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Kelly A. Pilato, Madelyn P. Law, Shannon A. Moore, John A. Hay et Miya Narushima

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Résumé de l'article

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# Policy Implementation in Higher Education:
# The Dynamics of a Fall Break

Kelly A. Pilato, Madelyn P. Law, Shannon A. Moore,
John A. Hay, & Miya Narushima
Brock University

## Abstract

A case study using mixed methods that critically appraises the implementation of a mental health policy in higher education in the absence of evidence to inform the policy using an exemplar case from one mid-sized post-secondary institution was the motivation for this research. Explanation building was used to iteratively analyse data on rival explanations of the implementation of the fall break policy. Analyses from the surveys revealed that overall, only 36.9 per cent of students perceived an increase in workload before the break and only 29.6 per cent of students perceived an increase in workload after the break. However, the focus groups and professor interviews revealed that the timing of the fall break had an impact on how students and professors experienced the break and their perceptions on its impact on student mental health. If baseline data regarding the implementation of the fall break would have been collected prior to its implementation, we could have possibly avoided the implementation issues that arose. While this research provides an exemplar case of a fall break policy at one post-secondary institution, the policy learning is universal.

*Keywords:* policy implementation, fall break, mental health, policy evaluation, higher education

## Introduction

Student's mental wellness has become a priority in post-secondary institutions with the increasing prevalence of mental health issues reported by students (Zivin et al., 2009). As a result, many post-secondary institutions have implemented a variety of policies and initiatives in an effort to reduce academic and personal stress (Martin, 2010; Mowbray et al., 2006; Tanenbaum, 2005) indicating that post-secondary institutions recognise the seriousness of the mental health issues encountered by their students. For many of these post-secondary institutions, the implementation of a fall break is one such policy (Poole et al., 2018). While many post-secondary institutions have implemented a fall break policy, this break varies by length and placement within the semester.

Although evidence on the fall break is limited, available research indicates that the variability in the timing and placement of a fall break can influence the successful implementation of the policy (Agnew et al., 2019; Hulls et al., 2018; Poole et al., 2018). Illustratively, in their research, Poole et al. (2018) found that the timing of the fall break, falling so soon in the semester, created confusion for students about its intent. Similarly, Hulls et al. (2018) found that the timing of the break had a negative impact on students' perceptions of stress and their ability to relax relative to the winter term break which falls later in the semester. Thus, while it is important that post-secondary institutions recognise their responsibility to address student mental health (Lisnyj et al., 2020), it is imperative that any policy to address this be implemented effectively in order to actually benefit students (Heck et al., 2014). Though the creation of the fall break policy was based on good intentions, implementation decisions made during its creation

were based on institutional factors that were influenced by the increasing uptake of the policy at other institutions and the growing demand for mental health supports by students (Pilato et al., 2021a). As is so often the case in higher education, "there are regulative and normative institutional pressures that can influence decisions to take visible action to demonstrate their conformity to global norms, while still pursuing local missions." (Klassen & Sá, 2020, p. 159).

Consequently, it is important to evaluate the implementation of policies in higher education in order to understand their degree of effectiveness (Nilsen et al., 2013; Reale & Seeber, 2013). It is here that policy learning occurs that can give an indication of the success or failure of any given policy (Howlett et al., 2009). There are many variables that can impact the success or failure of policy implementation in higher education. Howlett et al. (2009) agreed that the actors and activities involved in the implementation process can either help or hinder its implementation and thus, are important to examine in the policy cycle. There could be ethical tensions in policy development with policy makers that can act as a barrier to policy implementation by creating a gap between the policy development and implementation and should be taken into account in the implementation process (Park et al., 2015). Implementation evaluation is important then, for policy learning, in order to understand perceptions about what has worked and not worked throughout the policy cycle process and help to better understand facilitators and barriers to implementation.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research was to understand the factors that influenced the implementation of a fall break policy using a critical analysis lens perspective to compare, contrast and evaluate what is known about best practices for policy implementation in higher education with the implementation of a fall break policy using one exemplary case. This research is important because it gives insight into the implementation processes in higher education and the policy issues that ensue when there is a lack of evidence prior to implementation. Our research question was: *how was the fall break policy implemented in relation to what is known about best practices for policy implementation in higher education?*

