respond to stressful situations in a specific way and thus promote growth and thriving (Park, 1998). Moreover, it is a possible protective factor for individuals facing difficulties (Kasser, 2011). Higher levels of spirituality, for example, correlates positively with satisfaction, grades, academic self-esteem, and acceptance of diversity (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

Religious faith is also valuable in that it serves as a source of strength inclining individuals to notice and identify the positive outcomes of a stressful condition over the negative (Antonovsky, 1987; Krauss & Seltzer, 1993; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993; Park, 1998). Park, Cohen, and Murch (1996) pinpointed intrinsic religiousness as an intrapersonal characteristic that was the strongest predictor of Self-Reported Growth (SRG) among a sample of 256 college students. What is more, religion provides an avenue through which students have the ability to interpret negative experiences as merely temporary setbacks (Derrico, Tharp, & Schreiner, 2015). Such view pushes individuals to fulfill their purpose or what their faith has ‘called’ them to do (Astin et al., 2011; Derrico et al., 2015). As any positive outcome generates internalized confidence in students (Bean & Eaton, 2000), reshaping negative experiences to
positive ones leads to focusing on strategies to overcome difficulties and moving on (Derrico et al., 2015).

**Contextual Characteristics**

Although scholars have historically associated lack of graduate student persistence to individual characteristics (Berelson, 1960; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), examining institutional dynamics is the gateway to identifying causes for departure decisions beyond students entering characteristics (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Investigating institutional behaviors has provided the baseline for many scholars to examine how existing policies and practices within higher educational institutions have affected students’ success and offer strategies to undercut shortcomings and build a stronger bridge between students and the institutional body. For instance, Tinto (2010) suggested that students are more likely to succeed if their institution holds high expectations for their success, provides consistent feedback and support, and prioritizes their involvement and general well-being. To that end, universities have sought to design mechanisms to promote students’ thriving and success. Lau (2003) suggested that the institution can significantly enhance student retention by modifying and providing funding and academic, social, and cultural support, as well as physical facilities.

Community is widespread terminology in reference to institutions of higher education (Braxton et al., 2011; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Community consists of members who possess strong friendships; are trusting and supportive of each other, and constantly grow and develop (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community is the most important characteristic of a shared environment as it allows individuals to have “a setting and an audience” where they can project the unique aspects of their personality (McMillan, 1996, p. 315). To that end, contextual characteristics of thriving have been centered on the learning community and the behaviors that effect thriving within the learning community including sense of community and the supportive roles of engagement, faculty, peer, financial aids, and mental health services.
**Sense of community.** Generally speaking, success in higher education comprises of not only what individuals feel and the characteristics attributed to 'self', but also how they behave and what they do in regard to their community (Astin, 1999). Moreover, students who thrive are more likely to interact positively with their peers, be involved in campus activities, and identify with their academic community (Schreiner et al., 2009). In the context of academia, community relationships were considered one of the most important aspects of thriving, without which thriving would not be attainable (Schreiner, 2010b). Sense of community stems from interpersonal relationships (Braxton et al., 2011). Positive relationships are the essence of interpersonal thriving, and the basis for sense of community (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Pretty (1990) attempted to examine students’ sense of community in the context of residence halls and found that perceived sense of community was significantly associated with students’ interpersonal networks and supports (Pretty, 1990). Sense of community, in return, was negatively correlated with loneliness in a subsequent study (Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994). To that end, building friendships is crucial for students in developing a sense of community within university (Richardson et al., 2012; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2008; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Students with a strong sense of community feel their contributions acknowledged and their voices heard, they are proud of their institution and therefore capable of building relationships with others (Schreiner, 2013). Moreover, students who have higher sense of community tend to be more involved in their institution and participate in decision making processes that effect their environment (Cicognani, Pirini, Keyes, Joshanloo, Rostami, & Nosratabadi, 2008).

**Involvement.** Students who are actively involved in their university life tend to have a strong sense of community and belonging (DeNeui, 2003). Students’ involvement on campus and their interaction with peers and faculty members have long been identified as strong predictors of persistence and academic success (Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie,
Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Tinto, 2006; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Astin’s (1999) theory of involvement refers to an involved student as one who invests a considerable amount of energy and time to participate in events and interact with faculty members and peers. Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and their colleagues (2011) suggested that students who are positively involved in campus life are more likely to be satisfied with their overall experience. Involvement is thus a crucial aspect of thriving in that it allows students to build positive and meaningful relationships and establish a strong connection to their ecosystem (Schreiner et al., 2009). Not only do students learn better when they are involved, their academic performance and overall retention are also positively correlated with their involvement with Faculty, peers, and academics (Astin, 1993). Ullah and Wilson (2004) further confirmed the role of involvement in academia as the most important indicator of academic achievement among a sample of 2,160 undergraduate students.

That said, Hu (2010) found that the relationship between engagement and persistence among university students is not linear, meaning that while high level of social engagement promoted students to stay in university and complete their degrees, pure academic engagement had a negative effect on self-reported persistence. Such finding begged for a differentiation between academic engagement and social engagement as two separate components of a bigger picture. One possible explanation could be that students who are highly academically engaged, fail to engage on a social level, which in turn drops their persistence to a rate similar to those who have low-level academic as well as social engagement (Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000).

Meaningful engagement in the community requires early initiation. Students are less likely to increase their involvement at later stages of their higher education. Such notion is of importance for graduate students; graduate students need to participate in projects both inside and outside of class with faculty members and their peers to grasp the norms and expectations of their programs (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). There is a direct link between early involvement and connection to community and overall thriving. In a study intended to understand the impact of
involvement on student persistence, Berger and Milem (1999) established that students who were uninvolved early in the fall semester tended to stay uninvolved throughout the year and were less likely to perceive faculty and peers as supportive. Similarly, DeNeui’s (2003) study demonstrated that sense of community does not automatically increase for students and that students’ active participation along with their dedication to their roles determine its growth and sustainability.

These elements of interpersonal thriving seem to be more highlighted in regard to students of racial minorities. Although initially committed, students with racial minority backgrounds tend to lose persistence at later stages of university (Berger & Milem, 1999), driving scholars to investigate the reasons behind their declined thriving. Seeking to understand pathways of thriving among students of racial minorities, Schreiner (2014) found their thriving to be particularly influenced by their interpersonal relationships and involvement in campus life. For example, she uncovered that, for Black students, campus involvement directly influenced sense of community and thriving, especially when they were given leadership roles. One explanation may be, according to Schreiner, that leadership roles promote interactions with peers and faculty. They provide such students with the appropriate avenues to exercise their cultural values, consolidating their sense of community (Schreiner, 2014).

Support systems. Support embodies initiatives taken by peers, advisors, and faculty members, as well as services provided by the institution that foster academic success (Tinto, 2010). Such initiatives and services offer a flow of social stability and harmony for students to make a smooth transition to campus life and maintain wellness (Gloria & Robinson Kurpuis, 2001; Skahill, 2002). Conversely, the absence of social support undercuts developing a healthy social identity and sense of community (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999), resulting in marginalization. El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, and Bufka (2012) investigated the role of interpersonal support in degree completion among Ph.D. students and
hypothesized that graduate students who abandon their programs may have not been able to form a support system, and thus did not receive adequate social support.

Constant social and academic interaction with peers and faculty helps graduate students build a support system that would ultimately reduce negative effects of stressful situations, especially at the start of their program (Goplerud, 1980). Positive interaction between students and faculty facilitate socialization of graduate students and assimilation into graduate school (Austin, 2002; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Frequent and meaningful interaction between faculty and students can enhance graduate students’ satisfaction with their academic experience, including learning and socialization (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Institutions, thus, play important roles in supporting students’ thriving in graduate school. Below is an overview of the role of advisors (supervisors) as well as peers in thriving.

**Faculty.** Katz and Harnett (1976) predicted that Graduate students’ relationship with their advisor is fundamental in graduate student experience, as it can be both the best and the worst thing about the graduate experience. Advisors and supervisors are greatly responsible for providing students with support in gaining a proper understanding of what they need to do to be successful (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Metzner, 1989). Multiple studies have highlighted the importance of student-advisor relationship in graduate student persistence (Barnes, Chard, Wolfe, Stassen, & Williams, 2011; Barnes & Randall, 2012; Cockrell & Shelley, 2011; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Moreover, the quality of such advisement determines students’ satisfaction, particularly for students who are not sure about their educational goals (Lewallen, 1993). Advisors create the opportunity for students to learn from their mistakes and equip them with strategies to overcome obstacles (Schreiner, 2010a). In the graduate student context, advisors’ role varies from “laying out the structure and language of the field to inspiring enthusiasm for the life of the mind” (Baird, 1995, p. 25).
The advisor-advisee (or supervisor-supervisee) relationship is a crucial element of graduate education and success (Lovitts, 2001; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Patton 2009; Patton & Harper 2003). For instance, faculty mentors are believed to benefit graduate students by providing opportunities for employment (Bova 2000) and professional development (Bova & Phillips 1984). Graduate students are more likely to seek support from their advisors than other sources. In the sciences, for instance, graduate students are significantly more willing to turn to their supervisors for support than counselling (Toews et al., 1997). As such, students who have healthy, functional relationships with their supervisors tend to experience less stress (Hyun et al., 2006) and express greater satisfaction with their graduate experience (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Moreover, an advisor is a role model who mentors advisees and motivates them to be ethical in their future research careers (Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004).

Graduate students’ progress in their research and the time spent to complete their program is strongly dependent on the quality of their relationship with their advisors and their supportive role (Faghihi, 1998; Peacock, 1996). For example, Lovitts (2001) examined graduate students’ motivation to complete their degrees. In comparison to those who successfully completed their programs, non-completers felt that advisors were not interested in students as people, nor did these advisors care about their students’ professional development or their personal lives (Lovitts, 2001). Additionally, Heath’s (2002) research suggested that doctoral students who frequently met with their supervisors were more likely to succeed. Finally, clear and consistent feedback by advisors generally contributes to students’ academic development and success (Boud, 2001), especially in the graduate context (Bieber & Worley, 2006). Students who receive support from their advisors through regular interactions and feedback tend to complete their degrees more quickly compared to those who don't (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).
**Peers.** Peer mentoring is a semi-informal support intended to aid students to fit in, make connections, and succeed, especially those who are new to the environment (Twomey, 1991). Peer mentoring is informal in that it does not strictly entail academic support; it largely encompasses students passing on their wisdom to those who need it (Schreiner, 2010a; 2010b). Perhaps the significance of peer mentorship in graduate school is increasing student involvement and easing transition (Austin, 2002; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006), as well as building a sense of community (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, and Dhanarattigannon (2007) examined the role of peer mentoring in the level of stress associated with doctoral programs. Guided by the social and academic settings provided in peer mentorship sessions, students engaged in academic discourse, found the support they needed to reduce stress, and found themselves more confident in navigating through their program (Hadjioannou et al., 2007).

**Financial aid.** Students’ ability to successfully complete their degree is relatively dependent on their financial capabilities. Students who are able to meet the financial needs of higher education are likely to stay in graduate school (Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Financial support offered by institutions is a major component of student retention through graduate school (Rogers & Molina, 2005). Tied with poor advisor-advisee relationships, financial difficulty is the most common reason for dropping out of graduate school (Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1983).

Therefore, financial support offered by institutions as a result of such needs, in forms such as fellowship programs and teacher and research assistantships, tends to increase student involvement and socialization (Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Students who participate in such programs are thus more socially active. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) hypothesized that granting fellowships as financial assistance rather than teaching or research assistantships fails to engage graduate students within their departments and beyond. Graduate students who solely rely on funding as financial support have fewer opportunities to socialize with their community and
become involved. Lack of on-campus jobs and students’ ineligibility for such opportunities push graduate students to seek employment outside of their academic environments, causing them to constantly assess the cost and benefit of their education. Two repercussions are attendant here: seeking outside employment splits students’ focus on their academics, further alienating them from the rest of the community, and, more importantly, pressures them to either drop out or finish quickly (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). Such contentions call for greater attention to graduate students’ financial status throughout their programs.

Mental health care. Mental health initiatives stand at the top of the pyramid for their direct support of wellness. Negative mental health impairs academic success (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Karabenick & Collins-Eaglin, 1995). Such a consensus has drawn significant attention to promoting mental health and well-being by establishing related support systems, such as counselling services. College students’ mental health needs are continuously evolving (Levine & Cureton, 1998). In recent years, counselling services are required more than simply taking preventative measures; the increasing diversity of the college demographic has brought along additional issues, such as, multicultural, career, and developmental needs that compromise students’ wellness and success and require explicit attention (Archer & Cooper, 1998; Benton, Benton, Newton, Benton, & Robertson, 2004).

There is a positive correlation between counselling utilization and student retention (Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997). Counselling support is a protective factor that helps ensure healthy transition to graduate programs and successful completion of the degree (Johnson & Huwe, 2002). In a study aimed to understand graduate students’ well-being and their use of counselling services, Hyun et al. (2006) found that almost half of the participants experienced stress throughout their studies. The number of students who sought counselling help was significantly low. They further indicated that graduate students could benefit tremendously from tailored counselling services designed to meet their specific program needs (Hyun at al., 2006).
Summary

Thriving as an overarching concept is linked to different behaviors on the part of students and the institutions they attend. Students’ personal characteristics may facilitate thriving in the higher education context. Studies on traits such as conscientiousness, hope, and religious belief have been important resources in understanding non-academic aspects of higher education success. However, the nature of such characteristics and the degree to which they can be fostered have yet to be fully examined. The research available on such characteristics offers a deep understanding on how personality traits maneuver students’ behavior throughout their education. However, there needs to be a more detailed understanding of what those personal characteristics students and faculty can cultivate, and how they can accomplish this task.

Thriving in the higher education additionally consists of complex interactions among individuals (e.g., students, supervisors, faculty members). To understand these interactions, one must delve into the constructs of what moderates and controls them. Understanding the dynamics of such interactions is crucial, as doing so will inform future research intending to understand these connections. With the support provided by the community as a whole, individuals, and services students will be able to achieve sense of community and maintain meaningful involvement on various levels. Additionally, advisors-supervisors as well as peers both support and guide students towards achieving their goals and maintaining their well-being. Finally, financial and mental health support services offered by the institution attend to financial and psychological needs of students.

Thriving is a culmination of various types of support typically found in academia. Still, while different aspects of these interactions have been examined in isolation and their impact explained in detail, there is an increasing need to connect these findings and offer a holistic view of what constitutes fruitful academic experience for students. Such is the aim of the study in hand.
What impacts thriving is strongly linked to the demographic of the institution in question (Berea, Tsvetovat, Daun-Barnett, Greenwald, & Cox, 2015) and the individuals who constitute this demographic. Perhaps the most important results of the reviewed literature is summed up by Schreiner’s (2013) statement: “one size does not fit all.” In addition to scholars’ attempts to devise guidelines for all who are involved in higher education, it is important to recognize that customization is fundamental to any efforts of supporting students’ thriving (Schreiner, 2013).
Chapter 3

Methods

The following chapter describes the methods utilized to conceptualize and conduct the thesis. As part of a larger research study aiming to understand thriving and self-determination in the graduate studies context, the current study explored thriving experiences of four female, upper-year, master’s and doctoral students in their respective field of study utilizing a deductive qualitative method. The methodological framework guiding the larger study will first be introduced, followed by details of the current study’s design, participants, and instrument. This chapter will then proceed to provide a description of data collection and analysis processes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, a summary of ethical considerations is included at the end of this chapter.

Methodological Frame Work

Overview of the Larger Study

This study utilized data collected in a larger study entitled Self-determination and Thriving in Graduate Students. I have been a part of the larger study as a researcher, participating in data collection and analysis. A portion of the collected data has been utilized for the purposes of the current thesis. Naturally, the two studies share a variety of methodological aspects. An overview of the larger study is, therefore, beneficial to rationalize the current thesis.

Conducted across three time-periods (Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Fall 2017), the purpose of the larger study was to investigate the extent to which graduate and professional students report thriving and self-determination in the graduate studies context, as well as the events and experiences influencing their thriving and self-determination while attending a mid-sized university in eastern Canada. By extension, this thesis aimed to understand how thriving is
perceived by graduate students and hone in on the factors graduate students believed affected their thriving via their narratives.

The body of research dedicated to the topic of thriving among graduate students has been driven by either a quantitative or a qualitative approach. Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design helps formulate a holistic picture of this topic of investigation, all the while capturing its fine details (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2006). A combination of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies provided an opportunity to benefit from the strengths of each, offering a richer, more fruitful analysis (Greene & Caracelli 1997; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). The mixed-methods methodology consists of collecting and analyzing data both quantitatively and qualitatively and mixing both data at some stage within a singular study (Creswell 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). The most prominent advantage of using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches in the same study is to minimize the biases and weaknesses inherent to each, thus providing results that are more beneficial in addressing the research questions (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007).

Based on the above argument, the larger study consisted of two separate phases, the quantitative and the qualitative, with the quantitative proceeding the qualitative (Creswell, 2014). Priority, or the attention and weight given to a specific data source (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003; Morgan, 1998) was assigned to the quantitative phase based on the researchers’ interests (Morgan, 1998). As such, quantitative data informed the qualitative data collection in two ways. First, by identifying participant demographic (Creswell et. al., 2003; Rossman & Wilson 1985; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) and second, by devising interview questions that best targeted the self-determination and thriving criteria established in the surveys (Sieber, 1973). While both surveys and interviews were administered in the larger study over multiple time periods, the current thesis examined a subset of interviews from the Fall 2016 data
collection phase and describes only the elements of research directly applicable to the current thesis.

**Current Thesis**

Selecting the appropriate methodological framework for my study involved a process of deep reflection on my reasoning for undertaking a study within a study to fulfill my research intentions. With an abundance of diverse data being at my disposal, I chose to formulate the current research in a qualitative manner following the guidelines of a case study. Subsequently, I carried out data analysis for this study independently from the larger study.

Understanding thriving among graduate students called for an exploration of the topic, as explained in the previous section. My experiences as a graduate student were, and continue to be, interconnected with those of my peers, some of whom became my participants. It is, therefore, virtually impossible for me to fully isolate myself as a researcher from the topic of my thesis simply because I went through graduate studies very similarly to my participants and, naturally, identify with some of their stories, share some of their ideologies, and relate to their experiences on a personal level. In a sense, I was seeking to validate my experiences while and through uncovering the meanings reaped out of the life experiences of my participants, a quality Denzin and Lincoln attribute to a qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Unraveling personal experiences such as thriving is a complex subject in nature and not easily measurable. My exploration, therefore, consisted of a quest to understand how something happens, rather than its outcome (Patton, 1990), a task that seemed very difficult at first glance. That said, Leko (2014) offered a possible pathway to untangle this complexity through a “holistic examinations of the phenomenon in natural settings with participants’ voices at the forefront of the study” (Leko, 2014, p.276). My goal was to explore what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described as “the inner life of a person” to capture the fluidity and dynamism of thriving (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). My role, therefore, fit naturally into that of a qualitative researcher or a
“Bricoleur and quilt maker” who, seeks to use people’s narratives to produce an aesthetic manifestation of their everyday experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4).

I viewed my participants as my peers, real people who live in the real world. Such approach required a deep understanding of their individual perspectives of a shared feeling; their first-hand accounts as experienced by them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To do so, I utilized the analytic lens of a case study. Stakes (1995) described the case study approach as a way to zoom in on the unique as well as common aspects of a phenomena experienced by certain groups of people guided by the researcher’s “sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus” (Stakes, 1995, p. 1). Within that definition, a case is a “specific thing, a complex functioning thing” that consists of people who share specific characteristics in a general context (Stakes, 1995, p. 2). On one hand, literature describes graduate students as unique demographics within post-secondary education and on the other hand, my intrinsic interests have driven me to focus on this particular demographic. Accordingly, female graduate students can be construed as one case existing in the larger context of the university. I am not attempting to understand thriving through examining female graduate students, but rather unravel the experiences of the four female graduate students by studying how they thrive. The case studied here is a bounded system (Miller & Salkind, 2002) defined as four female graduate students who completed the first year of their program in a small Faculty in the humanity and social sciences at a mid-sized university in eastern Canada in 2016.

The contextual background as described in the previous chapter have distinct implications on the topic of thriving for the participants of this study. One of the conditions under which a case study approach may be carried out is when the researcher believes the “contextual conditions” of the participants influence the topic of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). In understanding the implications of this study, therefore, it is important to keep in mind the parameters of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). One of the unique contextual characteristics of the
above case is the size of the Faculty where participants studied. Small and intimate, this Faculty connoted notions of community and closeness. That, in turn, can potentially determine their behaviors and beliefs in relation to their thriving. The culture of the environment could be accordingly influenced. Having passed the first year of their study, participants shared common aspects as a result of their academic phase. As graduate students typically begin by passing courses in the first year then research in the following years, students in their second year and above may be different than those in their first year in terms of their needs and views. The parameters of the case, therefore, narrowed down the scope of this study to its boundaries.