### Policy Appraisal Framework

This research used a policy appraisal lens to evaluate the implementation of the fall break policy at one mid-size university in Southern Ontario. Howlett et al. (2009) suggested that part of appraising policy is to examine the policy process used for its formation. They suggested five such stages: agenda setting, formulation, decision making, implementation, and evaluation. These stages relate to phases of applied problem solving (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995). Policy implementation is an important step in the policy cycle that typically occurs once a problem has been identified, the agenda set, the policy has been formulated and policy decisions have been made (Howlett et al., 2009). In the implementation stage, policy decisions made during the first three stages are put into effect and the policy is put into practice (Howlett et al., 2009). There are many variables that can impact the success or failure of policy implementation. Weimer and Vining (2011) suggested four factors that impact implementation success. These include incentives for implementation, assembly, compliance and incentives of the policy actors involved in overseeing its implementation. Howlett et al. (2009) agreed that the actors and activities involved in policy implementation can either help or hinder its implementation and thus, are important to examine. For instance, there may be many different actors involved in the policy implementation who were not necessarily part of the decision-making process, with their own competing interests and this can hinder implementation success (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009). Subsequently, the success or failure of policy implementation may be traced back to its design (Bardach, 2012; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Accordingly, policy design configuration should anticipate implementation issues and offer alternatives to correct them (Weimer & Vining, 2011). At the very least, policy alternatives need to be adequate so that, even if the implementation is unsuccessful, positive policy outcomes may still ensue (Bardach, 2012). Yet, policies in post-secondary institutions are often implemented without such considerations, serving as a barrier to positive policy outcomes. The fall break policy described here was implemented in this fashion.

## Methods

This case study used both interpretive qualitative and realist quantitative forms of evidence (Yin, 2014) to collect self-report and archival data on the implementation of the fall break policy. Both descriptive statistics collected from a fall break survey and qualitative data from each of the documents, fall break focus groups, faculty, and informant interviews were analysed in relation to Howlett et al.'s (2009) implementation stage of the policy cycle. The exemplar case described here first implemented the fall break the week following Thanksgiving in the fall of 2013, with a one-day earlier start to the semester and a condensed December exam timetable. It is a mid-sized university ranked high for mental health supports. The survey data was collected from a convenience sample collected freely across various locations on campus. Sampling for the focus groups was purposeful and included participants who were registered in undergraduate courses. Sampling for the informant interviews was also purposeful and included an upper administrative staff representative of the Undergraduate Student Affairs Committee (USAC) at the time of the policy creation.

## Quantitative Data

### Fall Break Survey

The surveys were distributed in hard copy and online over the course of three days during the last week of January in partnership with University Student Union (USU), who suggested the best time to run the surveys based on prior experience. In Year One (2013/2014) the fall break survey had eight items with the final seven scored using a Likert scale where 1 equals strongly agree and 5 equals strongly disagree. In Years Two (2014/2015), and Three (2015/2016) the fall break survey included an additional six items with varying response options, five of which only applied to students in their third or fourth year of study. The analysis reported here focused on five items from the fall break survey. Table 1 displays these items from the fall break survey.

**Table 1**
*Included Survey Items*

| Item Number | Question |
|---|---|
| 4 | The fall break led to an increase in workload before the break |
| 6 | The fall break led to an increase in workload after the break |
| 8 | The best time for a break in the first semester is (options provided) |
| 9 | The fall break means that there may be less time for final exams or require an earlier start to the fall term. Would you prefer (three options given) |
| 12 | Was the starting date of the fall term problematic for you in any way relative to years before the fall break (options provided) |

## Qualitative Data

### Fall Break Focus Groups

The week following the administration of the fall break survey, focus group sessions were conducted over the course of the same three days of the week that the surveys were run. Students were provided with either lunch or a ten-dollar campus gift card at each of these sessions as thanks for participating. In years one (2013/2014) and three of data collection (2015/2016) three focus group sessions were conducted. In year two (2014/2015) two focus group sessions were conducted as no new themes were emerging. Focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to one hour in length and were audio-recorded. The same semi-structured interview guide was used for all of the focus groups in the fall break assessment as a basis for open dialogue between the participants and the interviewer. Topics of discussion related to the timing of the break and workload are presented in this paper and included questions like: Now that

you have experienced the fall break, what did you see as the benefits or the drawbacks to having this fall break? Thinking about the whole term, when did you feel the majority of your workload happened in terms of your courses? Thinking about the timing of the break, what is the best time for a break?

### Faculty Interviews

In the spring and summer of 2018, faculty interviews were conducted to collect data on faculty perceptions of the fall break policy. Ten faculty interviews, two from each faculty, were conducted over the course of two months (May-June). Participants voluntarily consented to participate and were not given any compensation for participating. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from twenty to forty-five minutes in length. The same semi-structured interview guide was used for each of the ten faculty interviews to encourage open dialogue between the participants and the interviewer. These questions focused on uncovering their perceptions of the implementation of a fall break and included questions like: What do you see as the benefits/drawbacks to having the break? Thinking about the whole term, when did you administer the majority of your tests/assignments? Did the fall break change the way your structure your courses? What is your perception of the fall break on student mental health? For the purposes of this research, only those themes that relate to time and timing are included.

### Informant Interview

In the summer of 2018, an informant interview was conducted to gather contextual data on the implementation of the fall break policy. It was hoped that at least three informants would agree to participate however, in the end only one informant agreed to participate. This interview was conducted via telephone and was audio recorded. It was 27 minutes in length. A semi-structured interview guide was used as a basis for the discussion and focused on understanding implementation decisions in the creation of the fall break policy.

### Documents

Documents from USAC and Senate that include recommendations from the Health Advisory Committee and Department of Housing, Associate Deans and the Registrar's office were used to triangulate data from surveys and qualitative interviews. These documents provide a possible explanation for implementation decisions made during the creation of the policy related to timing and placement.

### Data Analysis

Data from the fall break survey as well as focus group data from the fall break assessment were analysed and compared against Howlett et al.'s (2009) second stage in the policy cycle: implementation. Explanation building was used to iteratively analyze data on rival explanations of the implementation of the fall break policy in order to offer policy alternatives (Yin, 2014; Howlett, 2009). Descriptive statistics were examined using Stata 13 on each of the above pertinent variables from the fall break survey. Focus groups, informant interviews, and documents were analysed using a thematic analysis method that included open coding, axial coding, and theming using an intercoder agreement between the researchers. This analysis offers an iterative explanatory analysis process. From this analysis, other plausible explanations were uncovered.

## Results

### Fall Break Survey

In Year One (2013/2014) of the fall break assessment, participants included 713 students in years 1-4, 267 males and 446 females. In year two (2014/2015) of the fall break assessment, participants included 1124 students in years 1-4, 354 males and 398 females. In year three (2015/2016) of the fall break assessment, participants included 1234 students in years 1-4, 398 males and 836 females.

Analyses revealed that over all three years studied that 36.9% of students perceived an increase in workload before the break and 29.6% of students perceived an increase in workload after the break. Moreover, survey results indicated that the majority of students across all three years of the fall break

assessment (2013-2016) agreed that the best time for a break in the fall semester was in conjunction with Canadian Thanksgiving in October. While there was mild disagreement whether the break should precede or follow the Thanksgiving holiday in each year of data collection students preferred Thanksgiving week to the alternatives (56.0%, 73.0% and 66.0% respectively).

When examining the implementation of a fall break in relation to the start of the fall semester, the data revealed that the majority of students liked the timetable the way it was. It should be noted that this question only exists for the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 cohorts, so analysis reflects that. As such, in each year of data collection the vast majority of students preferred keeping the status quo (86.0% in 2014/2015 and 78.0% in 2015/2016). This was true even for those students in third year and higher in (2014/2015), fourth year and higher in (2015/2016). When asked if the fall term was problematic in any way relative to years before the fall break existed, students overwhelmingly responded that there was no problem at all (70.9% in 2014/2015 and 66.8% in 2015/2016). Analyses also revealed that for these same students, the timing of the fall term was not problematic. Seventy per cent of participants perceived no problem to the timing of the fall term at all while 16.0% perceived minor problems. Moreover, when students in either third or fourth year were given a choice, they overwhelmingly (84.0%) chose to keep the current schedule (start of term, fall break and final exams) as it was in their current school year.