**Research Design**

**Participants**

Participant selection procedure was informed by the guidelines of the stratified purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990) to explore in depth the similarities and differences across the strata (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The diversity of the data collected within the larger study, presented me with a plethora of choices; I was allowed access to a rich pool of diverse data as individuals who participated in the larger study varied in Faculty, year of program, degree, gender, and residency status. However, the number of individuals belonging to each category was limited. Therefore, narrowing down of the number of categories of participants was deemed necessary. Four female second-year and above graduate students were selected, three of which were in the master’s program and three in the doctoral program in one small Faculty in a mid-sized university in eastern Canada. As such, degree program was established as the stratification category. Figure One illustrates the sampling process in relation to the larger study.
Figure 1. Participant Selection Process

**Graduate student recruitment.** Individuals who participated in the first phase of surveys within the larger study were asked to indicate whether they were interested in further involvement in the research project. Potential interviewees were assigned to each researcher to contact individually for an interview request. As part of the research team, I took part in participant recruitment and conducted a number of interviews, some of which were chosen for the current thesis. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym of their choosing and addressed accordingly throughout the study. Table One outlines each participant’s characteristics.

**Table 1. Stratification Criterion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second year and above</td>
<td>Second year and above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/university X</td>
<td>Faculty/university X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Degree program stratification category. Tinto (1993) stated that students in post-secondary differ in their experiences based on their progress in their degrees. The quality of students’ initial experiences in university are significant predictors of their success in the first year, as well as in the years leading to degree completion. Moreover, if students are able to integrate into university life, i.e., adjust appropriately to academic demands (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994) and social contexts (Tinto, 1993), they are more likely to stay in the university, complete the requirements of their degree, and be satisfied with their educational experience. I attempted to ensure specificity and precision by creating a distinction between first-year and second-year and above due to the noted above contextual nuances.

Moreover, personal identification with this sample (as I am also an upper-year graduate student) was a strong driver towards such manner of participant selection. As a full-time, female, upper-year master’s student, I was most invested in understanding the experiences of my fellow female master’s students, not only in their present challenges, but also in the challenges that lie ahead in continuing their graduate education as Ph.D. students. I have spent the majority of my time interacting with my community of peers, building friendships with them, celebrating their triumphs, and empathizing with the challenges they faced. A strong sense of camaraderie drove me to pursue a topic that ultimately not only influenced me, but my peers alongside who I have journeyed alongside. In a sense, I felt, and continue to feel, a sense of obligation to serve the community I feel most connected to in understanding the topic of thriving through this thesis study I am most passionate about. Students who shared various aspects of their personal experience in graduate school, I felt, best represented the collective voices of the graduate student body. As such, stratification category was set as the degree program (Table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Degree Program</th>
<th>Year of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leandra</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Six eligible participants’ transcripts, three in each category, were selected in this manner and their data analyzed. All six participants and their stories were initially assigned for this thesis and their transcripts were fully analyzed. However, only four sets of data were utilized when data saturation was achieved. Data saturation is described as “a criterion for discontinuing data collection and/or analysis” (Saunders et al., 2017, p. 2). Accordingly, I started by analyzing all six transcripts until data became repetitive and redundant. This approach of saturation takes place on a transcript level wherein “new data repeat what was expressed in previous data” (Saunders et al., 2017, p. 5). As such, four of the six transcripts where deemed to offer the richest data and were further presented in this study.

Transcripts that met the research criteria were nominated out of the larger study’s interview codex. The transcripts of full-time master’s and doctoral students who were studying in the same Faculty and university who had completed their first year of studies and self-identified as female were pulled out of the data pool. When using already collected qualitative data, Åkerström, Jacobsson, and Wästerfors (2004) suggested that it is the researcher’s choice and rather responsibility to select interviews that best serve the research topic as well as the researcher’s interest. It was, therefore, important to use data that offered new insights into the topic, until no new data emerged. Second, the narrative aspect of data presentation being the intent, narrative-rich transcripts were predominantly considered.
Data Source

Throughout this research project, I sought to echo the exploratory nature of this inquiry. Individuals’ personal experiences being the focal point of my research, I utilized the method most typical and consistent with a qualitative research, i.e., interviews. Goodman (2001) stated that “spontaneous responses to questions asked on the spot can augment the researcher's understanding of participants' thoughts about events in progress” (Goodman, 2011, p. 11), thereby proving this approach to be one of the most powerful (McCracken, 1988) and used (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996).

In his book *Learning from Strangers*, Weiss (1994) described interviewing as a powerful tool of enquiry because “it gives us access to the observations of others” (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). Not only will the researcher explore people’s perceptions and enquire about their view of the world, through interviewing in is possible to unravel “how events effected [participants’] thoughts and feelings.” (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). In that sense, interviews were the medium through which individuals could share their own stories and perspectives. Interviews allowed me to delve deeply into the hidden meanings (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) of their daily life experiences (Kvale, 1996). Selecting interviews as the principal data source reflected open, flexible, and salient data, raw in its individuality while being identifiable and close to the fabric of everyday life (Kvale, 1996).

In-Depth Interviewing

I followed an in-depth approach to interviewing as prescribed by Foley (2014) based on the principle that the interviewee is not a respondent, but rather the teacher and the interviewer, therefore, the learner (Foley, 2014). Situating the participant as the person in charge of the conversation, required flexibility on my part, thus allowing the said participant to control the speed and direction of the interview and the topics she wished to disclose (Foley, 2014). In that sense, I attempted to augment participants’ perspectives accordingly to uncover the hidden
meanings in their stories, which is an approach most consistent with in-depth interviewing (Rapp, Kisthardt, Gowdy, & Hanson, 1994).

The interview questions for the first phase of the larger study were devised in collaboration with the entire research team in multiple meetings. As a team member, I contributed my ideas and comments to develop the questions alongside my colleagues. A Google Documents file was created to review the questions collectively and on a regular basis, while I included my edits and commented on my teammates’ edits along the way. After reviewing possible research questions in accordance with the study’s purpose, a draft was submitted to the then team leader, Dr. Freeman, who made the necessary changes, after which the final version was developed and used in the interviews.

Based on the preliminary analysis of Fall, 2016 survey of the larger study, fourteen interview questions were devised. Focusing on thriving and self-determination, the interview protocol was divided into three categories: 1) Thriving and Wellness, 2) Self-Determination and Your Program, and 3) Looking Back and Looking Forward. As the responses within these categories were all applicable to the topic of this thesis, I utilized the responses to all the three sections.

The first section of the interview was devised to elicit a definition for thriving and well-being in the context of graduate studies, followed by self-assessment of thriving and well-being on the scale of one to ten. Participants further provide a rationale for their assessment. The remaining questions in this section aimed at exploring perceived supports and barriers to thriving, such as events and experiences that positively or negatively affected their thriving and well-being in their studies.

The second section of the interview inquired about participants’ relatedness, autonomy, and competence, and the effect of each on their thriving and well-being. Participants were asked to describe their relationships within their institution. A mixture of relatedness and competence
was explored through the extent of participants’ involvement in their learning community. The interview further inquired about participants’ freedom to pursue knowledge that they felt was meaningful to them, which targeted their perceived autonomy. The final question in this section aimed at understanding participants’ level of perceived competence by enquiring about the extent to which they felt they were capable of succeeding within their programs.

The final section of the interview was designed to provide an overview of participants’ extent of thriving based on their previous description. These questions include change in thriving and well-being over the course of their program, changes in their personal and academic goals, and personal recommendations to their Faculty in support of their thriving and well-being. In the final question, participant reflect on their graduate journey and share their learned lessons in this experience. A copy of the interview protocol utilized for this study is presented in Appendix A.

Data Collection

The process of collecting data for the larger study consisted of interview sessions conducted by my colleagues and myself. Identical protocols were employed in the entire data collection process described below in the Interview Protocol section. Two of the interviews considered for this thesis were conducted by me (Isabella and Helena), while the remaining two (Angela and Leandra) were carried out by fellow researchers. Several meetings prior to commencing data collection were held among the research team to ensure consistency in the manner the interviews were to be conducted. Moreover, I listened to the interview recordings repeatedly to get a contextual sense of interview sessions I did not personally conduct. I sought to identify subtle contextual indicators that would typically be picked up on the scene, such as laughter indicating a less serious remark or long pause demonstrating hesitation. To fully envision these interview scenes, I enquired to researchers who conducted the interviews about certain parts of the interviews that were not clear to me, as well as specific contextual information.
Interview Protocol

Subsequent to recruitment, participants were contacted via Email to establish mutually agreed upon time and place to conduct the interview. The majority of them chose the Faculty building as the interview site, in a quiet space either a room of their choosing or my office. To further help participants feel at ease and comfortable, I greeted them with a beverage based on their preference prior to the commencement of the interview. I began the interview by introducing myself, the intent of the study, and how their contributions were thought to benefit graduate students. I then provided them with a copy of the interview protocol, allowing them enough time to familiarize themselves with it. Interview sessions lasted approximately one hour each and were audio-recorded using a variety of audio-recording devices. For my interviews, I used a VoiceMemo application in my phone, as well as a backup recording application on my laptop. The recordings were transferred to DropBox immediately after the session was over, protected by a password only accessible by me and my colleagues.

Performing in-depth interviewing as described in the previous section, requires two main components, both of which I attempted to incorporate in the interview protocol. Much like the thesis in hand, when more than one person is conducting the interview, a degree of structure is inevitable and even useful (Tutty et al., 1996). However, to reduce structure and allow as much fluidity and spontaneity of response and freedom of expression as possible, interview sessions were designed in a semi-structured manner (Hays & Singh, 2012; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002). I allowed the conversation to be directed by the participant within the confines of the broad topic (Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). I sought to obtain deeper elaborations by asking exploratory questions such as ‘why’ or ‘how’. Even though preliminary interview questions were devised in advance, I took notes of ideas raised in the course of the interview and promptly asked participants additional questions to further unfold those ideas brought up by the participants (Hays & Singh, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Furthermore, to
channel my participants’ voices, I provided examples and gave verbal prompts as needed (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Second, Foley (2014) suggested that in an in-depth interview both the interviewee and the interviewer are actively engaged in the topic of discussion and maintained that complete neutrality on the part of the interviewer is an unattainable goal (Foley, 2014). Because of the nature of in-depth interviewing, both the researcher and the participant collaborate to uncover multiple truths about the topic (Johnson, 2002). To achieve this level of interaction and deliver accurate data, I attempted to build a rapport with my participants (Patton, 2002) through mutual understanding of the experiences they shared. I, additionally, familiarized myself with the interviewees’ contextual characteristics, which helped me revisit the interview within its particular context later on (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). At the end of the interview, participants were asked to add any information they deemed significant but overlooked, some of which responded to as a way to voice their personal concerns. I further encouraged them to contact me with any information they felt they need to add.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using the deductive thematic approach. After data collection was terminated, interview sessions were transcribed verbatim to be used for data analysis. I began by reading through the notes I jotted down during data collection to re-familiarize myself with the interviews and how I thought I wanted to present the data at the time of their collection (Patton, 1995). Afterwards, I pursued data analysis.

Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe (2010) defined thematic analysis as a “systematic approach” that involves producing themes or “patterns of cultural meanings”, generating codes or “classifying data”, and offering interpretation of the thematic structure (Mills at al., 2010, p. 926). I attempted to make sense of raw data to create order out of chaos in a manner that would lead to
generating a structural interpretation of the case (Boyatzis, 1998). My ultimate goal was to address my questions in a way that makes most sense to me.

There is general consensus among qualitative scholars that disavows the existence of one appropriate thematic approach to a single study, concurring that there are merits and disadvantages to both inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Mills et al., 2010). The process of selecting the appropriate analysis approach or making the choice between inductive and deductive approach in this context, is therefore informed and guided by the characteristics of an individual study, one of which is the study’s research questions (Mills et al., 2010). My research questions projected a strong element of structure that is most associated with the deductive approach, as they enquired about three key notions: how thriving is perceived and what supports and hinders it. Therefore, I allowed the research questions to guide thematic analysis and become themselves the producers of the themes.

Deductive coding is the process of reasoning from general to specific (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). In performing deductive thematic data analysis, I followed Crabtree and Miller’s (1999) proposed template approach, which consisted of the process of developing a codebook containing a set of predetermined general categories. These categories were designated based on the research questions or the theoretical framework, and were later applied to matching segments of the transcript. A codebook consists of a label or name, definition or what the theme entails, and description of how to identify it (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The importance of developing a codebook in deductive analysis was to guide the process of coding; clear definitions provided a unified strategy for me to apply across all the codes, which in turn enhanced the quality of the process. Reviewing my research questions, I designated the themes as perceptions and experiences, supports, and barriers. I further narrowed down supports and barriers by dividing each into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional factors guided by
a system’s theory approach developed by Bronfenbrenner (2009). Table Three illustrates the codebook developed for this study.

Coding began by reading each transcript individually (Patton, 1990). To do so, I organized each transcript and developed a coding system using the Microsoft Word™ (MW) software in the early stages of analysis and completed manually. With the codebook in hand, I devised a coding approach that was both systematic and reliable. My coding system consisted of highlighting excerpts of the transcripts that corresponded with the themes. The quotes highlighted, I utilized the comment feature on MW where I assigned the first letter of the interviewer’s pseudonym followed by the chronological order of the quote, plus a label or description, referred to here as the preliminary code. This system allowed me to track my codes as needed and refer back to the original quote when writing up results. Once the entire transcript was coded this manner, I went through each preliminary code and, using a pen and paper, further clustered them into secondary codes. Subsequently, I placed each secondary code into its corresponding sub-theme, which automatically fell into the corresponding theme in reference with the codebook.

There existed few nuances in my data analysis process. First, while reading the transcripts I took notes of important quotes I thought captured the essence of each participants’ narrative. I used these excerpts at the beginning of results production to complement the introductory segments of the results. Second, I stumbled upon portions of transcripts during data analysis that did not necessarily fit into the codebook or corresponded with any of the themes. I treated these codes as emerging ideas, thus incorporating elements of inductive thematic analysis into the process (Mills et al., 2010). Doing so allowed me to reduce the risk of “rigidity and premature closure” of the deductive approach (Mills et al., 2010, p. 926) and incorporate both “structure and flexibility” in my data analysis (Mills et al., 2010, p. 751). Two samples of transcript illustrating the above manner of coding is presented in Appendices one and two.
Table 3. Research Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Perceptions and Experiences of Thriving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>The participant’s individual conceptualization of what thriving is and a self-assessment of her current state of thriving based on a rating system of 1 (lowest state of thriving) to 10 (highest state of thriving).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>A detailed description of what a thriving graduate student looks like and how thriving can be achieved, as well as the different ways the participant has not experienced thriving in her program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Supports for Thriving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Participant’s recount of events and/or experiences that can support or further thriving in graduate school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                         | Description                               | Sub-Theme 1: Label Intrapersonal Support  
Definition: Support within one’s self  
Description: Elements originating from within that promote the participant’s sense of thriving, such as personal characteristics and attributes |
|                         |                                           | Sub-Theme 2: Label Intrapersonal Support  
Definition: Support from other individuals  
Description: Supportive individuals and any form of relationships, as well as the participant’s involvement within or outside graduate school that support her ability to thrive in graduate school |
|                         |                                           | Sub-Theme 3: Label Institutional Support  
Definition: Support embedded within the educational institution  
Description: Resources offered by the University and Faculty as well as policies/guidelines that are in support of the participant’s ability to thrive in graduate school |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Barriers to Thriving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Participant’s recount of events and/or experiences that can hinder thriving in graduate school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                         | Description                               | Sub-Theme 1: Label Intrapersonal Barrier  
Definition: Barrier within one’s self  
Description: Elements originating from within that hinder the participant’s sense of thriving, such as mental health issues |
|                         |                                           | Sub-Theme 2: Label Intrapersonal Barrier  
Definition: Barriers in relation to other individuals  
Description: The presence of absence of individuals or relationships within or outside of graduate school that hinder the participant’s ability to thrive in graduate school |
|                         |                                           | Sub-Theme 3: Label Institutional Barrier  
Definition: Barriers embedded within the educational system  
Description: Ineffectiveness/serenity/absence of resources offered by the University or Faculty as well as policies/regulations/guidelines that hinder the participant’s ability to thrive in graduate school |
Trustworthiness

Ethical clearance for the larger study initiated by Dr. John Freeman was received from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) from the university of origin. The current study has been granted ethical clearance as a sub-component of the larger study (Appendix C). I strived to ensure all ethical procedures were followed throughout data collection and analysis as identified in the ethics clearance of the larger study. Thus, ethical protocols of this study were in-line with those of the larger study. These procedures are described below.

In the interview session, participants were first provided a Letter of Information (LOI)/Consent Form (see Appendix D). LOI sought to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of the purpose of the study, the potential benefits and risks associated with the study, the manner in which their information would be used, their right to withdraw, and privacy protection protocols (Creswell, 2014). To avoid pressuring them, I informed my participants that they do not have any obligation to sign the LOI and answer questions about which they do not feel comfortable, and that they may stop the interview session or take a break at any point in time, if they so felt inclined (Creswell, 2014). Participants were made aware of the content of the LOI by reviewing it themselves, as well as a verbal summary given by me.

I additionally reiterated that some of the questions could potentially lead to discussing intimate experiences of mental health, which could provoke emotional responses in participants. Therefore, I encouraged them to seek counselling in case of emotional discomfort as a result of the interview by contacting the imbedded counsellor at the Faculty as well as the counselling department at the university, whose telephone numbers were additionally included in the LOI. Finally, the participants were made aware that they may withdraw their statements or their participation during or after the interview session without any consequences. I further reassured them that if and when they decided to withdraw, all the corresponding data would be destroyed.
The Faculty where I conducted this study is a relatively small community where most graduate students know each other and stay in close contact. As such, members of the community can potentially identify a participant’s statement based on a combination of generic details, such as their year of study, program, and ethnicity. To that end, I intended to mask participants’ identities in ways that did not harm or influence the analysis of data. Altering small details when describing the participant’s appearance was one example of masking identity. Through masking identity, I was able to share participants’ information without unduly risking their privacy or the validity of the data.

To ensure preserve the credibility of my research I incorporated member-checking measure before releasing the results. Through member-checking, participants were able to go over the interview transcript and incorporate their comments into the narrative or retract statements that jeopardized their privacy (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After transcription, I emailed transcripts to their corresponding participants asking them to go over their transcripts carefully and share any comments or concerns about their statements and make any changes as they saw fit and asked them to forward back their revisions to be used in the study. They were given a two-month window to respond. Some participants took advantage of this opportunity and were contacted in the manner they selected to discuss their thoughts, while the majority either did not respond or required no revision. Finally, participants’ comments and their wishes to omit any part of their narrative were incorporated into the writing process using pseudonyms to further conceal their identity.

In addition to the steps taken above, I further attempted to ensure the trustworthiness of this study through minimizing my own biases. The researcher’s closeness to the topic of investigation and the participants can potentially pose a threat to the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Mehra, 2002). Chenail (2011) concurs that “given this affinity, these insider investigators may limit their curiosities so they only discover what they think they don’t know,
rather than opening up their enquiries to encompass also what they don't know they don't know” (Chenail, 2011, p. 257). It is therefore, important for researchers to avoid imposing their preconceived ideas and predispositions into the voices of their participants (Patton, 1990). However, Patton (1990) iterates that true researcher subjectivity is difficult and might not be fully achieved.

One way to minimize bias is acknowledging and clarifying positionality on the part of the researcher in relation with the topic and the participants (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Throughout this report, I sought to disclose the underpinning beliefs of selecting the methods and methodologies that guided this study. Further, I used my positionality as a researcher to my advantage; because of my closeness to the context and the participants of this study, I was able to remove my identity as a graduate student and become my participants. In that sense, I impersonated their identities and experienced graduate studies through their lenses for the duration of conducting this study and producing this report. Such process additionally allowed me to engage in constant “critical self-reflection” on my potential biases, bringing continuous self-awareness to instances where the trustworthiness of this study might have been jeopardized in collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data (Johnson, 1987, p. 283).
Chapter 4

Results

Overarching Themes

Utilizing a deductive approach to data analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005) and based on the reviewed literature, three main themes have been selected: Perceptions and Experiences of Thriving, Supports for Thriving, and Barriers to Thriving. While the first theme identified participants’ understanding of the nature of thriving and how it can be achieved, the second and third themes, i.e., supports and barriers, were organized by sources originating from self, interpersonal relationships, and the university as an institution (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Levels of Supports and Barriers](image-url)
Considering the topic of this study, and based on the reviewed literature, individual voices were of utmost important as they best served the intent of this research study. The established themes were interconnected within each individual story. An isolated view of each participants’ narrative allowed me to gain an understanding of several key aspects in relation to the topic without losing site of individualized perspectives. With the goal of voicing participants’ stories in mind, I proceeded to echo each narrative and explore themes separately within each transcript.