## Focus Groups

Focus group participants included 13 students from years 1-4 in faculties of Education, Health Sciences and Social Sciences in year one (2013/2014). Of those, 3 were males and 10 were females. In year two (2014/2015) 10 students from years 1-4 in the faculties of Social Sciences and Applied Health Sciences participated, 2 were females and 8 were males. In year three (2015/2016) 10 students varying in years 1-4 in the faculties of Applied Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Education and Goodman School of Business participated, 7 females and 3 males. For the purposes of this research, only those themes that relate to timing are presented here.

## Students

Timing and placement of the break were important themes that emerged regarding implementation in the focus groups with students. This included not liking the timing of the break or liking the timing of the break or disliking the placement of the break. Momentum and workload either before or after the break were also important themes that emerged among students.

**Like Timing.** Some students really liked the timing of when the break was implemented for a variety of reasons. In the focus groups, students conveyed that the break "was nice to take a break from school for a bit, especially around, around the time of midterms" (Focus Group 1, 2015). Some students liked the extra time at Thanksgiving as they can go home: "I think it's good with the Thanksgiving weekend because students go home" (Focus Group 3, 2013). Another student stated that: "I personally like where it is because I can go home and celebrate Thanksgiving with my family, and then spend time with my family" (Focus Group 1, 2014). Other students revealed that "it breaks the semester up nice and cleanly too. It makes the whole 8 months into, kind of, nice bite size sections. Okay, I have these 6 weeks, and then it's reading week and now okay, I've got this, and then Christmas" (Focus Group 2, 2013). This was true "Even regarding midterms, I think it's perfect timing. If you have your midterms before the break and then you have the break, you still have a month before your next midterms start" (Focus Group 2, 2016).

**Dislike Timing.** Contrary to what the fall break survey data suggests, there were some students who did not like the timing of the break in the focus groups. This was related to both the length of the break and the placement of the break within the fall semester. Some students felt like "it was too early to have it" (Focus Group 2, 2014). Another student suggested "it was about two weeks too early" (Focus Group 2, 2015). This was in part due to when assignments were due within the semester. "My biggest workload was actually all of November, that's why I think that having it later, either at the end of October or very beginning of November, a time when I think students do need a break" (Focus Group 1, 2014). Another student agreed that "I think if we push it a couple weeks back, then the people who do utilise it for a studying week, you have enough stuff to actually prepare for your exams" (Focus Group 2, 2014). Hence, while the majority of students in the fall break survey liked the timing of the break this was not always

the case during the fall break focus groups.

**Dislike Placement.** The fall break focus groups also revealed that there were some students who did not like the placement of the break attached to Thanksgiving. "I kind of wish it wasn't attached onto Thanksgiving, so we'd get a real full week because I felt like because we already have the long weekend that we're not getting what we deserve" (Focus Group 1, 2013). Another student agreed that: "I think it's funny how they always pair it with the long weekend. So, we technically only 4 days off, it's like you're gipping us out an extra day" (Focus Group 3, 2015). One student even suggested "I didn't really like the time because we're already getting thanksgiving off and they're like cheating us of one day" (Focus Group 2, 2015).

**Workload.** Regarding workload going up either directly before or after the implementation of the fall break, there was a bit of discrepancy between the surveys and the focus groups. While the majority of students in the fall break survey did not report workload going up either directly before or directly after the break, during the focus groups with students, some students suggested otherwise. One student suggested that: "instead of four weeks because of reading week, in three weeks I have either papers, assignments or midterms, I have twelve of them in three weeks" (Focus Group 1, 2014). This discrepancy seemed to be particularly strong during the first year of data collection regarding December exams. "I didn't even know what exam to study for first because I had those four in two days and then I had no time to study for that last one" (Focus Group 2, 2013). Implementation of the break "Pushes the exams back a bit or makes them more condensed, which kind of makes people stress out a bit more during exam time" (Focus Group 3, 2014).