Isabella, Angela, Helena, and Leandra each had fundamentally distinct experiences in graduate school. Such distinction can be strongly attributed to the diversity of their background, experiences, and personality, the combination of which encapsulated their graduate experience and shaped their perspectives. An understanding of these elements will help the reader better grasp the reality of each story with a focus on the individual voice. Each story is, therefore, introduced through a description of these circumstances.

Following the introduction, the first selected theme revolves around perceptions of thriving and the experiences leading to their formation. This theme provides a framing for thriving in graduate studies, as well as a lay the groundwork for subsequent themes that describe supports and barriers.

Supports for and barriers to thriving were the second and third established themes for this study. Participants were asked to point out specific factors affecting their thriving, positively or negatively, within their Faculty, university, and city. They were additionally asked to describe the three elements of SDT theory to examine their competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Their identified supports and barriers as well as the circumstances in which they were deemed advantageous and disadvantageous were reflected within these themes. Supportive and hindering factors were highly individualized; for example, while socially charged studying environments were deemed conducive to thriving by one student, another referred to communal
spaces as distractors and preferred academically focused communal spaces. Funding, for example, represented as both a source of financial stability and academic stress. As such, individuals’ back-stories and the circumstances that surrounded their judgment were as important as the factors themselves.

**Isabella’s Voice**

“Thriving… that’s a very complicated question.”

Isabella was a master’s student. She possessed a cheerful personality that radiated positivity. At the time of the interview, Isabella had recently completed the first year of her studies, which comprised of passing all of her course requirements and entering the research stage of her studies. The stage at which Isabella had reached in the program at the time of the interview had contoured her narration of the study, as she described the different aspects of thriving in relation where she was as a graduate student.

The stories shared by Isabella resonated perseverance, triumph, and vulnerability. She spoke openly and fearlessly about issues of concern in the Faculty where she studied. Protecting the well-being of students had been a cause Isabella advocated for in various capacities. As a teacher, she aspired towards helping the youth grow in a learning environment that was safe and inclusive. As a scholar, she had chosen to investigate possible ways to enhance the educational system she herself grew up in. Whether in the context of scholarly or extracurricular activities, she spoke without fear of judgment and questioned the status-quo of in hopes of helping to build an educational system that emanated support and compassion for vulnerable students.

The interview was held in the graduate student space, where my colleague and I selected as a convenient venue and collaboratively conducted the interview. This locale was the graduate student hub, which Isabella spent many hours writing, researching, and socializing with her peers and, as she later described, felt quite comfortable being at. On a personal level, I was quite familiar with Isabella. Therefore, we shared what I felt was a sense of comradery; an invisible
connection that enveloped us through mutual experience in graduate school. Moreover, with the three of us being graduate students, a bond was formed effortlessly and the interview evolved quickly into an intimate conversation between friends. Consequently, Isabella appeared to be comfortable, even when recalling unpleasant anecdotes of her personal life. Despite their relevance to the topic of this thesis, some of details of these stories shall remain confidential as to protect Isabella’s privacy.

The culmination of Isabella’s personal and professional experiences guided the course of the interview, as well as her master’s thesis topic, which concerned raising mental health awareness and creating a supportive learning community. Mental and spiritual well-being in conjunction with sense of community, therefore, became the motifs of this interview. Isabella’s passion for mental health awareness was both anticipated and fully apparent; she strived to vocalize the importance of mental well-being in the Education field as a whole. Sense of community was equally important, as Isabella relied on her family, partner, peers, and faculty to reach a state of thriving.

That said, Isabella’s long-term battle with mental illness and her ability to overpower its crippling aftermath was, perhaps, the driving force for her mental health advocacy, as well as the incentive to participate in this study. She shed light on the history of her mental illness and her journey to recovery as a graduate student. Because well-being was what Isabella cared for professionally, educationally, and personally, the state of thriving as a graduate student became secondary and even an obstacle to continuous well-being.

**Perceptions and Experiences of Thriving**

Isabella possessed distinct views of thriving and well-being. Isabella viewed thriving and well-being as separate concepts; while she perceived well-being in graduate studies as essential to achieving a sense of positivity and harmony, achieving the state of thriving in this context, she viewed, could potentially disrupt her mental health and well-being. That was because, to Isabella,
thriving in graduate school suggested prioritizing academic achievement over mental well-being. Isabella then proceeded to rate her own thriving within a scale of one to ten and provided the rationale for her self-assessment.

**Perceptions.** Well-being was a multifaceted and all-encompassing concept to Isabella. Isabella’s perceived ability to maintain a balanced life determined her mental health state. The state of well-being, therefore, comprised the social, professional, and personal aspects of life coexisting and interacting in a harmonious manner. Thus, the markers of academic success, such as passing courses and sustaining meaningful involvement in academia, were prudent to her well-being in the academic context along with the other aspects mentioned above. As such, academic successes and accomplishments had been further promoters of well-being as a graduate student: “thriving academically actually fed into my wellness, because even when other aspects of my life weren’t perfect I felt like one thing was working, which gave me the strength to improve those other areas.” Academic success, therefore, was incremental to Isabella’s well-being as a graduate student.

When achieved, thriving in graduate school was a potential threat to well-being according to Isabella. She believed that thriving inherently inhibited one’s ability to maintain well-being in graduate school. In fact, Isabella noted that thriving and well-being were two distinct spheres. As one naturally diminished the other, therefore, they could not coexist in one individual. Isabella viewed thriving and well-being as negatively interrelated; while full academic investment of effort and energy compromised well-being, moderate, but acceptable, academic success actualized well-being and facilitated its continuation. In regard to her current state of well-being versus thriving, Isabella explained: “I wouldn't say I'm thriving necessarily, but I would say I'm well- I'm being moderately successful.” In that sense, Isabella placed her well-being first and thriving second in graduate school, an order with which she was quite content.
Prioritizing self over academics extended beyond graduate school. Isabella explained that self-care was a philosophy, one that was teachable and transferable. She hypothesized that if graduate students did not grasp the importance of their own self-care, it would be rather unlikely that they recognize its crucial impact in their professions as future educators in their respective fields. Isabella argued that and awareness was, therefore, needed to ensure that graduate students comprehend the fundamentality of mental health and well-being. Alluding to her own experience as a graduate student diagnosed with mental illness, Isabella further explained that mental health awareness must take precedence in any educational setting. She proposed that “teachers play a bigger role than we educate them in the well-being of their own students”, and that “we can do better to meet the new standards.” She further highlighted the existing gap between our beliefs in the importance of mental health and well-being and the strategies in practice to actualize them.

**Experiences.** Isabella carefully placed her overall rating of thriving at seven and a half out of ten. Such number, however, reflected her graduate experience in its entirety and her state of thriving at the time of the interview was, as she later explained, much lower. Having had completed the first stage of her program successfully, she rationalized, put her state of thriving well above average; excelling at coursework and achieving high grades were perfect indicators Isabella’s thriving in the first half of her graduate program. However, research-related struggles and their consequences had reduced her thriving and well-being considerably, causing it to drop to an average of five.

Much like any other master’s student, Isabella was required to comply with certain ethical standards in order to initiate data collection. Therefore, Isabella’s degree completion at the time relied on her ability to obtain ethical approval. However, certain ethical restrictions associated with her topic of research had brought her academic progress to a standstill. As described by Isabella, those restrictions lacked both necessity and applicability, which caused her to feel generally dissatisfied with her progress in the program.
The attempts made by Isabella to comply with the standards set by the board of ethics had been unfruitful and her experience with the process, disappointing. Based on her experience, she considered the ethics clearance process to be mere “hoops to jump through” as opposed to meaningful measures towards ensuring the trustworthiness of the subject study. Isabella expressed strong contempt with such limitations, rendering them irrational practices: “I get frustrated because I get recommendations that have to do more with being politically correct than with the ethical standards for my participants.” Therefore, not only was she concerned about the hindering effect of such experience on her progress, but she was also skeptical about the extent to which such guidelines were beneficial to her demographic of concern.

Supports for Thriving

Recounting the circumstances and events affecting her thriving and well-being, Isabella noted key individuals as well as an abundance of institutional resources which supported her thriving. With the majority of her focus dedicated to external sources, much less emphasis had been given to intrapersonal factors of support. As a result, Isabella’s source of support mainly comprised of interpersonal as well as institutional elements.

Interpersonal support. Within the interpersonal realm of support, Isabella noted the fundamental role of her relationships in support of her ambition of obtaining a higher education degree, which included peers, family, and faculty members. Isabella’s family dynamics had been the backbone of her support system. A well-established network of relationships and various graduate school involvements had been prudent to establishing a sense connectedness to a community of like-minded peers. Additionally, the positive nature of Isabella’s relationship with her supervisor had been an additional conducive factor to her thriving.

Having strong Interpersonal tendencies, Isabella described herself as a “community-minded person.” Sense of belonging to a community, therefore, possessed a powerful impact on her thriving. Her natural draw to the notion of community aside, Isabella felt she required a safe
environment to heal mentally and emotionally. The effects of her past traumatic experiences prior to graduate school left Isabella feeling “mentally unwell” and “not connected to reality,” which later extended to graduate school, affecting Isabella’s thriving as a graduate student. The Education community was a substantial source of support for Isabella in that regard. She was able to gradually restore her mental health and overcome the crippling aftermath of her mental illness within graduate school and function as a student. The “immense improvement” of Isabella’s psychological condition was partly delivered by the virtue of a supportive community, her graduate student friends. Such amity had helped Isabella to feel “accepted” and “safe” in the Faculty. Safety, she recalled, was extremely important: “I just didn't feel safe at all, ever, and I feel safe here.” The community that existed within the Faculty had additionally promoted Isabella’s feeling of being “capable, competent, and able to be successful and the ability to improve.” The community, therefore, allowed Isabella to feel safe again while recognizing her contributions to the field.

Despite its effectiveness in ensuring a constant flow of support and positivity, a community mind-set, as Isabella further explained, had at times been daunting to her well-being. Seeking external validation occasionally resulted in excessive attempts to please people to exhibit flexibility and build sustainable interpersonal connections. Reflecting on her graduate studies journey thus far, Isabella contemplated a balanced mentality and course of action in forming interpersonal relationships where she vocalized her opinions more often: “I maybe wouldn’t take people’s disapproval as seriously as I did. That I would be a little bit more ‘me’, which makes other people uncomfortable [chuckles] and not be so tentative to make other people uncomfortable.” Isabella’s inclination to belong to the community had, at times, caused her to comply with the community’s norms and expectations, even when they contradicted with her own ideologies.
The quality of Isabella’s relationships had been far superior to the number of relationships she had been able to cultivate in graduate school. She shed light on her predisposition to be a selective individual when it came to the people she interacted with. Isabella’s friendships within graduate school, therefore, were limited in number. However, such restriction was compensated by the strength and depth of these friendships and their consequent supportive role. She further explained that her tendency to be more “family oriented” rather than social had caused her to place greater importance on her family: “on one side of my family, I am the first person to university. My grandfather is very proud. [My being a graduate student] is a big boost for him.” Furthermore, making her family “proud” had been a fruitful cycle, because: “it feeds back into my feelings as I'm successful and I did right by my family.” Family support had elevated Isabella’s feeling of capability, even when the extent of her academic contributions was not fully apparent to them.

According to Isabella, the degree to which academic supervisors recognized and prioritized their students’ well-being determined the extent of their supportiveness. In Isabella’s view, graduate students’ mental health must not be construed a mere accessory to their thriving; the overall sense of well-being was a fundamental aspect of Isabella’s academic experience, and attending to graduate students’ mental health, she added, must take precedence over their academic achievement. Isabella urged scholars who take on the responsibility of graduate student supervision to be cognizant of the non-academic components of success that directly influenced graduate students’ well-being and hypothesized that such components were equally influential in their thriving.

Isabella described the negative repercussions of exclusive academic focus at the expense of interpersonal connectedness: “if you have a graduate student who is incredibly academically focused and has no social skills, that person is not necessarily going to be very successful or happy.” It was, therefore, imperative for Isabella that supervisors consider a holistic approach of
supervision, where graduate students’ mental health status is taken into consideration alongside their academic progress: “I think supervisors who work with graduate students [to] make sure that they are well, having that at the front of their mind, is definitely important.” Isabella offered suggestions that could foster awareness of the concerns she raised above: “I think giving supervisors adequate training in that type of thing would be important.” Creating such awareness would ultimately facilitate an enhanced graduate experience, Isabella concluded.

Isabella maintained her involvement in the graduate student community, which had positively impacted her wellness. She considered involvement opportunities as mediums through which it was possible to establish connections with like-minded individuals while indulging in social activities. Networking with peers and participating in academic events had enabled Isabella to exchange knowledge and build on her scholarly insights. More specifically, graduate school involvement had been instrumental to academic growth: “talking to people about my study and developing it and so on was really beneficial. For example, [name of a fellow graduate student] gave me one of my interview questions, my favorite interview question actually.” To facilitate such growth, the society of graduate students at the Faculty had successfully provided a variety of platforms, academic and social alike. The non-academic events organized by this student group, as Isabella recalled, were multifaceted: “We are really lucky in that we have a really great social committee who provides opportunities for us to mingle and you can participate at various levels. I think it’s really important to go and literally just have the goal of having fun.” Social involvement, thus, was as valuable as academic involvement in promoting Isabella’s thriving.

Isabella emphasized the importance of feeling joy in graduate school and having a sense of general positivity. The opportunity to be involved in the graduate school community was a vehicle to feeling good about herself and her place in the program. As such, Isabella advocated for her own general sense of happiness by engaging in areas of interest, where she was able to share her accomplishments with fellow graduate students and the graduate community. Isabella’s
participation in certain events, therefore, allowed her to gain recognition in her area of expertise, while fueling her sense of satisfaction.

Helping fellow graduate students through one-on-one interactions awarded Isabella with a sense of joy. Furthermore, the ability to be of help as a way of importing wisdom, fed into Isabella’s competency. Giving back to the community internalized satisfaction and confidence, both of which had been conducive to Isabell’s thriving. She described the impact of this experience and its supportive role: “I was one of the older students and I think that really helping younger students, as well as just editing for ESL students, was really good for my thriving, because it made me feel good to help other people, that I was capable, etcetera.” Isabella credited a substantial portion of her sense of thriving to the supportive role of what is technically referred to in her Faculty as the Peer Mentoring Program, as well as international student writing support—both of which were less traditional forms of involvement.

**Institutional support.** Isabella’s feeling of thriving and well-being in academia had been highly conditional to an environment that was suited to her specific needs. On a personal level, the notion of safety had been of utmost importance for Isabella. From the institutional stand point, Isabella described a supportive academic environment as a friendly community, where she could feel “safe and accepted.” By welcoming Isabella and providing her with a sense of security, the Faculty as an institution paved the way towards her thriving and well-being. Granting funding opportunities, offering quality courses, and furnishing the building with an exclusive graduate student space, were examples of institutional supports to Isabella’s thriving and well-being.

Funding was a decisive factor for Isabella’s pursuit of higher education. Financial assistance, professional experience, and community involvement were all provided within a single phenomenon, i.e. funding. Funding had helped Isabella to ease the financial burden of attending graduate school. The institution’s ability to secure multiple financial assistance options for Isabella was a significant point of attraction for her; consistent monthly pay of teaching
assistantship positions rendered off-campus employment as a means to finance graduate school unnecessary. Through funding, Isabella was able to support herself while concentrating fully on her academics. She pointed out that paid positions available for master’s students, such as Teaching Assistantships (TA’s) and Research Assistantships (RA’s), were valuable for a parallel professional growth and financial support.

As a TA, Isabella’s well-above average monthly salary in conjunction with the ability to build on her teaching skills and curriculum vitae gave her a well-needed head-start into her profession as a teacher. Such opportunity was extremely valuable for Isabella, especially considering her financial aspirations prior to working as a TA: “I couldn't find work as a teacher, I couldn't find work when I started my master’s. I was working at [name of an organization] for minimum wage, and part-time at that, so, I was barely scraping by. To go from that to getting thirty plus dollars an hour as a TA was awesome.” A tremendous leap towards financial security had been an influential support for Isabella on the institutional level. As a side benefit, Isabella noted that master’s and doctoral employment opportunities within the university were constructive means of funding as they also provided platforms to contribute to the graduate community in the field at practice.

What is more, thriving in graduate school entailed participation in meaningful learning opportunities, such as courses targeting specific intellectual needs. As passing courses had been an important factor affecting Isabella’s thriving, the quality and diversity of the courses offered to graduate students determined the extent of their contribution to students’ education. For Isabella, professional growth had been an inseparable facet of a meaningful learning process. Therefore, Isabella’s priority as it related to course selection was to participate in courses that were applicable to her teaching profession.

With the goal of building on her teaching knowledge, Isabella attempted to select courses that would award her with contextual knowledge that she could later transfer to her teaching
career. She referred to such courses as ones that “offer a dual knowledge,” where her academic as well as professional needs were met: “I ultimately do not want to be an academic. I want to be a teacher. I just want to be a really, really good teacher.” The diversity in course offerings at the Faculty were extremely beneficial to Isabella’s thriving and well-being because she was capable of finding courses that better served her goals. That said, the extent of such diversity is a topic that will further be uncovered in the next section as a barrier to Isabella’s thriving.

To thrive and be well, it was necessary for Isabella to segregate graduate school work from her personal life. “Having a space,” therefore, was vital. The Graduate Student Lounge facilitated this need; as communal space, this environment provided student interaction. Without the ability to “run into people,” Isabella’s experience of graduate school would have been “completely different,”; one that would not have been conducive to her thriving. In addition to compartmentalizing “home life and school,” dedicating an exclusive space to the graduate student body would promote graduate student interaction and socialization in Isabella’s view. For Isabella, it had also reduced academic-related stress because, she explained, “I can come here [the Graduate Student Lounge], and work at my desk and at home what’s on my desk is not my thesis stuff, it’s my banking and personal stuff.” As such, a thriving graduate student was also one that, as Isabella described, was able to successfully “silo” the two components of graduate studies.

**Barriers to Thriving**

**Intrapersonal barrier.** As part of her experiences in the graduate program, Isabella shared details of her mental health illness and its detrimental impact on thriving within graduate school and resulting struggles had initially created a barrier to her progress. Had her condition not improved, mental illness would have continued to deter her from accomplishing the necessary qualifications to successfully complete a graduate degree. Mental illness, had it not been addressed, would have created an internal barrier that blocked external supports and inhibited Isabella’s ability to function and perform tasks. For Isabella, proper and professional mental
health care had been fostering her ability to thrive in graduate school and be well and if absent, such ability would have been greatly hindered.

**Institutional barrier.** The thwarting effect of mental illness aside, Isabella’s thriving had mainly been influenced by systemic barriers. Such barriers originated from the Faculty as an institution, and by extension, the university as a whole. The reduced availability of on-campus professional support such as on-campus counsellors had been a significant barrier for Isabella. She, furthermore, pointed out limitation of choice in regard to her academic trajectory and the unhealthy, competitive nature of academic awards as additional drawbacks to her thriving.

Notwithstanding the support offered by the graduate program, Isabella described her ability to establish a support system that was capable of addressing her mental health needs as limited. As part of the initiative to be inclusive, various student groups and communities have been formed within the university. To name a few, the university allowed and encouraged the formation of religious and cultural identity groups, social groups, and athletics groups aimed at consolidating students’ sense of belonging. Therefore, it was imperative for the institution that students were capable of identifying with a community that represented them.

In light of the increasing need to belong to a community, the scope and depth of Isabella’s sense of connectedness was particularly contingent on addressing her unique mental health needs. In that regard, Isabella expressed her disappointment with the lack of inclusivity within the university for trauma survivor students such as herself. She viewed the lack of social support for students with mental health issues as negligence on the part of the institution.

Listing a few examples of the numerous student groups available for students, Isabella attempted to shed light on the reality of mental health support systems that were at students’ disposal. Isabella noted that counselling services were established to offer professional help, but students with long-term mental health difficulties, such as herself, lacked rigorous and lasting support throughout their program. As a trauma survivor, Isabella recognized the need to associate
with a community of fellow students who shared similar mental health struggles as herself. She provided a description of the quality of the existing support: “I would say there isn’t a lot of support. Like if you are an international student, there’s a place for you. If you're a band member, there’s a place for you. If you're a football player, there’s a place for you. But if you have mental health issues, there [are] services, but there’s not really a social support system.” The university’s approach towards mental health support had, therefore, been a barrier to Isabella’s thriving as it did not extend beyond the clinical support of the Counselling Services. It had, therefore, left Isabella feeling excluded and isolated.

From a clinical perspective, the type of support offered by the University Counselling Services was no more than a temporary fix as Isabella pointed out. In fact, the structure of the services offered by on-campus counsellors did not allow for long-term support, but rather “triaged” the students in need. In a case where more than a bandage is needed, the University Counselling Services was not a reliable resource. In an attempt to compensate for the unsustainability of this service, Isabella resorted to services within the city, which granted her access to free and steady mental health support.

Redirecting the discussion to the Faculty Counselling Services department, Isabella raised questions about the effectiveness of its approach and expressed concerns about the Faculty’s perceived value of professional mental health support and its implications. She pointed out that when viewed as dispensable in their roles, it would be less likely that the Faculty’s counsellors could deliver the support required by students. She justified that, for instance, in the absence of the Faculty’s residing counsellor for a prolonged period of time, assigning an expediency for the vacant position was warranted. The Faculty’s failure to do so, Isabella explained, signified a fundamental flaw in its belief in the importance of mental health support. In her opinion, counsellors “should be considered as essential personnel,” so they can offer a year-round on-site professional care to students.
Despite the fact that graduate students were typically pro-active in self-care in Isabella’s view, some individuals required the support of a counsellor throughout their graduate program. Students bearing the weight of mental health issues, were among those individuals. Isabella recalled one incident where that had become problematic and described the underlying issue.

Within the frame of peer support, Isabella had relied greatly on the support of her peers. For them to further support each other, Isabella recalled an initiative that was taken by students to encourage sharing their experiences of well-being in graduate school. Isabella expressed her extreme discomfort with the manner in which this session was carried out and its consequences: “I would say that that’s one thing that really negatively affected my well-being.” Among the students who participated in what was referred to as a “Sharing Circle”, were a few individuals whose mental well-being became extremely compromised as the session came to an end. To Isabella, it appeared that the session was inadvertently encouraging “broaching other students on the subject of mental health without supporting those students,” despite its original intention of discussing day-to-day challenges of graduate school. Talking about their experiences with mental illness, some “broke down to tears” because “once [the students] have opened the box and all these intense, negative emotions were out in the air, they [didn’t] know how to close the box again”. Without subsequent professional follow up, she concluded: “I just don’t think it was [name of the graduate student-run organization] place to kind of ask that question because they couldn’t handle the intensity of the response.” Such incident left a strong negative mark on Isabella’s experience of thriving in graduate school.

This incident elucidated a fundamental Faculty-level barrier to Isabella’s thriving. Isabella concurred that graduate students were not qualified to carry out mental health counselling groups, nor did they have the “resources and knowledge” to do so. “A trained professional,” whose role was recognized and valued by the Faculty could have prevented this incident or any future similar ones. Isabella suggested that “if the counsellor on-site is going to take an extended
leave, finding a replacement for said counsellor for the duration of the leave would be really smart.” She concluded that the Faculty should have been held accountable for this incident and the responsibility, therefore, did solely fall on to the graduate students.

Isabella assessed the degree of freedom she was given by the Faculty as “limited like any other system.” Although faculty members had been supportive, their encouragement of academic independence was often systemically directed and, thus, restricted. That said, Isabella explained that faculty members differed in their approach towards graduate students’ academic self-reliance, some advocating for their initiatives more than others.

Like most graduate students, Isabella had started her graduate education with a specific area of interest in mind. However, she had not been fully capable of realizing her original research intentions; insufficient diversity in Faculty’s research backgrounds and the consequent lack of endorsement had forced Isabella to alter her academic trajectory. She explained: “basically, I was told that I shouldn’t pursue it because there isn’t faculty support for it; nobody will be on my side about it, which was frustrating.” She consoled herself by considering the merits of the Faculty’s push towards altering her research plans. Had she been allowed to pursue her original goals, her chances of pursuing a Ph.D. degree might have been narrowed because, as Isabella affirmed, her: “[research idea] was kind of academically out there and doesn’t have a lot of traction.” Isabella’s community-mindedness and general agreeability had compensated for the Faculty’s limitations, therefore, “if [the institutional barriers] were to affect anything negatively, it might as well be my autonomy.”

Similarly, the University’s ever-increasing time of completion restrictions pressured Isabella. The Faculty expected graduate students to depart their program within a strict timeline. The continuous pressure of completing the degree within the deadline, in a manner that was both successful and intellectually fulfilling, was a concern to Isabella. Considering the demands of her career and everyday life, Isabella deemed graduating within the prescribed timeline an extremely
slim probability. Impractical expectations in regard to master’s degree completion had negatively affected Isabella’s thriving, as she pointed out: “If I get ethics approval tomorrow, I still have to collect my data, and then write my thesis, and spend three hours in a classroom everyday plus planning, plus... It's very challenging. So, there's just no time to do it on time.”

The financial burden of graduate school had been an underlying barrier throughout Isabella’s graduate studies. However, financial assistance could at times be a double-edged sword. Depending on the source, funding packages guaranteed a steady flow of finance for graduate students and potentially offered professional experience and knowledge. Yet, Isabella noted that the process of obtaining certain funding opportunities, such as the grants offered on a national level demoted healthy competition. She explained that these competitions created a scale by which research value and academic competence were measured. Although she did not experience its detrimental effect first-hand, Isabella observed a fellow Ph.D. student undergo harsh self-criticism and question the worthiness of their research in the application process. The dynamics of these national funding opportunities, Isabella explained, were “all tied up with self-worth.”

Helena’s Voice

“I’m a teacher. I’m a helper. I’m an encourager. It’s just who I am.”

Helena is a mother, wife, and successful final-year Ph.D. student. She is a middle-aged scholar whose knowledge in the field of her studies exceeded the borders of graduate school. Having had many years of experience in her profession, Helena had embarked on the graduate education not for the sake of the degree per se, but for the opportunities that a doctoral degree would potentially present her with in her career. Helena’s motives for entering the graduate program, therefore, were unique because of the exclusive professional nature of her goals. What additionally stood out for me in Helena’s stories was her religious beliefs that shed light on yet another aspect of her experiences with thriving in graduate school. As a professional and a person
of faith, Helena offered me a view of thriving that was both materialistic and spiritual at the same time.

Often passionately producing research from the sanctuary of her own home, Helena was rarely seen roaming the hallways of the Faculty. She later explained her lack of enthusiasm for participating in graduate school activities that had less to do with her professional aspirations and research goals. Her scholarly presence, on the other hand, was robust and meaningful, as she was at the time involved in numerous external and internal research projects. I first met Helena at the interview session. To me, her tall, ethnic, professional, and rather serious exterior exuded collegiality, warmth, and kindness.

I was able to establish a good rapport with Helena as she allowed me to tap into some of the fundamental ideologies that navigated all aspects of her life, her graduate experiences included. The absence of any particular agenda relating to the subject matter of the interview was perhaps what inspired our conversation to take a rather philosophical course. Helena did not seem to be interested in the interview as a podium to voice any concerns or suggestions with the graduate program, nor did she deem that necessary. Rather, Helena was genuinely content with the graduate program; she acknowledged the contributions made by her peers, faculty members, and the Faculty.

As a mature student with a wealth of experiences, Helena’s narratives and descriptions of the graduate experience reflected her mature mindset. She also described herself as a religious individual, a person who believed in a higher being. Her experiential wisdom and the inextricability of her faith have allowed her to navigate graduate studies successfully. Armed with her experience and faith, Helena was capable of managing the difficulties of graduate school, situations where her state of thriving would be compromised. Therefore, Helena's thriving was minimally affected by external factors, but more so dependent on internal elements as well as a few close individuals.
**Perceptions and Experiences**

Thriving in graduate studies was, for the most part, academic in Helena’s view. Helena perceived thriving, first and foremost, as a continuous movement towards one’s educational goals. In that sense, achieving goals in a timely manner had been the priority for Helena. Wellness, on the other hand, was a pre-possessed quality and an aid to thriving, which she had brought into the program from the start rather than acquiring after. She, additionally, spoke about the individuality of thriving, a one-size-doesn’t-fit-all perception.

**Perceptions.** Helena’s initial definition of thriving granted favourability to the academic aspect of thriving. In her words, thriving was “an overall movement to where I feel like I need to be going in the program” accompanied by "feeling very good about [graduate school] emotionally.” Later, Helena incorporated non-academic concepts, such as personal values and family into her understanding of thriving in the graduate studies concept. As such, she defined thriving in the graduate studies context as “achieving the goals that I set out for myself within the time-ish, and being true to myself throughout and maintaining the relationships that are the most important to me throughout.”

Helena’s state of well-being prior to graduate school had been a determining factor of thriving within. Hence, the graduate program had little influence on Helena’s well-being: “I wouldn’t say I [don’t] think the program is contributing to my overall well-being, I think that I had a strong well-being coming into the program and that has helped me thrive within it.”

Helena spoke openly about her views on the unattainability of thriving for all graduate students within a singular prescription, that is applying a unified approach without taking into consideration the individual needs. She linked her unique requirements of her thriving to the uniqueness of her personality and life experiences. She concurred that perceptions of thriving were highly individualized because “what works for one student might not work for all. So, there is no one solution to contribute to thriving.” Acknowledging and attending to each graduate
student's individual needs, therefore, must go hand in hand with our broad understanding of how thriving could be achieved in graduate school.

**Experiences.** On a scale of one to ten, one being the lowest and ten being the highest, Helena assessed her level of thriving at an average rating of nine. This assessment was mainly based on her overall satisfaction with the program and her progress within, as well as the social and emotional aspects of her life. Helena had managed to sail smoothly through graduate school that far at the time of the study, avoiding notable drops in her thriving level. She described her experience of thriving: “I feel like I am progressing. I’m comfortable with how I’m progressing within the program… I would be consistently between 8 and 9. I don't see [that] as a big fluctuation. I would say that I'm generally thriving.”

**Supports for Thriving**

The majority of supports for Helena's thriving stemmed from elements within herself along with the support of her family. Therefore, intrapersonal factors were the most influential in her thriving, followed by interpersonal elements. Helena considered institutional factors to have had minimal effect on her state of thriving and well-being. The Faculty and university, therefore, had not been significant sources of support.

**Intrapersonal support.** Among intrapersonal elements, faith in a higher being has been the most substantial source of support for thriving and academic success for Helena. Faith and life experiences have nurtured being “resilient,” which Helena described as the ability to recover from challenging experiences in life. For Helena, some of the most prominent obstacles of graduate studies had been lifted by virtue of her well-formulated research idea coming into the program. Moreover, family and faculty have been a source of continuous support, and the most influential in Helena’s scholastics. Helena also drew support from other relationships such as the Faculty community and fellow graduate students through academic collaboration and peer mentoring.
opportunities. The institution had endorsed Helena's scholarship, which was an additional support for her thriving.

Faith had removed some of the barriers associated with graduate school pushing Helena forward when she faced setbacks. Believing in a power greater than herself had given Helena an “unwavering” assurance that what would typically be considered difficulties, were no more than mere “bumps on the road.” When anxious, Helena relied on her faith to evoke strength and confidence within herself. Faith had, therefore, become the ultimate thrust in Helena’s progress. Although difficult, Helena attempted to put faith into words and how it applied to her graduate studies endeavour: “I don’t really worry about things. I know I'm doing the right thing at the right time and I'm on the right path and I just have my faith that the right opportunities and the right people will be there for me at the right moment and I just need to keep moving forward.”

Helena had been able to cultivate valuable skills throughout her life that proved to be instrumental in overcoming challenges and thrive. She repeatedly emphasized how she relied on her life experiences to maintain a momentum in graduate school: “coming back into graduate studies as a more mature student with several years of professional experience and life experience, you experience things [and] you have to deal with them and you have to figure out a way through them. So, I see graduate school as the same.” She later referred to this skill as resiliency.

She viewed the concept of resiliency as the ability to “bounce back and figure out [her] way through any kind of day” when she “wasn't feeling positive.” In that sense, the inherent difficulties of graduate school, or "barriers" became "challenges to overcome." Similar in life, resiliency had been a vital skill in graduate school to resolve difficulties, and Helena's years of practice had proved to be crucial to her thriving and well-being: “I had overcome obstacles before coming into the program. I worked through challenges and figured out solutions and ways forward.” Helena implemented a similar approach in all aspects of life, graduate school included.
Interpersonal support. Interpersonal supports to Helena’s thriving consisted of her interactions with family and individuals within the graduate community, with the majority of these interactions being family oriented. Within the Faculty, Helena described faculty members to be the most supportive, followed by graduate community relationships.

Family and academia, the two pillars of Helena’s life, cultivated two distinct spheres of belonging: her home where she worked and spent most her time, and the Faculty where she pursued scholar and leadership responsibilities in her discipline. Helena’s husband and child understood the importance of her work and offered their undeviating support. Therefore, she felt little need to extend her support system beyond to the Education community. Family, therefore, was the most conducive to Helena's thriving from the interpersonal standpoint.

With family consuming the majority of her time, there remained very little time for the graduate community. Her relationships with peers had remained strictly academic as a result. When speaking of peers, she continuously emphasized the different academic connections she had been able to foster with fellow graduate students. That may have partly been due to her introverted personality, as well as familial responsibilities. Helena shed light on her tendency to be an introvert and found social events where there would be opportunities to make social connections with the graduate community, "draining." The nature of her connection to the Education community, therefore, had been strictly academic. Her predisposition to remain "selective" in seeking community support had further limited her interpersonal relations.

Helena shed light on the supportive role of her family: “My husband is amazingly encouraging and patient through this whole process. That’s really allowed me to thrive in the program. [My family] has been really unwavering in their support.” On how she prioritized her interpersonal relationships, she said: “Because I have a family outside of the program, I don't really do a lot of the structured social events… Time is precious. When I'm making choices between maybe being in [name of social/academic graduate student organization] or spending
time with my family, I am going to pick the family… my family is my home-base.” If she did not have those family connections, she added, she would be more inclined to seek out external interpersonal support. “But I really have to devote my attention and time to [family] and those relationships,” she concluded.

Professional and academic growth having been Helena's incentive to enter graduate school, faculty members who had helped her achieve these goals were the most supportive of her thriving. To Helena, achieving such goals required a supportive supervisor and committee member who connected her with the appropriate resources, encouraged her to take advantage of opportunities, and allowed her to be an ultimate decision maker. More precisely, Helena identified being in control of her academic destiny as an important asset. She further explained: "My committee member has encouraged me to take risks in terms of academics and publications. My supervisor allowed me a lot of latitude, and he's helped bend the rules for me to give me opportunities." Both her supervisor and committee member had been true mentors.

Helping peers had been an additional promoter of Helena’s thriving. When possible, Helena had volunteered to be a mentor to help new graduate students navigate graduate school. She considered this contribution as a learning opportunity that was both enlightening and enjoyable: “It’s kind of a win-win. People can learn from my experiences in the program, so, I can help people to navigate [the] challenges of the program. I can also learn from them. I'm a teacher, I'm a helper, I'm an encourager. So, it feels good to do that. It’s a contribution.”

Institutional support. Neither the Faculty nor University have been identifiable sources of support for Helena’s thriving despite the supportive resources available for graduate students. Helena had remained relatively self-sufficient through graduate school; she had been able to thrive with little support from the university. However, she alluded to the financial assistance offered by the university as a "validating factor" that had indirectly fostered her thriving. The institution's only notable contribution, therefore, had been the financial aspect.
Barriers to Thriving

Helena considered herself to be a thriving student. The fact was, that Helena did not view challenges of graduate school as hurdles and, therefore, no major barriers inhibited her thriving. She was only able to speak of possible barriers based on her observations and other students' experiences.

That said, Helena had initially experienced a few barriers here and there. Imposter syndrome, for example, was one of the barriers she experienced at the start of her Ph.D. program. Regarding her research, she spoke of how systemic rules could at times create hurdles in academia and research. She did not note any interpersonal factors as barriers to her thriving.

Intrapersonal barrier. Helena described Imposter Syndrome as lack of belonging. Originating from within, Helena’s occasional lack of belonging impeded her growth and progress as some of her peers appeared "intimidating" because she did not consider herself to be intellectually comparable to senior Ph.D. students. Unsure of her capabilities, Helena was initially hesitant to take on teaching roles within the graduate community. Such negative feelings caused her to struggle to fit in within the Ph.D. community.

Helena has since outgrown Imposter Syndrome, or the "self-doubt phase" as she put it. She has managed to look beyond her uncertainties and build the confidence and the courage to showcase her talents and capabilities. She recalled how she defeated Imposter Syndrome: “If you’d asked me how capable I felt when I first started, I think I would have been a lot less than what I feel now... But I shut that voice down and just kept moving ahead, and finding people to learn from, and experiences to learn from.” Her later accomplishments had continuously fed into her feeling of belonging, which minimized Imposter Syndrome.

Institutional barrier. Systemic rules had at times halted Helena’s course of research. In her opinion, institutional-level guidelines were singular in approach and application. Overlooking graduate students’ individual needs, talents, and capabilities had limited flexibility and diversity
in practice effectively determined academic fate and hindered graduate students’ progress. Creative measures in research taken by graduate students, therefore, were rendered illegitimate because the guidelines at practice generally supported student attempts that followed the recognized framework.

When Helena proposed to take her academics to a higher level, she was initially discouraged from doing so by the institution because "it has never been done in the past." The rigidity of the institution’s regulations did not allow Helena to step into a less known field of research. She did not consider some systemic laws to be particularly "necessary or productive" and couldn't find "the logic behind them," as "they did not seem fair or reasonable." Similar incidents had perhaps been the biggest barrier Helena had to overcome in the course of her studies.

**Leandra’s Voice**

“They take pride in their graduate students, and they defend our well-being.”

Leandra’s quest to obtain a graduate degree began at Queen’s University, when she was a master’s student. Currently in her second year of Ph.D., Leandra’s scholarship continues as a student, researcher, and instructor. She had been able to transfer the skills she cultivated her master’s into the Ph.D. program and continues to better herself as a scholar.

Leandra’s graduate school learning experience had been a transformational one; in the master’s program, she mainly concentrated on navigating the program or, in other words, accomplishing the degree completion requirements. It was within the doctoral program where Leandra experienced growth as a researcher and took the leap from student to scholar. By reflecting on her journey, Leandra offered a view of thriving and well-being as it pertained to her own mind-set and individual experiences.

Thriving is a multi-faceted concept for Leandra. In graduate school, it is generated through a healthy interaction between life and school, and an appropriate balance between the
two. There existed, therefore, distinct qualities to Leandra’s thriving within graduate school. Throughout the interview, Leandra focused on her continuous efforts to sustain progression and create a steady flow of thriving and well-being. To do so, she strived to follow a regiment consisting of daily mindfulness activities to promote healthy mind and spirit. She, furthermore, emphasized on the need to remain involved in the graduate community in ways that is most meaningful to her and continued to connect with like-minded peers to spark intellectually stimulating conversations. As the interview continued, Leandra began to tap into each of these ingredients separately to and drew a picture of their interactions.

**Perceptions and Experience**

Leandra described thriving in the graduate studies context as self-relative to how it was experienced. Graduate students’ experience graduate school differently in Leandra’s opinion and, therefore, there is more than one unified notion of how thriving can be achieved. Likewise, Leandra considered her state of thriving as a graduate student to be unique to her experiential knowledge as it related to graduate school. Within Leandra’s framework of thriving, a combination of mentality and action had set the ground to realize otherwise theoretical knowledge of what thriving looked like. Feeling connected internally in addition to a sense of belonging to the community had formed and informed Leandra’s perception of thriving and her later experiences in graduate school.

**Perceptions.** The interview began by inquiring the perception of thriving and well-being in the context of graduate studies, to which Leandra replied: “it depends on the person. So, how I might define wellness might be different from someone else.” In Leandra’s experience, thriving is circumstantial and inspired by the personal journey taken by each graduate student individually. Within each individual, it is “multi-dimensional,” the dimensions being personal and academic.

Leandra’s thriving and well-being were interdependent. Devoid of well-being, experiencing thriving in her academic life could not be achieved. This is because a thriving
individual is not only capable of succeeding, but also a functional social being.

Compartmentalizing life, where both academics and social life are equally important and attended to was how Leandra could establish balance between the two. When having a “balanced day,” Leandra felt productive in graduate school. However, practicing yoga and dedicating time to her fiancé on a daily basis were integral aspects of this balance. Moreover, when her well-being was jeopardized, when she “wasn’t getting enough sleep” for example, her academics suffered as well. Balance was restored, therefore, when these two dimensions co-existed and improved upon each other.

To thrive in graduate school, Leandra sought to avoid what she felt was disruptive of her life’s balance. The isolation experienced in graduate school, for instance, was a set-back factor in Leandra’s thriving. When experiencing isolation, Leandra sought opportunities to interact with the graduate community and connect with peers. The more robust interactions she was able to cultivate, the higher her state of thriving was. When able to collaborate with like-minded peers, Leandra experienced thriving. On the other hand, inability to collaborate with peers in a productive manner significantly decreased thriving, leaving her feeling “confused.” Relationship dynamics, therefore, were decisive factors in Leandra’s thriving as well.