**Momentum.** Momentum was another important theme related to timing that emerged regarding the implementation of the fall break in the focus groups with students. This included breaking the flow in the semester. Some students felt like: "it was too early to have it. I felt like we had just gotten into school, we had just got into the routine of things, and it was like okay see you in a week and it actually kind of got me out of the flow that I was just getting into" (Focus Group 1, 2013). Students reported that the break made it hard to get back into a routine. For instance, one student suggested: "I felt more drained after the break because I had just gotten back into my routine and then I had a week where I could sleep in and do nothing…so then when I started again I felt like I was starting my routine again" (Focus Group 2, 2014). This break in momentum can in part be attributed to the placement of the break within the semester. One student stated: "I felt like I was just getting back into being at school every day and everything and then I had a week off and kinda had to come back again remembering that you kinda have to read when you're not at school and do assignments when you're not actually at school, so I felt like it threw me off a little bit" (Focus Group 1, 2014).

## Faculty Interviews

Time and timing were important themes that emerged among faculty. This included not liking the timing of the break or liking the timing of the break, not having enough time in a semester, and not having enough time off for a break. Timing was also related to momentum and its impact on how a course is structured.

**Timing.** Overall, faculty did not like the timing or the placement of the break within the semester. For instance, one participant believed:

> It's always a little bit of a pain to figure out how to work around Thanksgiving Monday. Right in the goofy schedule where, after Thanksgiving anything that was scheduled for the Monday would then be out of sync with everything else. The way that the universities try to find those days, well they found a little bit at the beginning but they've also shortened things at the end. And so, I think there's a bit of a loss that comes with the days in the term. (Participant B, 2018)

Some faculty suggested that they did not like the timing of the break because it came too early in the semester.

> So, I just think that's too early and I don't know if that's the reaction of students as well. But

that's a concern to me. I think it'd be better if it happened at the half mark or even in maybe the 60% mark so it was kind of on the down swing of the term so that students were already working on their capstone assignments for the courses. (Participant H, 2018)

Other faculty participants suggested that the timing of the fall break impacted how they structured their courses and the due dates they placed on assignments. Participant D suggested that "Each year when I go through and align things the fall break happens at a weird time and it moves times, and so I'll have to move when the exam is around the time of the break (2018).

Even though some faculty did not necessarily like the timing of the break, they also understood the rationale for the timing and placement. Participant H suggested that:

I also understand the reason why it is early, it's because we already have that one day that's a holiday in October, Thanksgiving, so we're not only having to lengthen the term four days instead of five with the Thanksgiving (Participant H, 2018).

**Momentum**. Much like the student participants, some faculty also agreed that the placement of the break in the fall semester had an impact on momentum.
Participant J described this as:

From a learning point of view, I think it's actually detrimental, because most courses are even more different. Maybe it's different between level, like year one, two, but at the courses that I teach, we're really getting into the thick of things. It's sort of like if you've ever been jogging, you reach that, you reach a steady state and you just start, hit your pace, then somebody makes you stop to like to tie your shoe or something. And then it's really hard to get everybody up and running again, because people will check out. (2018)

Other faculty thought that the fall break helped to keep a nice flow in their course.

So, the one good thing about the fall break is that it helps you keep everything still in sync because you just skip that week and then carry on with the next. It just sort of helps keep the overall flow of a course consistent for every student. (Participant B, 2018)

Other faculty suggested that the timing of the break had an impact on how they structured their courses and when assignments were due. For instance, one faculty stated:

So, there used to be a major assignment that was due that would prepare them for the midterm. Now what the break did was it ate into the time that I would be easing into all the information that they would need for that assignment. So, I would have to give all that material that they would need for the assignment and make sure it was done before the break, so that they would have the entire break to do the assignment and get ready for the midterm. (Participant J, 2018)

## *Informant Interview*

The informant interview revealed that the timing and placement of the break were considered as implementation issues during the creation of the policy. Timing related to length and placement of the break within the semester, important dates in the fall term and the impact on the student timetable.