Experiences. Leandra’s experiences of thriving had been an evolutionary journey. For Leandra, thriving in graduate school had been a learning experience, an incremental skill. Perhaps, Leandra’s evolution of thriving could best be demonstrated as a Bell Curve diagram. As a master’s student, Leandra began to learn how to build on her research identity and actualize her potentials. Her highest perceived state of thriving took place within the Ph.D. program as Leandra continued to add on her knowledge and experiences as a graduate student. Naturally, where her thriving hit a pinnacle, it began to decrease closer to a point of plateau.

The notion of challenge and the learning that followed had steered Leandra’s direction of thriving. When challenged, Leandra attempted to learn about the subject matter, make
connections between ideas, and proceed to tackle those challenges. At the master’s level, this process had been initiated; Leandra, however, was unable to truly build on her mental development as a master’s student and found herself “going through the motion.” The “massive reading and getting through it” had consumed most of Leandra’s mental capacity, because, in her own words: “I would feel like I’m missing something if I didn’t complete all the readings and that I wasn’t able to contribute to the discussion.”

When Leandra entered the Ph.D. program, however, she experienced the “steep learning curve” she lacked in the previous degree. Having evolved as a scholar, Leandra explained, she became more conscientious of the “rabbit holes” of scholarship and, therefore, more competent as a researcher: “over time I’ve been able to demonstrate my ability.” Despite being higher on the thriving spectrum than her master’s, Leandra associated her current state of thriving as a near respite. As the challenges she was presented with in the Ph.D. program evolved, so did the resulting learning curve, which slowly began to flatten. That said, Leandra identified eight to be her thriving average rate out of ten.

Leandra’s course of thriving was relatively stable and consistent throughout graduate school in the sense that she continuously experienced minor fluctuations regardless of the phase she was at. However, the ups and downs of thriving rate were moderate in strength and significantly fewer in between. To that end, when she was asked to rate her state of thriving and well-being, Leandra was able to confidently place her rate of thriving at a “solid eight.” That said, she identified thriving fluctuation as an intrinsic component of graduate school. Leandra’s experienced rate of thriving differed on a daily basis depending on the short-term effects of her interactions with colleagues and her progress. She exemplified this flux in thriving in regard to a conflict that took place the day prior to the interview: “That [event] made me feel frustrated and I would’ve said that maybe I wasn’t thriving to the same extent. So, maybe I was on a six last night. But this morning, or today, I would say I’m at an eight.”
Supports for Thriving

Leandra had always considered herself to be on the path towards thriving. Having a knowledge of what is necessary for achieving her goals had helped Leandra to develop a well-formulated support system, both intra and interpersonal. Learning from experiences had fostered the skills Leandra needed to fuel her progress towards the desirable direction. Cultivating graduate community relationships, including peers, supervisor, and faculty members, had equipped Leandra with the necessary support to better herself as a scholar. Therefore, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal factors have been the two main sources of support for Leandra’s thriving and well-being.

**Intrapersonal support.** Part of Leandra’s growth consisted of learning how to advocate for her own well-being and thriving. The interpersonal skills within Leandra could be characterized as resiliency and determination. In addition, Leandra’s notion of self-care had complimented the interpersonal support she desired.

Reflecting on her past, Leandra noted her ability to recognize an area of concern and taking actions to mediate them. Leandra strived to maintain her focus on her end-goals despite in situations where she was “spinning wheels”. When facing a challenge, she found a way to “get past those moments” and recover back to a thriving state. Therefore, she explained, “I've never felt like I'm a lost soul in this program or that I'm wavering. I always see the next step, and I'm always thinking about what I'm going to do next.” Having witnessed how “wandering” in the program had impacted her peers, Leandra considered the fact that she didn't “dwell on things” an invaluable asset to her thriving.

Mindfulness had been an important part of Leandra’s daily routine for its numerous beneficial components, especially for a graduate student. Remaining connected with the spiritual part of her being had been incremental to Leandra’s well-being and, consequently, thriving. While participating in “badminton,” for example, promoted physical activeness, mindfulness
practices, such as yoga, were both physically and spiritually engaging. In fact, spirituality was so important that Leandra ensured to spare time to nurture it, even if it was at the expense of other activities: “Not because I have strong dislike for badminton, but it’s just not something that I rate highly in my life. I make time for yoga, because it feeds my soul.”

Yoga exercises had allowed Leandra to establish body and mind connection. The breathing exercises found in Yoga brought a sense of harmony throughout her day, which in turn aided with managing the daily stresses of graduate school. Moreover, Yoga helped with the stationary nature of graduate school work; Leandra had been experiencing physical pain as a result prolonged sittings and Yoga had been helpful in withstanding this discomfort and posture correction: “Ever since starting graduate school I felt a lot more stiffness in my hips just because of the amount of sitting that we do. So, [Yoga] helps with that.” Leandra’s initiative to improve her well-being with Yoga, therefore, had been the most influential of the intrapersonal supports.

Interpersonal support. The majority of the support system that enveloped Leandra throughout her graduate education, if not all, consisted of her social network, both inside and outside of graduate school. In that regard, she noted: “Socials are a big thing for me. I put a lot of emphasis on [interpersonal matters] in my life. Other things, not as much.” Leandra’s emphasis on the supportive role of peers and supervisor steamed from her interpersonal tendencies a person, as well as her reliance on their feedback in regard to her academic progress. Additionally, consistent involvement within the graduate community advanced the sense of productiveness and contribution. Leandra pointed out that networking with both graduate students and faculty members and the opportunities to share ideologies in a safe space were imperative for thriving and well-being in the graduate context, both on the academic and social levels.

Leandra described her relationship with the members of the Faculty as predominantly positive. In that regard, Leandra considered her peers, instructors, and the administration staff as “easy to talk to.” She felt comfortable enough to “reach out to people” when assistance felt
needed. The approachability of people, as experienced by Leandra, had encouraged her to be transparent about negative situations and vocalize objectionable encounters without fear of counter repercussions. For instance, when an instructional position was vacant—a situation that affected Leandra’s academics, she confirmed: “I feel comfortable to state my concerns, and to go as far as recommending potential people who I thought could teach it and could help my thinking, and that person was hired.” Such complaisant learning environment facilitated a strong and dependable interpersonal support structure for Leandra.

Aside from the general positivity of its members, Leandra further unraveled her experience of closeness to the Faculty. The structure of her graduate community proclaimed unique characteristics that rendered its atmosphere welcoming and intimate. Leandra pointed out that the size of the Ph.D. program, and the graduate community as a whole, had greatly furthered establishing meaningful relationships. She rationalized: “I think the size of our program is unique because we know each other. We know the graduate students who are here.” Addressing faculty members by name was another characteristic exclusive to the Faculty and a promoter of sense of community. Leandra expressed gratitude to the community’s attentiveness to the well-being of its student members by the virtue of its size and atmosphere.

Leandra’s interpersonal support had been fed by a select group of people, however. Certain peers and faculty members were more highlighted in their supportive role as it pertained to Leandra’s thriving and well-being. As an individual, Leandra found herself to be more inclined to interact with faculty and students whose “values and directions of educational scholarship” aligned with hers. Her ability to arrive upon such individuals perpetuated open dialogues, which led to productive collaborations that benefited the scholar community at large, and Leandra’s thriving abilities on a smaller scale.

The academic advisement carried out by her supervisor reinforced Leandra’s learning and progression: “my supervisor makes time for me … I appreciate those opportunities to connect
with him,” Leandra noted. In addition to one-on-one meetings, frequent meeting sessions with other graduate students who shared her supervisor had allowed Leandra to evaluate her progress. In that regard, Leandra noted: “to see what [my supervisor’s] other students at other stages of the program are doing, so that I can make comparisons between what I am doing and what they’re doing.” Her supervisor’s support further extended to regularly based feedbacks that helped evaluate goal achievement in respect with her predetermined academic trajectory.

In regard to Leandra’s thriving “keeping tabs” wasn't exclusive to her supervisor. In fact, Leandra pointed out the support she had received from members of the graduate studies office. Leandra felt her work was valuable when the graduate community recognized her contributions. Regular “check-ins” form the associate dean of graduate studies, for example, reinforced sense of capability– an effective addition to the support Leandra received within the Faculty. She later concurred: “I know that my contributions are taken seriously, and that makes me feel good too.”

Involvement within the graduate community brought Leandra a bounty of benefits that made thriving possible. Leandra thrived through involvement, as she explained: “I thrive when I'm heavily involved…. I thrive on energy.” Involvement diversified Leandra’s graduate experience; being involved in various capacities helped Leandra to be “a contributing member” and a productive individual. Building on her self-efficacy, active involvement was a way for Leandra to give back to a community who “are also giving back to me.” As such, involvement provided a double benefit; it was a way for Leandra to help herself while helping the community.

Leandra warned, however, of the pitfalls of involvement in graduate school. While beneficial, the abundance of involvement opportunities within graduate school could at times be detrimental to wellness, as Leandra noted: “there’s a fine line.” Leandra’s reference to the “line” was what she considered the difference between the healthy amount of involvement necessary to thrive and over commitment resulting in stress and “being spread too thin”. As she continued to
gain more experience, she hoped to become better at distinguishing the two and more conscientious of the risks inherent to involvement in graduate school. She further explained:

“I know what I recognize in myself. I'm not going to bed at my normal time… I’ll drink more caffeine… I’ll skip on my regular activities that I really enjoy going… I become resentful of my partner when I see that he has some time to spend with his friends and I isolate myself to get my work done that when I'm worried about school and my commitments and I feel spread too thin.”

**Institutional support.** The opportunity to socialize, communicate ideas, and receive feedbacks was a valuable asset in Leandra’s view, and the Faculty’s contributions in this regard, fundamental to her thriving and well-being. The supportive role of the Faculty manifested through frequent Faculty meetings, forums, and events dedicated to networking, socializing, and connecting. Leandra proceeded to expand on the reasons why she considered these opportunities important.

In accordance to her thriving and well-being, Leandra pointed out a few opportunities that “brought students together” and provided a platform for “a very informal flux of people [to] come in and talk about [their research] at various stages, whether they’re a first-year master’s student or a tenured faculty member.” Apart from socializing, the events authorized, supported, and/or organized by the Faculty provided informal feedback giving; a more casual manner of evaluating research and that of her colleagues for Leandra. Finally, Faculty’s demonstration of flexibility in regard to course options, as manifested by independent study course options, was considered an advantage by Leandra; it represented a degree of accommodation and support that was ultimately conducive to Leandra’s thriving and well-being.

**Barriers to Thriving**

The isolating nature of graduate studies had been the most deterring aspect of graduate school as it imposed restrictions on the amount of time Leandra was able to spend with and
around people. Graduate studies effectively reduced her interaction with her biggest source of support. The physical isolation of the Faculty from the rest of the university further intensified Leandra’s feeling of segregation and she deemed facilities such as the gym and campus restaurants less accessible.

Graduate school bestowed upon Leandra the ability to operate autonomously. More specifically, the dynamics of the Ph.D. program warranted independence and, as Leandra had experienced, required more initiative on the part of the students. Therefore, anything that restricted Leandra’s freedom of expression and action was considered detrimental to her academic thriving.

The perceived barriers of graduate school mainly existed on a Faculty level. A graduate working space that was accessible and healthy determined the quality of Leandra’s work production. The Faculty’s ability to provide such spaces directly correlated with the value placed on her contributions and the graduate student body by extension. Lacking such a space, therefore, had been a notable barrier to Leandra’s thriving.

Interpersonal barrier. Leandra’s interactions with the graduate community had been fundamentally positive, but the occasional friction she experienced in certain situations resulted in feelings of frustration. While uncommon, unreceptiveness of ideas and its consequential detrimental effects on thriving, were identifiable as barriers to Leandra’s thriving and well-being. Moreover, when her potentials were not recognized, Leandra felt she was missing on important opportunities and responsibilities she felt more than qualified to take on. Such conditions jeopardized Leandra’s autonomy and progression.

Leandra described her aspirations with regards to independence in graduate school as those moments when she could “take initiatives that I'm interested in and that other people can support me in.”. Collaborative teamwork required openness to opposing views. Being ignorant of another’s ideas negated Leandra’s approach and mentality: “I'm very open for debate, but it really
rubs me the wrong way when somebody is very dismissive of an idea.” To Leandra, such behavior signified “stubbornness” and “underplay” of her value as a researcher on the part of those individuals. Leandra contextualized this behavior: “I've had that happen on a committee I'm serving on. It’s frustrating as a student when your ideas or opinions are shut down without any recognition of the potential value that that might have.” Feeling underappreciated, Leandra’s caliber of work suffered as a graduate student.

**Institutional barrier.** The institution’s effort to allocate a quality space for graduate students to study and socialize speaks volumes of their appreciation of the graduate student body in Leandra’s view; more specifically the Faculty. She concurred that the space allotted to graduate students at the Faculty lacked the healthy features typical to any conducive work environment, among which were appropriate location, natural light, and healthy air quality. The absence of these characteristics had greatly impacted Leandra’s thriving and well-being in a negative way.

Principally, Leandra considered the basement of the building an inappropriate choice for the Graduate Lounge. “In terms of the consideration of graduate students,” she added, “it says something that we are placed in the basement.” The locality of this space limited access to natural light and airflow, both of which had tremendous effect on Leandra’s productivity. “I was getting really sad, because I was here in the early morning hours and I was leaving when it was dark, and it was always dark.” Because of these conditions, Leandra was further deterred from utilizing this space, ultimately forgoing her desk space.

Being affected by, what she described, “seasonal depression,” Leandra was forced to work out of various locations, including the Starbucks coffee shop or the university library. Although content with such decision, her inability to access a stable working space that was both communal and peaceful was a significant hinderer to Leandra’s thriving and well-being. She described an ideal work space as “a consistent space where I feel that I can go on campus to work
that's not in a dark place.” She further explained the social aspect of such place as a supplementary component: “As well as not too removed. Being near other graduate students that you can go on pop out to have those conversations, but not being too social where other people are talking and it's disruptive to workflow.” Private office spaces, for example, were appropriate work environments for graduate students in Leandra’s view.

Although content, Leandra added that she would “feel a lot more well” if the Faculty were more cognizant of graduate student space needs and the negative repercussions of neglecting those needs. “Even though we pride ourselves on the Graduate Lounge,” she concluded, the reality of this space failed to echo such emotions as far as Leandra was concerned.

**Angela’s Voice**

“It’s totally up to you what you make of it. For the most part.”

Graduate school is an exploratory journey for scholars to discover their strengths, weaknesses, and interests and so had it been for Angela. A second-year master’s student, Angela’s graduate studies endeavour was coming to an end, as she was fast approaching the closing of her 5th semester at the time of the interview. As an academic, Angela was focused, driven, and determined. These qualities might have shaped her experiences with what she construed to be the supports and challenges of graduate school, but they certainly influenced her perception of thriving and well-being as a student. Not many barriers were experienced, neither were many supports needed; as long as Angela received adequate support from her supervisor, she continued to thrive in graduate school.

Angela stroke me as the ‘go getter’ type in the academic arena. Academically driven, her sole mission was to complete her graduate degree and move on to the next chapter of her life and put the skills graduate school had equipped her with to use. Her definition of thriving was, therefore, inspired by academically influenced ideologies and events. Angela’s experience of thriving, therefore, relied upon the quality of her education. Angela was able to receive structured
malleability in the graduate program; she was guided when needed and allowed to fly solo when appropriate. Such perceived perfect combination she owed to her supervisor, as he played the single most influential part role in her thriving and the reason for persevering despite challenges.

With supervisor’s guidance forming the majority of Angela’s ethos of support, the remainder resources had little to no effect on her thriving. However, inexistence of key aspects of graduate studies were identified as barriers to her thriving. What is more, Angela’s perceived barriers were experienced during specific phases of her studies and changed as she passed through different stages of a master’s degree. As such, Angela’s perceptions and experiences of thriving, as well as the supports and barriers associated with graduate school depended on which phase of the program she was in.

**Perceptions and Experiences**

Angela’s definition of thriving was a strictly academic one. The constructs of a successful academic experience, thus, equaled of how Angela perceived and experienced thriving. Well-being, on the other hand, was a reflection of her overall state of mental health in a continuum. Thriving and well-being, therefore, were defined as two separate concepts with one feeding into the other.

As a final year master’s student, Angela’s definition of thriving was partly inspired by her previous experiences in post-secondary. The immense shift in structure and academic requirements from the undergraduate level to the graduate level had altered her understanding of how thriving could be achieved in the two contexts. Initially, this shift brought along certain roadblocks that made thriving difficult. However, Angela’s ability to adjust to changes quickly and efficiently allowed her to eventually overcome challenges. Angela shed further light on some of the contextual differences of thriving as experienced in undergraduate and graduate education.

**Perceptions.** Angela’s point of reference in regard to her perception of thriving originated from an academic perspective because, she explained: “I’m very academically
oriented. And certainly, coming into the program that was my sole focus.” In that sense, Angela conceptualized thriving as a student who is capable of obtaining acceptable grades and producing work that is in par with general expectations in academia. The ability to transfer abstract knowledge into real life in a form of contextual knowledge was Angela’s overall academically-driven “idea of thriving.” She added: “I feel like I’m trying to apply [academics] to real life, and so when I’m able to do that, it’s another important component to thriving.” Well-being for Angela signified a continuous stream of positivity and “to feel good about yourself on a daily basis.” Being able to manage changes in well-being had been key to being well in graduate school for Angela.

Courses, the academic component of graduate studies, had had distinct implications on thriving as far as Angela was concerned. Coursework, be it at the undergraduate level or the graduate, was a rather “straightforward” process for Angela. It was much easier for Angela to work within the structure imbedded in course-work, than independently. She found instructors’ guidance beneficial in producing focused and purposeful results in academia.

Upon entering graduate school and after completing course-related requirements, maintaining thriving became a difficult task for Angela, as she explained: “one day you’ll be doing really well and you’ll be writing and everything’s great. And the next day you don’t know what you’re doing.” Working independently had resulted in feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, which Angela considered to be extremely disruptive of her well-being despite a continuous effort to feel positive in graduate school.

A unilateral approach to thriving, i.e. academic success, might have been less problematic at the start of her program, but as the program progressed Angela’s priorities began to shift; At first, Angela’s desire to “get as much work done” as possible in hopes to move to the latter phases of her studies left very little room to take well-being into consideration. In Angela’s words: “[this approach] had quite an impact on me and it’s resulted in few mental health issues,” after which
she came to understand the importance of mental well-being in conjunction to academic success because, she explained, “for a while it’s ok, but for an extended period of time, it really takes a toll on you… You kind of need to make yourself happy before you can really do anything else.” This realization lead to another; as Angela began to ponder a different course of action to make herself “happy and more productive.” Such realization did not come to Angela naturally, but she eventually came to the conclusion that “[well-being] is not a priority until you make it a priority.”

**Experiences.** Rating her thriving at nine in a scale of one-to-ten, Angela considered herself to be possessive the characteristics of a thriving graduate student. Her experience of thriving clustered in academic achievement and progressed towards a speedy degree attainment. Since she “never had an issue with academics,” Angela was confident about this self-assessment. “Thinking of thriving as being academic,” Angela was pleased with her progress in graduate school, which was soon closing to an end at a pace she considered “ahead of the majority of the people.”

However, Angela further added that she had experienced fluctuation in her thriving from time to time. On any given day, Angela’s thriving could be high or low depending on the events leading up to her experience on that particular day: “When I’m down in the dumps, it really doesn’t help my thriving whatsoever. It really depends. Good day, bad day.” Angela’s thriving also depended on what stage of graduate studies it was in reference to; while she experienced maximum thriving as she approached the end of the program, her feelings of thriving were significantly lower during earlier stages of graduate studies: “so, if you had been interviewing me this time last year, I probably would have had a completely different answer.” For example, drafting a proposal that would eventually lead the way to thesis production was an overwhelming task for Angela. It was, as she described, “the first stage of such a big project.” Similarly, Angela experienced occasional feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty about her abilities during the earlier stages of the program, which she would soon overcome when she began to take “little steps
towards [your goals], then it becomes much easier on days when you're not feeling so well to look at it in general.”

In that sense, experiencing fluctuation had been an internal aspect of Angela’s thriving processes. Her experience of thriving seesawed as she moved from completing courses to writing a proposal, then collecting data, and finally producing thesis. While successful course completion by the end of her first year fed into her sense of thriving, the uncertainty that followed had an opposite impact. Not being able to settle on a topic at first, Angela felt she was “floundering” in the program as she felt “forced to figure out a topic.” Her feelings of despair were so strong that she seriously contemplated quitting the program half way through.

Struggling with finding a supervisor she felt could best guide her through these challenges, supervisor selection was yet another turning point in Angela’s experience of thriving. To achieve this high level of thriving in graduate school, Angela eventually altered her perspective to focus on her achievements: “it definitely helps once you start making some real progress towards your research, then you are able to look at it overall.”

**Supports for Thriving**

Angela’s support for thriving was a fundamental passion for learning and writing about what made her feel happy, i.e. her topic of research. It was not until she found her passion in life that she began to experience thriving in graduate school. Eventually, she explained, “I really had to sit down and think ‘what do I enjoy? What interests me?’ and once I did figure it out, it was a very simple answer.” Having settled on a topic that she truly enjoyed writing about, she added, “it just kind of started flowing from there.”

Her academic lens of thriving, had narrowed down her support system to academic resources or those that pertain to academia. Within interpersonal supports, Angela described her connections with the graduate community as being limited to courses and academic events. Therefore, Angela’s interpersonal and institutional supports were closely net to her academic
needs. Angela considered herself to “never have had an issue with academics,” therefore she had been able to achieve her goals rather autonomously form interpersonal and institutional resources.

That said, the support source that Angela did utilize in graduate studies was powerful and significant, to the degree that made obtaining a graduate degree a possibility. She attempted to sum up her system of support to one individual, who was, as Angela described “pretty much my number one support… my supervisor.” Angela’s supervisor had been all-encompassing and unwavering in his support, to whom she credited her so-far academic accomplishments.

**Intrapersonal support.** After a few failed attempts, Angela realized that the only way she could enjoy her graduate journey was to find what her real passion in life was. To find this passion, Angela explained: “I really had to sit down and think like ‘what do I enjoy? What does actually interest me?’ Once I did figure it out, it was a very simple answer. And then it just started flowing from there.” It was very important for Angela, therefore, to study a topic that was meaningful to her on a personal level and a source of joy.

Reminding herself of her achievement, was another way Angela attempted to advocate for her own thriving. Keeping in mind the milestones she had been able to achieve had reminded Angela that she was a capable graduate student. Because the early stages of graduate school, such as writing a proposal that lead to Colloquium had been challenging and difficult to complete, Angela found it to be helpful to reiterate those accomplishments when times were hard. Therefore, those “bluh days” in terms of Angela’s thriving became more tolerable.

**Interpersonal support.** Angela’s relationship dynamic with her supervisor had allowed her to thrive in graduate school requiring little support from other sources. Angela explained that her supervisor’s unique approach of minimal but consistent guidance created a balanced relationship, where she was able to receive support but work independently at the same time. Such approach perfectly matched Angela’s personality: “I don't constantly seek reinforcement to make sure I'm on the right page, but he was able to support me without kind of overdoing it.” A
balanced encouragement and hand-holding granted Angela adequate support to complete her degree.

Receiving concise guidance was another factor Angela pointed out in regard to her supervisor’s support. When struggling with a specific component of her academics, Angela emphasized the fundamental role of her supervisor, and supervisors in general, in alleviating the situation and redirecting her to the right path. Had her supervisor not have been able to provide that level of support, Angela reiterated, “I wouldn't have stayed. I can guarantee you I wouldn't be sitting here.”

Lastly, the prompt, constructive, and consistent feedback Angela received from her supervisor was additional to his overall supportive role. Acknowledging supervisors’ limited time and resources dedicated to each student individually, Angela was advantageous to receive timely feedbacks from her supervisor. His feedback had gradually built on Angela’s writing skills as well, which she was able to enhance. “Just having a supervisor just read everything you're writing makes such a big difference” Angela explained, which subsequently helped Angela’s thriving.

**Institutional support.** The supports Angela mentioned in reference to the measures taken by the Faculty to facilitate graduate students’ thriving were minimal and, naturally, academically driven. Internal workshops and academic showcasing events had prompted Angela to cultivate valuable skills.

Among these resources, Angela referred to writing workshops held for the purpose of teaching graduate students how to write efficiently and avoid the pitfalls of “writing block.” The workshops specifically organized to help graduate students “formulate research questions and hypothesis and that sort of things” were also supportive in their supplementary role. They would have been much more effective, however, if they were synchronized with graduate students’ stage of studies as she rationalized: “I feel like you have to do [research] first and then you go to the
workshops because you [would] know where the problems were. Whereas a lot of these workshops were offered in the Fall when a lot of us were still doing courses.” It was still, Angela concurred, “a nice gesture on the part of the Faculty.”

Through showcasing her research topic and approach, Angela was able to gain presentational skills, which were of value for her as an academic. These events offered various venues, more specifically the roundtable sessions, through which Angela brainstormed her thought process with the academic community. In addition to her supervisor’s, the feedbacks she received from peers and faculty aided Angela to refocus her ideas, which proved beneficial in reforming her research.

**Barriers to Thriving**

On a personal level, Angela identified the structural ambiguousness of graduate studies program to be the most challenging aspect of higher education. The isolating nature of graduate school hindered interpersonal connections and involvement. Her inability to form relationships had been more highlighted than ever in the second year of her studies, as she pursued to immerse herself in research and limit her contacts to her supervisor. Feeling increasingly isolated from the graduate community, Angela attributed some of the isolation related barriers to the Faculty. Moreover, in her views, the Faculty could have dedicated more efforts to providing better guidance for first-year master’s students that would be supportive of their thriving in graduate school.

**Intrapersonal barrier.** In her first year as a master’s student, Angela had encountered major difficulties regarding graduate school navigation. Because of a major shift in program structure moving from an undergraduate program to a graduate program, Angela found it challenging to adapt to the fast-paced requirements of a master’s degree. More specifically, Angela emphasized the detrimental effect of the unstructured nature of graduate school on both thriving and well-being. Understanding the dynamics of graduate school and making the
appropriate transition to the graduate program, therefore, comprised the intrapersonal barriers of graduate school as described by Angela.

In her undergraduate years, Angela relied greatly on instructors to provide step-by-step structure and detailed plan of completing the requirements of the degree. In graduate school however, Angela began to notice the freedom of choice that came with the absence of a structured plan. For Angela, that signified a great deal of responsibility as she felt she was no longer able to “go to a prof and ask them to explain something. You have to do all that by yourself.”

Such level of self-efficacy had been a significant challenge for Angela as “It’s very difficult to try and figure out what it is that you’re supposed to be doing when you don’t know what it is.” Lack of deadlines suggested the need to “self-direct” in order to accomplish goals, which, as Angela suggested, was not supportive of her well-being at the start of her program. Not knowing what was required of her and the uncertainty about the future of her education that came with it, had been a challenge Angela would “figure out eventually” and a valuable skill, as she concluded: “I think in a few years I’ll be thankful I had this opportunity… so while it’s difficult now, I'm sure it’ll be useful later on.” While preparing her for a professional future, the challenges associated with the nature of graduate school were undoubtedly significant barriers to Angela’s thriving and well-being.

Self-doubt, or uncertainty about her capabilities, had been an additional intrapersonal barrier for Angela. More specifically, it appeared to Angela that self-doubt was manifested at the foot of each major milestone, when she would question herself: “can I do this?” An over-exaggerated interpretation of the effort needed to write a proposal for example, had cause Angela to underestimate her capabilities and fall victim of self-inflicted imposter syndrome.

Such feelings of insecurity were further amplified when Angela compared her graduate student self to her peers. Circling back to the beginning of her studies, Angela’s lack of a predetermined research topic was a significant set-back to her thriving, when all of her peers were
seemingly confident about theirs. Although she later came to realize that her peers’ projection of confidence when it came to research topics had not been entirely accurate, it had been a significant initial factor that hindered her thriving within the program.

**Interpersonal barrier.** Throughout the graduate program, Angela described her interpersonal connectedness as limited and insufficient. Regardless of the origins of the causing factors, Angela described herself as being unable to form relationships in graduate school. As a result, Angela felt increasingly isolated from the graduate school community, as she mentioned: “I don't really feel super attached to anyone or connected. I'm really anxious to finish my degree and I think that that’s had a very important [negative] impact for sure.” She identified lack of central commonality that brought graduate students together the main reason for her reduced contact with them.

According to Angela, it was increasingly difficult to bring graduate students together to build friendships in the graduate studies context. With her cohort consisting of a small group of graduate students who differed in age and academic background, Angela found it challenging to relate to her peers on a personal level. What is more, they were scattered across the city, making it difficult for Angela and her peers to cross paths on a daily basis. Loss of contact with other graduate students shrunk Angela’s support system and caused her to feel disconnected from the graduate community: “I don't feel a lot of support from my classmates. Why? I don't know. I just feel like everyone’s kind of doing their own thing.” That said, attending courses in the first year had provided Angela with the platform to interact with her peers, which slowly vanished as she no longer attended any courses in her second year: “It just makes it difficult to create social connections outside of class, I guess. So, that has been a bit of a challenge.”

Involvement in the graduate community was identified by Angela as a significant means of building a social network. Recognizing the importance of involvement, Angela attributed her reduced involvement to her penchant to be a reserved individual and academically focused. Had
she made greater efforts to remain involved in the Faculty, Angela concurred, she would have encountered more individuals and venues to connect with her peers. Looking back on her journey as a graduate student, Angels recognized the importance of interpersonal relationships. She elaborated: “I probably would have made more of an attempt to talk to people. It would have been beneficial if I pushed past through [being a reserved person], but when you’re trying to concentrate on academics you kind of push [socials] aside. I would’ve made that more of a priority.” However, Angela refrained from placing the responsibility entirely on herself, as she concluded: “I wouldn't say I'm very involved in my Faculty. I don't know how I could be, that’s the thing… I'm not sure if there really isn't any [involvement opportunities] or if I just don't care enough to seek them out.” The institutional barriers to Angela’s involvement will further be explored in the following section.

**Institutional barrier.** On the Faculty level, Angela identified two main hurdles to her thriving: lack of guidance and involvement opportunities for novice researchers such as herself. She explained the various manners in which her thriving and well-being were compromised, especially during the first year of her studies. Feeling confused and out of touch, Angela felt the Faculty could have eased some of the burdens of graduate studies more efficiently and proceeded to offer a few suggestions.

As a fresh graduate student, Angela felt confused as she was bombarded by information from a variety of sources. Often conflicting, the instructions she received from faculty, supervisor, and peers in regard to the ‘how’s’ of graduate studies were, Angela felt, poorly coordinated: “there was a lot of conflicting information… you were being told one thing and then your supervisor tells you another thing. So, you’re not really sure what you're supposed to be doing… I found that really frustrating.” Those initial guidelines were extremely important as they set the tone for producing a proper thesis in the second year, Angela concurred. To reach a consensus, Angela suggested that the Faculty dedicate more effort towards providing clear
guidelines on how to take the first steps and formulate a proper baseline for research by “some kind of venue… like a 2-hour ‘this is how you do it’ kind of a thing.”

What is more, Angela’s inability to sufficiently engage in a variety of activities and social events to build social connections had partly been due to the limitations of involvement opportunities on the Faculty level. Socially inspired events as “opportunities for [graduate students] to talk to people” had been scarce according to Angela. Even the communal space of Graduate Lounge had not been able to provide student-to-student interactions on a social level because “it’s a place for work in the long run. It’s not a social setting, you're there to work.” It would have been much more beneficial, in Angela’s view, if Faculty’s efforts of providing involvement opportunities for graduate students were socially driven, as opposed to academically focused, especially for Angela because “if you haven’t made any connections in your first-year, you're going to be by yourself and that’s not good for anyone.”

Summary

Thriving as perceived by the participants conveyed a plethora of meanings. Not only did they perceive thriving as a unique phenomenon, but they each described their perceptions in relation to their experiences. Each participants’ background, worldviews, suggestions, and perspectives formed and informed the topic of this research. While distinct, Isabella, Helena, Leandra, Angela’s descriptions and views shared some essential commonalities. These shared aspects are brought together as findings of the study in the next section.
Chapter 5
Discussion

The final chapter addresses the research questions that instigated this study. The results presented in the previous chapter are discussed in accordance with the reviewed literature, including studies related to the construct of thriving, as well as academic retention, persistence, and achievement in the higher education context. In the previous chapter, individual voices were presented in isolation. In this chapter, these voices are consolidated and described collectively as the key findings of this study.

This chapter will begin by revisiting the questions posed at the start of this thesis in two sections. The first section will address the first research question of the study. The first research question underlines participants’ conceptualization of thriving. The second and third research questions will be addressed together as conditions that support and hinder thriving. Additionally, I will provide common findings alongside one unique finding that pertains to the context of master’s studies. Common findings consisted of similarities across the board, with no contextual distinction. On the other hand, unique findings were context specific observed in a single degree program. Finally, the limitations pertaining to this study were identified and, based on the findings of this study, I proceeded to make recommendations for future research and the educational practice.

The following findings are discussed in relation to the case study boundaries. The Faculty and year of study to which the participants of this study belonged influenced the findings of this study in two ways. First, participants’ focus on community and its influence on their thriving may have stemmed from the dominating Faculty culture and the behaviors that sought to promote sense of community among its members. That, in turn, may have been determined by its small size, as well as its physical isolation from the remainder of the Faculties and academic
communities. As such, participants exhibited a tendency to rely on the individuals and resources that were available within the parameters of their community. Secondly, thriving was heavily contingent on time and phase of the graduate study. The second year signified a notable transition from learning (courses) to applying (research). For the participants of this study, the first phase of their journey and the requirements for successful passing of courses implied challenges and needs different from those inherent to their present research-intensive phase. As such, the views and experiences that shaped their understanding of thriving and the conditions wherein they could thrive were specific to the phase of their studies. Together, both time and place as indicators of the boundaries of this case study navigated the findings shared below.

**Revisiting the Research Questions**

The study underlined three key notions in relation to thriving in graduate studies. Firstly, the study conceptualized thriving within graduate studies by enquiring about individual perceptions and experiences. Conceptualization of thriving was proceeded by exploration of the factors participants perceived to be influential in their thriving. To that end, this study addressed three questions:

1) How do graduate students perceive and experience thriving in their programs?
2) What barriers are present in relation to their thriving?
3) What supports do they have to facilitate their thriving?

**Perceptions and Experiences: Addressing Research Question Number One**

To address the first research question, participants’ perceptions of thriving in the context of graduate studies were explored. Individual descriptions of a thriving graduate student, along with envisioning what thriving looked like on a personal level underpinned thriving perception. These perceptions were then contextualized, providing an account of how they were experienced in reality.
Four key common findings were derived in relation to thriving perceptions and experiences:

1) Individuality of thriving
2) Multi-dimensionality of thriving
3) Thriving continuity and change

In addition, one unique finding was identified in addressing the first research question: The following represents a unique finding in relation to the master’s program that did not exist in the doctoral program.

4) Conformity to ambiguity

Students all viewed themselves as thriving individuals with an average rate of 8.3 out of 10. Moreover, participants’ overall descriptions of their learning environments were positive. They all seemingly had relatively strong relationships, ranging from family to peers and faculty. The two observations, having strong relations and satisfaction with Faculty might be related, especially among Ph.D. students. According to Lovitts (2001) students who are able to form strong ties with other individuals and cultivate positive relationships tend to hold their Faculty in higher regards and describe it as a supportive community.

**Individuality of thriving.** Thriving was highly subjective and unique among participants. Perna and Thomas (2008) have previously identified the uniqueness of academic success and posited that “because multiple layers of context inform student success, no one approach will improve student success for all students.” (Perna & Thomas, 2008, p. 63). When asked to define a thriving graduate student, participants refrained from generalization and recognized that thriving is perceived and experienced on an individual basis. Isabella, for example, stated that thriving is unique simply because individuals differ in their perceptions and experiences. Similarly, Leandra’s experience of thriving relied greatly on her progress, which she speculated to be different from other graduate students. In that sense, a single prescription for thriving in an attempt to reach a consensus is a gross over-generalization. Rather, identifying the
different facets of thriving bearing in mind its unique dynamics is the appropriate approach to understanding thriving.

This finding is consistent with a recent study conducted by Berea, Tsvetovat, Daun-Barnett, Greenwald, and Cox (2015) in which various dimensions of individual college achievement were examined through a nation-wide survey of 2,857 undergraduate students. Their result indicated that devising a unified approach to increasing student thriving was less likely as the researchers were unable to find patterns that could lead to generalizability (Berea et al., 2015). More specifically, this finding is in line with Schreiner’s (2014) suggestion that a unified approach is hardly representative of all students’ circumstances. Such notion is particularly important for those belonging to minority ethnic backgrounds who demonstrated specific needs distinct from the general population (McIntosh, 2015; Morgan Consoli et al., 2015; Schreiner, 2014). Students’ success is, therefore, context-specific and unique on an individual basis (Perna & Thomas, 2008).

Graduate students’ prior experiences informed their behavior in graduate school and affected their thriving. For example, maturity has been a great asset for Helena. Because of her age, Helena felt, she had a greater understanding of her path and her life goals in general. Ryff and Keyes (1995) identified age as a significant determinant of psychological well-being in three of the six pre-identified constructs of well-being. With age, individual’s levels of environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations increased (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Petridis (2013) hypothesized that as students age their interpersonal skills develop, which buffers their thriving in graduate school.

Older female graduate students are more likely to have familial responsibilities as a result of having children. In this study, Helena reported the highest level of thriving. What is notable in Helena’s case is her external familial engagements as a mother and wife. Previous literature pointed out that the complications arising from having families render balancing life and graduate
school a particularly difficult task for female students (Lynch, 2008). However, Petridis’s (2013) research found a positive correlation between having children and thriving. Similar to Helena, mature graduate students who constantly seek balance between multiple facets of their lives become more strategic, cultivate vital interpersonal skills, and feed from the support of their family, resulting in higher levels of thriving (Petridis, 2013).

**Multi-dimensionality of thriving.** The most common conceptualization of thriving among participants is its highly contextualized and multi-faceted nature. The thriving Quotient identified three layers of thriving as internal characteristics, interpersonal relations, and academic-related variables (Schreiner, 2010a). Similarly, Perna and Thomas (2008) proposed a multi-layered conceptual model of student success to close the seemingly wide gap between policy and practice in higher education (Perna & Thomas, 2008). Upon reviewing literary works in the fields of psychology, sociology, economics, and education, they concluded that “the policies and programs do not exist in isolation but interact with both characteristics of other policies and programs as well as the characteristics of the student, family, and school context.” (Perna & Thomas, 2008, p. 56).

In the same manner, the specific factors that influenced participants’ understanding of thriving, while diverse, seemed to originate from common dimensions across the board. Not perceived as a singular phenomenon, thriving consisted of two pillars: Academia and personal life. Hand in hand, academic success and personal well-being created a condition whereby participants felt thriving was a high possibility. What is more, thriving was viewed to be conditional to both, meaning that the absence or weakness of one pillar resulted in an unwholesome academic experience. Such holistic view was embedded in Schreiner’s (2010a) proposed model of thriving where she sought to expand upon typical measures of academic success and incorporate other influential facets of academia, such as personal well-being. Academic success and personal well-being are two pieces of one holistic picture, each
contributing a variety of factors that ultimately shape thriving in graduate school (Schreiner, 2013).

Passing courses with acceptable grades, achieving professional goals, and the overall satisfaction and progress leading to degree completion were among the most prominent aspects of academic success for participants. Confirmed by the studies of thriving in higher education (Schreiner, 2010a; 2010b; 2013), these academic accomplishments were the precursor to thriving among the participants. More importantly, tangible accomplishments when performing academic tasks and overcoming challenges created a momentous and sustainable state of thriving; participants agreed that one accomplishment led to a chain of additional accomplishments. The process of internalizing sense of accomplishment allowed participants to cultivate valuable skills that would later benefit them in future challenges. That in turn seemed to create positive emotions such as optimism.

That said, sense of accomplishment and positive emotions are juxtaposed in an interactive cycle, where major accomplishments created optimism. Optimism, in turn, helped sustain thriving over longer periods of time. Positive emotions have been previously identified as important predictors of fruitful academic experience (Brissette et al., 2002; Carver et al., 2009; Lounsbury et al., 2009; Park, 1996; Park et al., 1996; Schreiner, 2010a). Although often viewed as a general positive feeling or a state of mind (Cohn & Fredrickson 2009; Seligman 2011), optimism has also been linked to self-regulating behaviors that ensures continued movement towards attaining goals (Peterson & Chang, 2003). The interactive relationship between thriving and optimism discredits viewing positive emotions such as optimism as isolated personal traits. Instead, it is more appropriate to perceive these emotional resources as part of a cause an effect process.

The ability to contextualize abstract knowledge was considered prudent to thriving. In that regard, participants perceived themselves to be thriving when they were able to cultivate
important skills that would directly better their performance in their chosen careers. Academic success for graduate students, therefore, did not merely constitute finishing the program. Respectively, graduate students require certain skills or “competencies” which “transcend individual academic disciplines” (Poock, 2001, p. 348). These skills would eventually allow graduate students to transfer the knowledge obtained in their graduate studies to the context of a workplace. Similarly, in his study, Poock (2001) found a common belief among 97 graduate students, alumni, faculty, and administration staffs that all graduate students should be able to cultivate key identifiable professional development skills.

Results of the current study indicate that professional development is a fundamental aspect of thriving in graduate studies. This finding is unique to the graduate studies context as minimal attention was dedicated to professional development in Schreiner’s (2013) work in undergraduate level thriving. Moreover, literature suggests creating a balance between theoretical teachings and professional growth (Childers, Fitzpatrick, & Hall, 2004; Grube, Cedarholm, Jones, & Dunn, 2005), which is a characteristic inherent to graduate studies. That said, academic success is not the sole indicator of thriving in higher education.

Personal life included factors existing outside of academia. Participants believed that thriving graduate student is a social being, as well as a successful academic. A general consensus among participants indicated that their level of thriving suffered when they neglected key aspects of their personal lives. Nevertheless, participants conceptualized thriving as a state of balance between academia and personal life, where students were able to accomplish their academic goals while maintaining their relationships with their loved ones and their community. Graduate school often involves carrying out multiple responsibilities as a researcher, teacher, and a student. Balancing these roles with personal life is a significant aspect of success in graduate school (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, and Johnson, 2006; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).
A balanced life-style additionally signified a state of psychological well-being. Happiness, satisfaction, spiritual well-being, safety, and sense of belonging to the community were necessary to remain a functional and productive scholar. In fact, these are strongly connected to success and thriving through “creating opportunities for success, supporting academic achievement, and developing well-rounded, high-functioning students” (Marks & Wade, 2015, p. 10). For example, Leandra conceptualized thriving as the balance between social life and academic work, while Isabella identified thriving as a state of equilibrium across academic, professional, and social spheres of life. Consistent with Schreiner’s (2013) proposed construct of thriving, psychological well-being was found to be a common and imbedded component of thriving in this study.

**Thriving change and continuity.** Participants all referred to thriving as a fluid state, which described a constant change in how it was experienced. A shared aspect of participants’ thriving experience was its fluctuation. This rise and fall confirmed the malleable nature of thriving. Angela, for example, stated that depending on the events of the day, her state of thriving could be higher or lower than the day before. More interestingly, Leandra, and to some extent the remaining participants, stated that fluctuation is a natural component of thriving. As such, change in state of thriving did not necessarily equate to lack of it, but rather, reinforced its flexible nature. That said, participants experienced such change in different ways, some more than others.

Participants agreed that thriving occurred as a consequence of cultivating key skills in time. As graduate students learned the ins and outs of their program, they came to learn about themselves, what helped them thrive, and what deterred them from it. Thriving, therefore, was not only a sensation but a tangible result. Strictly speaking, thriving for the majority of participants did not come naturally but rather through experience and cultivating skills. In that sense, graduate students are not thriving individuals by the means of their prior accomplishments; rather, they learn how to thrive through a process. In Angela’s case, thriving was a process with a steep
learning curve where she gradually came to the realization that her initial view of thriving in graduate school was not entirely compatible with the reality of her experiences. Similar to Angela, Leandra’s previous experiences in her master’s in combination with her doctoral experiences resulted in her current state of thriving.

While a combination of different factors influenced participants’ perception of thriving, the degree to which academic and non-academic components influenced their thriving ranged across a spectrum. Out of the four participants, Angela exhibited a rather pragmatic view of thriving where academic success equated thriving almost entirely. Angela described personal well-being as a less significant contributor to her sense of thriving. On the contrary, Isabella believed that remarkable academic accomplishments are detrimental to personal well-being. Instead, Isabella believed moderate academic accomplishment is better suited to her in fear that higher academic expectation would effectively diminish her personal well-being. Although less rigid compared to Angela’s perception, Isabella’s views on the priority of academic success versus personal well-being fell on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Such vast differentiation in personal priorities result in opposite thriving conceptualizations. One reason for that may be that students enter graduate school with different goals in mind. Angela started her program with the sole purpose of completing her education as quickly as possible. Academic achievements, therefore, were highly contingent on prioritizing academia over personal well-being for the duration of her program. Such approach resulted in completing her degree more quickly than normally expected. On the flip side, Angela described that her sense of belonging and well-being suffered due to her intense focus on academia. Isabella’s prioritization, although vastly different, resulted to a similar pattern of behavior. Although academic accomplishments were important, speedy degree completion and going above and beyond to achieve academic goals were not. Isabella’s academic achievement standards being much lower than those of Angela’s, her initial goal when entering her graduate program was to
obtain her degree in a safe community that would promote her well-being. Given her prior experiences with mental illness, functioning as a student in graduate school was highly dependent on wellness. That said, Leandra and Helena conceptualized thriving somewhere in the middle of the spectrum with academics and non-academics playing similar roles.

Conformity to ambiguity. A unique pattern of thriving was prominent among master’s participants that did not replicate among participants in the Ph.D. program. Pursuing a master’s degree signifies a considerable conceptual shift in scholarship compared to other degree transitions (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998) on both the academic level (Gardner, 2007; Lovitts, 2001) and the social level (Golde, 2005). Transitioning into master’s degree implies more drastic changes in direction and speed of education compared to undergraduate studies. Master’s students face “a much shorter course of study, involving a lesser commitment of time and resources to earn an advanced degree” and, therefore, have considerably less time available to make the transitions necessary to successfully graduate (Tokuno, 2008, p. 5). That said, less attention has been awarded to the processes of master’s degree adjustment in comparison to the undergraduate as well as the doctoral student population (Polson, 2003; Tokuno, 2008). One reason for that maybe the simplistic assumption that graduate students are already self-sufficient and pre-possess the ability to adjust to graduate studies (O’Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthorn, & Zammit, 2009; Tonuko, 2008).

While undergraduate students function within a structure that is normally set out by instructors, graduate school requires considerable amount of self-direction. What is more, research is a solitary form of learning (Katz, 1997) resulting in isolation, especially in the humanities and social sciences fields (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005). While students receive general guidelines through courses, conducting research as the most highlighted aspect of graduate studies and an absolute requirement for a master’s thesis is carried out by students themselves within a structure of their own choosing (Katz, 1997). Such transition into
independence has been reported as particularly challenging (Katz, 1997; Lovitts, 2001). These findings coincide with Angela and Isabella’s experiences, both of which were master’s students.

One of the main conditions of a positive learning experience and motivation is autonomy or the ability to function independently and pursue knowledge freely (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, findings of this study indicate that not coupled with guidance, the autonomous nature of graduate studies could potentially hinder master’s students’ thriving. Such a move from high structure to minimal structure was more highlighted among master’s participants in comparison with doctoral participants. Both Angela and Isabella felt they were exposed to such highly autonomous environment for the first time in their academic careers. Thus, they experienced a more drastic change in their learning environment compared to Leandra and Helena who had already obtained their master’s degree. That said, the stress of transitioning into such vastly different learning environment is subjective, as Gansemer-Topf and his colleagues (2006) posited that depending on students’ perceptions, some may find the adjustment process more stressful than others.

Angela and Isabella both agreed that the process of adapting to the academic milieu of graduate studies is a fundamental component of their thriving conceptualization. They believed that thriving in the master’s program was highly contingent on the phase students find themselves in. The first phase of the master’s program is passing courses, which is much similar to the undergraduate studies. This phase is additionally referred to as the “formal stage,” that is a move towards internalizing graduate student roles and independence, followed by the “informal stage” or formation of one’s professional identity (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006, p. 21). Angela and Isabella were more likely to experience a drop in their thriving when entering the informal phase because the process of learning how to function with minimal guidelines required a period of adaptation and learning.
Supports and Barriers: Addressing Research Questions Numbers Two and Three

Thriving is a holistic phenomenon influenced by a variety of different factors, both within individuals and within the environment (Schreiner, 2010a; 2013; Schreiner et al., 2009). Similarly, a holistic approach is better suited to presenting the factors that promote or hinder thriving as the findings of this study. Findings of this research demonstrate that depending on the context in which it was experienced, a single factor can both be interpreted as a support for and a barrier to thriving.

Moreover, thriving is positive in nature. Therefore, it was not overall surprising to see that participants identified fewer barriers to their thriving than supports, especially considering the fact that they already placed themselves at the higher end of the thriving spectrum. When speaking of factors that inhibit thriving, participants reflected on conditions that temporarily or potentially compromised their state of thriving, rather than a singular event that effectively diminished it. Similarly, participants were more likely to recall situations that intensified their thriving, as opposed to identifying singular factors as supports. Considering the complexity of thriving as a phenomenon and the interconnectedness of its components, dissecting the factors that actively promote or hinder it minimized the topic into a series of do’s and don’ts. It was, therefore, more beneficial to fuse supports and barriers as conditions that effect thriving instead to depict a holistic view.

Feeling connected to a learning environment that is fulfilling of social, emotional, and intellectual needs of participants was a fundamental aspect of thriving in graduate school. Participants collectively owed a tremendous portion of their success to their relationships and the individuals they felt were supportive of them. Connectedness was, therefore, the most significant factor affecting thriving as found in this study. As members of a community, participants sought a variety of means to contribute, so as to give back to the community and gain validation. Mentorship was an essential and reciprocal aspect of thriving in graduate school, which
highlighted the role of a mentor. Moreover, academic and social identities were identified as two distinct facets of graduate studies. The need to separate school and life called for availability of designated graduate workspace. Moreover, occasion feelings of self-doubt directly affected their thriving. These common thriving conditions were clustered as the five following categories:

1) Connectedness
2) Contribution
3) Mentorship
4) Compartmentalization
5) Imposter syndrome

**Connectedness.** Schreiner and her colleagues (2009) highlighted multiple facets of interpersonal thriving, most notably sense of community and positive relationships (Schreiner et al., 2009). She further described sense of community as the “feelings of ownership and belonging, emotional connections with others in the community, and interdependent partnerships” (Schreiner, 2013, p. 46). Although this description fits the findings of this study, participants did not limit the supportive role of their relationships to their academic community. Therefore, sense of community is not a full representative of the kinds of relationships included in participant’ descriptions. Connectedness, on the other hand, conveys the existence of relationships regardless of their origins and embodies the network of supportive individuals, including the community of graduate studies as well as supportive family members. This shift of focus form sense of community to connectedness best aligns with Petridis’s (2013) study, where she sought to expand upon sense of community to include other facets of interpersonal thriving, such as the graduate program climate, friends, and family.

Connectedness was the single most consistent finding of this study; all participants referred to at least one individual whose supportive role hugely determined their ability to be and thrive in graduate school. Emulated in the previous literature in the field of academic thriving, (Schreiner at al., 2011; Schreiner, 2013) belonging to the academic community was found to be
an important contributor to thriving among the participants of this study. Nevertheless, sense of community was partial in explaining the kinds of relationships that fostered thriving in graduate school, as participants’ support systems often extended beyond academia to include significant sources of support such as family members. The dual effect of both sense of community and supportive family formed a wholesome sense of connectedness, which participants described as the essence of thriving in graduate school.

 Derived from Tinto’s (1993) definition, sense of community is nested in the academic system and originates from the social connections formed within the constructs of the institution. However, this definition does not necessarily fit the experiences of graduate students as it fails to capture the complexities of the communities that graduate students belong to (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). Moreover, sense of community is only a partial representation of interpersonal supports needed to thrive in graduate school. Hence, connectedness was selected as an alternative term to encompass both internal and external sources of interpersonal support. In the current study, family (including parents, grandparents, spouse, husband, and children) and the community (including peers and faculty) were both found as significant facets of connectedness.

 Family members were a significant source of support for the participants. Helena spoke of the continuous encouragement of her husband and daughter that fostered her thriving. Similarly, Isabella underlined the support of her grandparents as her main source of encouragement. The significance of family support was non-academic, which allowed participants to pursue graduate studies freely without interruptions or distractions. Moreover, having supportive family and friends is an added force that helps improve sense of community within academics (Petridis, 2013; Tinto, 1993), which is an identifiable pattern among the participants of this study as well.

 Consistant with previous studies (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), the dominating culture of the graduate program was found to be a significant
contributor to participants’ thriving. In that regard, Petridis (2013) stated that “Because community in graduate school is rooted in the academic department, it was not surprising to find that a welcoming and supportive departmental climate was foundational to students experiencing a psychological sense of community and thereby thriving” (Petridis, 2013, p. 106).

Angela’s sense of community suffered throughout her graduate studies because she was not able to establish connections with her peers, nor did she identify the support of her family or friends as significant factors. Lacking sense of community resulted in experiencing loneliness and isolation. Students who feed from the support offered by their peers are more likely to fit in to the community and establish sense of community (Austin, 2002; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006), especially at the start of their program (Gardner, 2009). Similarly, Angela identified peers as important sources of guidance, lack of which she linked back to isolation.Investing efforts in establishing sense of belonging in academia requires early initiation (DeNeui, 2003; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988) and was found to be an important factor in helping graduate students to transition into their scholarly roles (Golde, 1998). These findings were in line with Angela’s experiences with sense of community, where she linked isolation at the early stages of her program to overall diminished sense of community.

Angela perceived herself as a thriving individual, despite her perceived limited interactions with peer and faculty, which was previously identified as one of the most important aspects of success in graduate school (Weidman & Stein, 2003). That begged the question of whether the nature of the support overrides the number of supportive individuals. The singularity of support did not diminish Angela’s thriving simply because the support she received form her supervisor sufficed to maintain her thriving. Similarly, Petridis (2013) identified an atypical case where single-sourced but all-encompassing support originating from family was found enough to compensate for reduced sense of community. Similar pattern was found in other participants as well. Although the mere existence of relationships affected their thriving considerably, the
number of relationships and their origins were irrelevant. In fact, participants exhibited a tendency to be selective in their relationships as they preferred to limit their connections to individuals who they believed would directly promote their thriving. Setting these limitations did not imply weakness in their sense of belonging but rather indicated purposefulness and deliberation in forming connections.

Nevertheless, the degree of which participants achieved the sense of belonging differed. That may have been due to the fact that individuals differed in their ability to cultivate relationships. For instance, Leandra attributed the strength of her sense of belonging to her extroverted penchant. On the other hand, Angela associated her considerably less vigorous sense of community to the fact that she was an introvert. Extroversion instigated affinity and connectedness, while introversion inevitably diminished it. This finding is consistent with the empirical research, where extraversion was positively attributed to community involvement (DeNeui, 2003). That, in turn, increases sense of community (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011) and consequently thriving (Schreiner, 2010a; 2010b). Moreover, a study conducted by Lounsbury and DeNeui (1995) found a strong positive relationship was found between extraversion sense of community. That said, other empirical data contradict this finding. For instance, Farsides and Woodfield (2003) found contradictive information regarding the link between extraversion and academic success among undergraduate students in their review of empirical data. Moreover, Berea and colleagues (2015) came to the conclusion that these personalities cannot be a definitive measure of thriving in academia because “not all extrovert students would be thriving under any conditions as well as not all introvert students would be thriving under any conditions” (Berea et al., 2015, p. 13).

**Contribution.** Participant’s need to contribute to their learning community perpetuated their involvement on scholarly and social fronts. Similar to the findings of this study, involvement was identified as a way for students to form and strengthen connections to their academic
communities (Schreiner et al., 2009). This finding was especially true for Isabella, Helena, and Leandra, who strongly attributed their thriving to academic and social contributions as a result of involvement in the graduate community. That said, what distinguishes the findings of this study is that involvement in graduate studies is not merely a means to strengthen sense of community as implied in the results of previous studies conducted on the undergraduate level. In that regard, Gardner and Barnes (2007) noted that there are fundamental differences between involvement in undergraduate and graduate school in quality, extent, and purpose. Participants additionally perceived involvement as a way to give back and contribute to the collective goal of the community parallel to their own personal goals, which was emulated in McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) previous work.

Congruent with previous literature, findings of this study illustrate that a combination of academic and social engagement constituted fruitful contribution to the learning community (Hu, 2010; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000). Sense of contribution took various forms; while Helena emphasized the value of academic contributions in strengthening policy and practice, Isabella noted the importance social engagements to reaffirm her community’s support. Similarly, contribution to the learning environment, either through leading or engaging in academic projects, internalized sense of productiveness in Leandra. In short, engagement both academically and non-academically embodied sense of growth, competence, and joy for participants.

Moreover, contribution was a way for them to showcase their accomplishments and gain recognition from the academic community. That in turn validated their efforts in their academics and allowed them to have both a voice and an impact. Such finding demonstrates the interconnectedness of contribution and validation. Similarly, having an impact through contribution is one of the assessment parameters of interpersonal thriving (Schreiner, 2010a).

Mentorship. Participants of this study identified mentorship as one of the important conditions of their thriving, as both having and being a mentor. There are many discrepancies
regarding the role of the mentor (Santos & Reigadas, 2005) and the term mentor and advisor have been intermittently utilized throughout literature (Lipschutz, 1993). Therefore, understanding the characteristics of a mentor requires a differentiation between their roles (Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2009). While mentoring is informal and holistic in nature, advising is formal and academic (Lipschutz, 1993). Therefore, mentorship includes, but is not limited to, advisement.

Mentorship is one of the most significant aspects of graduate studies experience (Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2009; Katz & Harnett, 1976). The “organic” quality of mentorship described by Helena, and to a similar extent by the rest of the participants, aligned perfectly with Creighton and her colleagues’ (2009) conceptualization of mentorship. They defined mentorship as a reciprocal and equal relationship where the mentor is a genuinely caring role model, actively seeking to provide meaningful learning opportunities for the mentee. In addition, mentors are attending to the emotional needs of their mentees in addition to their academic needs (Lovitts, 2001). In a similar manner, participants perceived the mentor as an active observer who participated in their learning process and encouraged individuals learn on their own terms.

What is more, the balance between guidance and structure was the mojo of the mentor, which Goodman (2006) linked to the state of synchronicity between the mentee’s perception and that of the mentor. Participants described their mentors, in this case supervisor, as an individual who offers guided autonomy and encourages students to take charge of their learning process. Therefore, participants required in mentorship a combination of guidance and structure. A balance between dependent and independent learning allowed participants to have a supported yet unrestrained learning experience, which previous research has confirmed as an incremental aspect of graduate studies (Gardner, 2008).

Compartmentalization. A consensus existed among the participants that attending to all aspects of life and graduate towards achieving a state of balance requires physical isolation of
academia from personal life. Graduate students have reported higher levels of productivity when they were able to have an exclusive space to work (Kinsley et al., 2015). Compartmentalizing life and school called for the need for a space dedicated to scholarly tasks in the form of a designated desk, office, or room. That facilitated working and attending to personal life. Results from a study conducted to assess special needs among thirty-six students indicated that graduate students require a space not necessarily limited to campus library but separate from undergraduate students all the same (Rempel, Hussong-Christian, & Mellinger, 2011). Although designated work space was typically found within the confines of the learning environment, it could be anywhere from an office in the Faculty to a room in one’s living space, as long as that space could silo school and life (Brandes, 2006).

A conducive work environment is multi-faceted (Kinsley et al., 2015), serving both intellectual and social needs of graduate students (Brandes, 2006). The infrastructural specifications of a productive working space have been identified by previous researchers, including privacy and accessibility (Gibbs, Boettcher, Hollingsworth & Slania, 2012) and quietness (Mehta, Zhu, & Cheema, 2012). Similarly, Light and air were of utmost importance to Leandra, whereas the ability to engage in intellectual as well as social conversations with peers constituted Isabella’s idea of space. Moreover, a stable work place prevents students from having to migrate in between places, which in Leandra’s experience destabilized productivity and flow.

**Imposter syndrome.** Clance and Imes (1978) defined imposter syndrome as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women” (Clance & Imes, 1976, p. 241). Interestingly, both master’s and doctoral participants experienced self-doubt and discouragement and reported having imposter syndrome at the start of their studies. Feelings of competence and confidence are embedded notions in the construct of thriving (Schreiner, 2013). In that sense, imposter syndrome created conditions that temporarily hindered their ability to thrive.
Comparing themselves to other students, especially at the start of their program, lowered participants’ self-confidence and faith in their abilities, a finding in line with Parkman’s (2016) statement that a person who experiences imposter syndrome “often over estimates the abilities of others and underestimates the amount of work those individuals put into their success,” which in turn leads to self-inflicted perfectionism (Parkman, 2016, p. 52). Moreover, when experiencing imposter syndrome, students felt they did not belong to graduate school because they viewed others as smarter, more skilled, and more talented compared to themselves. Imposter syndrome, much like previous research (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010), was linked to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Other students, therefore, were intimidating. Such feelings were strong when present and deterred these students from achieving their goals.

Imposter syndrome, as portrayed by the participants, is internal and contradicts elements of intrapersonal thriving. While a thriving student holds a “positive perspective” towards her abilities (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 5), a person inflicted with imposter syndrome is less likely to view herself capable enough to be successful. Conscientiousness has been repeatedly studied and attributed to success in higher education (e.g. Busato et al., 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; Conrad, 2005; Kling, 2001; Lievens et al., 2002; Trautwein et al., 2009; Wagerman & Funder, 2006; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). A study aiming at relating FFM (Cost & McCrae, 1992) with imposter syndrome in a sample of 190 undergraduate students associated low Conscientiousness with feelings of imposter syndrome and hypothesized that reliance on intelligence and low efforts as indicators of low Conscientiousness are the main causes of imposter syndrome (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002).

**Limitations of the Study**

The strength of this study resides in the individual voices that help shape our understanding of thriving. The fact that this study was a small portion of a larger study might have set certain constraints regarding accessibility to participant pool. More specifically, there
were two main limitations pertaining to this study as a master’s thesis. These limitations include the number of participants and the researcher’s personal biases.

The first limitation of the present study is its limited number of participants. Only of four female graduate voices were utilized to collect data. The decision revolving around establishing adequate number of participants to saturate data relies on “the type of study, as well as assumptions about whether it represents a distinct event or an on-going process” (Sanders et al., 2017, p. 11). Increasing the number of participants, while increasing data saturation at times, may reduce the study’s “coherence and potency” if taken too far (Sanders, et al., 2017, p. 1). Despite lack of consensus regarding qualitative data saturation, scholars agree that it is flexible and largely dependent on the researchers’ purpose of their study, which is required to be fully clarified (Sanders et al., 2017).

The second limitation of this study is the potential interference of my personal biases. Because of my position as a graduate student, I was inherently entangled in the topic of my master’s thesis. Therefore, my personal biases were inevitably and to some degree imposed on this study. I made every effort possible to minimize contaminating the voices of my participants with that of my own by making a careful distinction between my identity as a graduate student and a researcher when conducting this study. That said, the nature of the research methodology utilized in this study entailed active participation of the researcher and the participants during data collection when possible (Johnson, 2002), which discouraged passiveness on the part of the researcher (Foley, 2014).

I recognized the potential biases that my position as both a graduate student and a researcher can bring to the findings of this study. Although the juxtaposition of the two identities may be construed as a limitation, my close familiarity with the context added to this study openness and transparency. As we were in a very similar academic context and time-frame, participants felt a degree of comfort in describing to me mutually understandable events. Absence
of power dynamic between myself and the participants facilitated open conversations without judgement on my part or reservation on theirs, adding authenticity to the responses that I was able to elicit.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, I offer recommendations that would benefit future research as well as the educational practice. The subject of thriving is a fairly novel concept that has only recently been introduced to the higher education context. To the best of my abilities, I have yet to find a comprehensive research aimed at conceptualizing thriving for graduate students. The current research touched upon distinct aspects of thriving fundamentally applicable to the graduate studies context, through which distinct recommendations for future research and educational practice were drawn.

I recommend dedicating explicit research to the graduate student body that examines their graduate experiences in a holistic manner through a combination of various research methods and methodologies. Second, researcher can expand upon each facet of thriving as identified in the findings of this study individually. More specifically, the current body of literature may benefit from further detailed investigations to understand the relationship between thriving and external support systems, professional development, mentorship, graduate space, and imposter syndrome among graduate students. Recommendations to the educational practice involve paying heed to graduate student thriving, modifying and enhancing the services offered at graduate programs to foster graduate student thriving in the above facets, and better familiarizing future graduate students with the nuances of graduate studies to facilitate their thriving once they start their graduate programs.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research may benefit from expanding both the scope and diversity of research aimed at understanding thriving among graduate students. Incorporating a larger number of
participants may increase the scope of data and consequently introduce additional information not found in the current study. Prospective scholars may be interested in diversifying the context by including additional graduate departments and disciplines to hone in on cultural-geographical and systemic similarities and differences across disciplines. Although similar on many levels, the findings of this study shed light on possible differences between master’s and doctoral programs that could have potential distinct implications on thriving for their corresponding graduate students. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to distinguish degree programs and dedicate exclusive research to thriving within master’s and doctoral programs separately.

Future research could further delve into the aspects of thriving for graduate students as per the findings of this study more deeply. With the framework of thriving in mind and building on the current body of literature, future researchers could further investigate the scope of the contributions made by family members, professional development, and mentorship on graduate student thriving. Graduate student space as an understudied component of graduate experience, more specifically thriving in graduate school, could benefit from further examinations beyond the use of library. From the perspective of compartmentalizing work and life, further studies are required to understand areas of strength, shortcomings, and strategies pertaining to acquiring personal space.

**Recommendations for the Educational Practice**

The findings of this study could be used in practices that support current graduate students and prepare future graduate students. The findings of this study illustrate that mere academic accomplishment does not constitute thriving in graduate school. Prioritizing graduate student well-being must be echoed in institutional policies and practices at its most fundamental level through creating awareness among graduate students as well as faculty. Building such cultural value might facilitate personalized approaches to support the wellness needs of graduate students, which is the essence of thriving. Moreover, establishing space and services for wellness
such as full-time on-site counselling departments, wellness-themed events, informal and social events, and increasing accommodation options for students with mental health related challenges may result in catering to a broader range of needs. The following recommendations are made for institutions in support of graduate students’ thriving:

1) Acknowledging the role of external support systems in graduate student thriving to shed light on silent causes of reduced thriving for students who lack family support, such as those who are away from their families and international students. Moreover, allocating additional social support resources for these students in an effort to compensate for lack of family support,

2) Assessing students’ special needs to allocate healthy, productive, and equitable work-spaces for graduate students with access to amenities such as kitchen, communal space, quiet work stations, computer desks, and study rooms,

3) Offering strong and all-encompassing orientation sessions for incoming graduate students to aid students in navigating graduate school, meeting academic expectations, locating resources, and reaching out to support services. Orientations devised to offer a clear understanding of the framework of graduate school, specific areas of challenge, and helpful strategies to overcome the stress of maintaining physical and psychological well-being throughout the journey maybe of great benefit for incoming graduate students across all departments.
Concluding Thoughts

Thriving in graduate studies is a complex phenomenon, non-linear, and highly individualistic. As previously established, thriving entails a high degree of personal well-being in addition to achieving academic goals (Schreiner et al., 2009). Findings of this study highlight several nuances to thriving in graduate school that the previously established model of thriving does not fully represent. Specific to graduate studies, one of the most prevalent aspects of thriving in graduate school is a state of balance between personal life and scholastics. Thriving was not perceived as a rigid all-or-none state but rather a continuously evolving and ever-changing condition. Rise and fall in thriving was, albeit less frequently, experienced by even the most thriving individuals. Specific to master’s students, thriving was the process of adjusting to the seemingly ambiguous nature of graduate studies and becoming autonomous learners.

Managing the nuances of graduate studies rendered achieving thriving rather different from undergraduate studies. Similar to undergraduate level thriving, supportive individuals were the most important contributors to thriving. Explicit to graduate students, belonging to the graduate community coupled by an external system of supportive family members and friends created a sense of connectedness whereby students felt thriving was achievable. Iterated by previous studies, meaningful involvement was among the key thriving conditions. In the graduate context, involvements signified active contribution towards the betterment of the community and building on scholarly knowledge, along with feeling recognized and validates. Moreover, mentorship and the ability to separate scholarship from personal life were identified as additional conditions that enables thriving. Finally, self-doubt in the form of imposter syndrome obstructed thriving in graduate school both for master’s and doctoral students.

As a graduate student, I have faced many challenges that shaped who I am today. Not only did I have the privilege to experience this life transforming journey, but I also had the opportunity to learn about my fellow graduate students’ experiences, as well as the works of
many scholars along the way. Such privilege came with distinct challenges that I had to overcome both on personal and professional levels. Though very difficult at times, preserving my integrity as a researcher required removing my graduate student cap to put on my researcher cap. Doing so entailed distancing myself from the experiences I have had as a graduate student in formulating, analyzing, and producing this study.

Absent from the literature were studies that viewed graduate studies in a comprehensive way. The issue with assessing graduate students’ experiences from the point of view of academic success is that it neglects their well-being in the process. For without well-being, how can a scholar be productive? At the very least, this study hoped to initiate a dialogue in the field of graduate studies research and propose an alternative approach to understanding the dynamics of the graduate studies experience. This dialogue will hopefully pave the way for future studies exploring thriving among graduate students.

Counterintuitively, I learned through this journey both as a researcher and graduate student that isolation is embedded in our community; we are isolated, but we are isolated together. In their goals, aspirations, longings, challenges, and successes, I learned that graduate students differ but unite all the same. In the process of writing this thesis, I came to the realizations that I am not alone and that we can do this together.

The findings of the study draw a similar conclusion to that of Perna and Thomas’s (2008) study. They maintained that our theoretical knowledge about student success in higher education is “disconnected” and does not “systematically canvas the range of issues and perspectives that more completely and comprehensively inform student success.” (Perna & Thomas, 2008, p. 63). The implications of such limitation cause institutional approaches to “artificially force a reality on the educational context in which success outcomes can be best understood” (Perna & Thomas, 2008, p. 63). The mere acknowledgement of the individual nuances is the first step towards
embracing tailored and holistic policies and practices on the part of the institution as a whole, as well as the individuals within.

I remain grateful for the opportunities I have been awarded in this journey. Most importantly, I will cherish the opportunity to view the journey of graduate studies both form outside and within. The conversations I have had the privilege to take part in with my peers and the opportunity to enquire about fundamental views that tapped on the very essence of their being has profoundly changed my view of life. This study informed and will continue to inform my experiences and shape my identity. My sincerest hope is that it will create a ripple effect to enhance the experiences of current and future fellow graduate students.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Thriving and Wellness
1. How would you define thriving and well-being in the context of your graduate studies?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being not at all and 10 meaning really thriving), how would you rate the degree to which you are thriving within your graduate program? How did you arrive at this number?
3a. What programming or events at your faculty/school have impacted your well-being? (e.g. course selection, funding)
3b. What other factors have impacted your well-being?
4. What specific resources and/or supports to thriving exist in your: lab/group? Faculty/School? Queen’s campus? Kingston community?
5. What specific barriers to thriving exist in your: lab/group? Faculty/School? Queen’s campus? Kingston community?

Self-Determination and Your Program
6. How are your relationships with people in your Faculty/School? How do these relationships contribute to or hinder your wellness and your ability to thrive in your program? (Peer, faculty, staff)
7. In what ways are you involved in your graduate community? What impact does this involvement have on your wellness? [RELATEDNESS/COMPETENCE]
8. To what extent do you feel you are able to pursue courses and research that are deeply interesting and meaningful to you? How do these course and research options contribute to or hinder your wellness and your ability to thrive in your program? [AUTONOMY]
9. How capable do you feel of succeeding in your program of study? How do these feelings contribute to or hinder your wellness and your ability to thrive in your program? [COMPETENCE]

Looking Back and Looking Forward
10. Thinking back over the course of your program, how has your wellness and ability to thrive changed?
11. How have your personal or academic goals changed over the course of the program? To what do you attribute these changes?
12. From your experience, what elements need to be in place in a graduate program to help students thrive and be well?
13. If you were to make recommendations to your Faculty/School on how your program could be adapted to better support thriving and student wellness, what advice would you give?
14. If you knew what you know now, what would you have done differently over the course of your program?
Appendix B
Sample Coded Transcript 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16:43</td>
<td>INTERVIEWER: So, in what ways would you say are you involved in the graduate community, and what impact does the involvement have on your wellness?</td>
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<td>16:58</td>
<td>PARTICIPANT: It's interesting 'cause that hasn't really changed this year. Last year I was super involved. I was on the RBJSE committee, I went to academic events all the time, I made comments, so on and so forth, and that really did positively effect my wellness. Like the creativity collective for example, was a really great way to connect with people who shared my ideas. So, talking to those people about my study and developing it and so on was really beneficial. For example, Judy gave me one of my interview questions, my favorite interview question actually. As far as academic thriving it really helped. Thriving academically actually fed into my wellness because even if other areas of my life weren't perfect I felt like one thing was working which gave me the strength to improve those other areas.</td>
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<td>18:19</td>
<td>INTERVIEWER: So a little bit of shifting gears but not crazy amount. So to what extent do you feel that you're able to pursue courses in research that are deeply meaningful to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>18:32</td>
<td>PARTICIPANT: To a limited extent, I don't know. Like any system, it has limits. You can't do whatever you want, whenever you want all the time. I felt that the course offerings were pretty good but not perfect. I couldn't study something exactly in my area, for example. But they just are trying to hire someone who focuses on at-risk youth right now. Courses in research. I also... I was all, at the beginning of the year, I was really into artography. And basically, I got told that I shouldn't pursue it because there isn't faculty support for it, nobody will be on my side about it, which was frustrating. It kinda made me go, &quot;I wish I went to BC.&quot; But, I also don't regret that decision, the decision not to pursue it, because it is kind of academically out there and doesn't have a lot of traction. There's a reason why faculty don't support it. And my master's, at least for the immediate future, is sort of a one off thing. I don't intend to get my PhD and become a professor so I kind of didn't care that it wasn't popular. But now, thinking about the future, maybe it's a better idea if I do something a little bit more legitimate in order to, whatever potentially, maybe 20 years from now do my PhD. It's sort of like, &quot;I guess, it's okay.&quot; [laughter] But I didn't get to do exactly what I wanted.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20:40</td>
<td>INTERVIEWER: How did that make you feel?</td>
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<tr>
<td>20:51</td>
<td>INTERVIEWER: Did it make you feel... It kinda takes away from... Did you feel that</td>
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</table>

Commented [NA27]: Be23-peer membership and help
Commented [NA28]: Be24-increased competence as a result of peer membership
Commented [NA29]: Be25-friendliness of the atmosphere/colleagues
Commented [NA30]: Be26-network building for academic development
Commented [NA31]: Be26
Commented [NA32]: Be27-academic thriving feeding elevating confidence
Commented [NA33]: Be28-limited course options
Commented [NA34]: Be29-faculty push to alter academic path/lack of autonomy
Commented [NA35]: Be29
Appendix C

Sample Coded Transcript 2

Leandra

came home and I was feeling really frustrated because I felt that a relationship that I had with somebody... It's research assistant work I was doing, she wasn't really understanding me. That made me feel frustrated and I would've said that maybe I wasn't thriving to the same extent, so I was on a six last night. But this morning, or today, I would say I'm at an eight.

03:22 INTERVIEWER: Eight's a good number. I'm glad to hear that. What programming or events that happen around the school impact your wellness? What sorts of things?

03:31 INTERVIEWEE: In our faculty what impacts my wellness? I know when I feel really isolated and I remove myself from the faculty, I feel like my wellness isn't as strong. It's the interconnectedness that I feel. When I see colleagues and classmates and I have opportunities to talk with them and to see my supervisor, to have these conversations, I feel more connected. Can you repeat the question?

04:02 INTERVIEWER: Sure. What programming or events that your faculty or school have impacted your wellbeing?

04:07 INTERVIEWEE: Overall wellbeing, I would say that the holiday social coming up, for example, is a nice opportunity to talk outside of our academic pursuits on a more relational social level. What other initiatives? Socials are a big thing for me. I'm a really interpersonal... I put a lot of emphasis on that in my life. Other things, not as much.

04:38 INTERVIEWER: Yeah that I can... I can understand that.

04:41 INTERVIEWEE: For example I don't participate in badminton on Friday. Not because I have strong dislike for badminton but it's just not something that I rate highly in my life, but I make time for yoga because that feeds my soul.

05:00 INTERVIEWER: A follow up if you'll indulge me, what succor does yoga provide that something like badminton wouldn't? What does it mean to you?

05:09 INTERVIEWEE: I guess it's my spiritual. To me it's more active in the sense of body and mind and that interconnected piece. I go to yoga and I think about breathing, which helps me with feeling calm throughout my day that I bring from my yoga practice to my day-to-day. What else does yoga do for me? I find that it helps my posture as a graduate student, and it helps my neck pain and my back pain. Ever since starting grad school I felt a lot more stiffness in my hips just because of the amount of sitting that we do, so that helps to combat that.

05:57 INTERVIEWER: Nice, thank you. What specific resources or support do you find that exist to your thriving? Groups, school, the campus itself, that sort of thing? What sticks out to you?

06:13 INTERVIEWEE: When my supervisor makes time for me. I feel like those weekly... Or not weekly, I shouldn't say that. They're becoming more frequent, but every couple of weeks we meet, all of the grad students, to my supervisor, and he checks in with what we're taking on right now and, and how it aligns with our trajectory in moving forward. I value those opportunities to connect with him, but also to see what his other students at other stages of the program are doing, so that I can make comparisons between what I'm doing and what they're doing. And so, that he can also comment on what I'm doing so that I make sure that I'm moving forward as he would anticipate.
Appendix D

Ethics approval

September 29, 2017

Mr. Eleftherios Soleas
Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Queens’ University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

Dear Mr. Soleas:

GREB Traq #: 6019104
Title: "GEDUC-822-16 Self-Determination and Thriving in Graduate Students"

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has reviewed and cleared your request for renewal of ethics clearance for the above-named study. This renewal is valid for one year from September 8, 2017. Prior to the next renewal date you will be sent a reminder memo and the link to ROMEO to renew for another year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Completed Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is ‘completed’ so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period. An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours. To submit an adverse event report, access the application at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form".

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes in study procedures or implementation of new aspects into the study procedures. Your request for protocol changes will be forwarded to the appropriate GREB reviewers and/or the GREB Chair. To submit an amendment form, access the application at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies".

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Interim Chair, General Research Ethics Board

c.: Dr. Rylan Egan, Supervisor
Miss Anoushka Mouessian, Research Associate
Miss Nadia Arghash and Mrs. Heather Nesbitt, Research Assistants
Dr. Richard Reeve, Chair, Unit REB
Mrs. Erin Rennie, Dept. Admin.
Appendix E
Letter of Information (LOI)

PLEASE RETAIN A COPY OF THIS LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR YOUR RECORDS.

LETTER OF INFORMATION & CONSENT FORM
(Interviews__Fall and Spring)

“Self-Determination and Thriving in Graduate Students”

Dear Graduate Students,

This research is being conducted by Eleftherios Soleas, Heather Coe, and Nadia Arghash in the Faculty of __________ and Anoushka Mouesson from __________ supervised by Dr. Rylan Egan. This study has been granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board according to Canadian research ethics principles (http://www.ethics.gc.ca/default.asp) and __________ University policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to explore the capacity of students to self determine and thrive in graduate studies programs. Self-determination and thriving can be considered measures of how fulfilling the program is and the depth of the richness of the opportunities facilitated by the program. Each individual phase of participation will enter the participant into a prize draw for a $50 gift card from one of Starbucks, Amazon, or the Apple Store. At each phase, there will be one gift card for participants in the Faculty of __________ and one for participants in the __________. The odds of receiving the gift card are dependent on the number of participants.

What is involved in this study? This phase of the study centres on individual interviews being held in the fall (in the spring for spring administration). Participating in this phase should require about one hour. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by a research associate who has completed the appropriate research ethics training. The interview will take the form of open and closed-ended questions with the potential for prompts to fully examine the phenomenon of self-determination and thriving in graduate programs. Some of the questions in the study are about sensitive topics such as mental health, if you feel uneasy after the interview, we encourage you to contact Telephone Aid Line __________ and Counselling Services at __________ While there are no direct benefits to participating in this study, your participation in this study could help future graduate students through improvements to graduate programs.

We are leaving it to you to decide who you would like to conduct the interview, rather than making that determination for you in advance. In addition to the two graduate students and the faculty member who are currently listed, other graduate students from Education and Kinesiology and Health Studies and a faculty member from Kinesiology and Health Studies are available as interviewers. We will provide you a list of possible researchers from which to make your choice.

Is participation voluntary? Yes. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable. There are no consequences to withdrawing from the study. You may withdraw from this study until July 31, 2016 by contacting either Anoushka Mouesson at __________ or Eleftherios Soleas at __________ Participating or not participating in this study will have no bearing on your standing in your graduate program.

What will happen to your responses? Your responses in the interview will be treated as confidential to the extent possible. However, even though your identity will not be revealed to the other members of the research team who do not interview you, it is possible that your identity may be inferred by the
responses you give. Your data will be linked across all phases in which you take part. Only Dr. John Freeman and his research team will have access to this information. The study results may be published in journals and presented at scholarly and professional conferences. Any such presentations will maintain individual confidentiality. No identifiable information from the interviews will be revealed; however, de-identified quotes and non-identifiable paraphrases will be used. Further, any demographic information that might identify a specific person will be removed. In accordance with Queen’s University policy, data will be retained securely on a password protected server for a minimum of five years. If data are used for secondary analysis, they will contain no identifying information.

What if you have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Eleftherios Soleas at [email protected], Anoushka Mouessian at [email protected] or Dr. Rylan Egan at [email protected].

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study.

PLEASE RETAIN A COPY OF THIS LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR YOUR RECORDS.

I have read this Letter of Information and agreed to participate in this study.

Name ____________________________

Signature _________________________

Date _____________________________