**Registrar's Office.** The informant indicated that the timing and placement of the break was heavily influenced by the registrar's office. "I think it was largely looking at even with the registrar's office at the time, where it made most sense to be able to insert a break so it would be the least disruptive right, for students" (Informant, 2018).

It was also clear that policy creators were concerned about how the timing of the break would impact

students' timetable and would best be placed to support students.

> So, we had to factor in things like would it impact on science labs if you introduced it on these dates and how many days would be appropriate, looking at the timing and the length of the break were, I'd say the main considerations right? So where do you introduce it in the academic semester so that makes the most sense to support students at that point in time and looking at things like when midterms are. (Informant, 2018)

When considering the length of the break and the timing and placement of the break within the fall semester, the informant revealed that student preference and impact on academic calendar and teaching hours were considered.

> And then also considering the timing and length of time. Is it more likely that students would prefer to have this added to a Thanksgiving break when they're more likely to go home and have a more extended break. Then looking at the impact on the academic calendar for the term to say, you know, what does this mean in terms of teaching days and contact hours right. So trying to minimalise the impact on the academic contact and teaching hours. So that was the other consideration, so can we, you know, shorten orientation by a day? Are students prepared to do that, so that we can introduce the break. Can we extend the exam schedule by a day so that we can build in the break. So those were the considerations. (Informant, 2018)

**Senate.** Ultimately, the timing of the break was influenced by the recommendations from the registrar's office who reported to USAC, who then relayed this recommendation which helped to inform Senate's decision. "I think through the registrar's office, that was identified as almost the preferable time but when it went to senate, it was identified as those dates as part of the academic calendar dates that are presented to senate." (Informant, 2018).

## Documents

The documents revealed that the considerations for the timing of the fall break included recommendations from USAC with Associate Deans, staff, and the registrar's office that were used to inform Senate's decisions regarding the timing and placement of the break within the fall semester.

**USAC and Registrar's Office.** The minutes from Senate indicated that USAC and the registrar's office worked together in scheduling a fall break. "USAC presented the draft proposal and the registrar's office will work on a proposal for the dates 2013-2015)" (USAC, November 8, 2012). Moreover, upon Senate's decision to pilot the fall break for three years, "In conversation, it was noted that the Registrar should be included in future discussions to bring forward information on the scheduling of exams" (USAC, November 8, 2012)

**Associate Dean's.** In the documents, it was clear that Associate Deans were also consulted regarding the best time for a break in the fall semester. "USAC had discussions with the Associate Deans regarding a time period for a fall break Week and orientation day to reflect the inclusion of the fall break Week in the Academic Calendar Year (approved at Senate 603 as a three year pilot)" (USAC, November 22, 2012).

**Staff.** The minutes reflected that the Health Advisory Committee and Department of Housing were also consulted about the timing of the break. "She also met with the Health Advisory Committee and the Department of Housing for discussions about moving dates" (USAC, November 22, 2012).

**The Calendar Year.** The documents also reflected that consideration of the calendar year in relation to the academic year was given prior to implementation.

> A fall term Break period shall be scheduled for the full week that includes Thanksgiving Monday. Winter Term Reading Week shall commence on the sixth Sunday after the beginning of classes for the Winter Term and shall continue for seven days until the seventh Sunday. To reflect the inclusion fall break Week in the Academic Year (approved at Senate

603 as a three year pilot). (USAC, November 7, 2013)

**Evaluation.** Analysis of documents also revealed that evaluation of the break was embedded in the discussions around policy creation, but not specifically implementation. This was reflected in the minutes from Senate:

> On Dec. 5 Senate approved fall reading break as a three-year pilot beginning in October 14-18, 2013; agreed to do assessment of pilot initiative. Classes will begin Wednesday, Sept. 4 instead of Thursday, Sept. 5. USAC will meet to discuss fall reading break/MH assessment opportunities for possible graduate student. (Senate, January 24, 2013)

## Discussion

This research sought to evaluate the implementation of a mental health policy in higher education using an exemplar case from one mid-sized post-secondary institution. Overall, data triangulation showed that even though students and faculty agree with the policy of having the break, there were implementation issues related to the length and placement of the break. There is a bit of discrepancy between the surveys and the qualitative interviews with both faculty and students perceiving the timing of the break to fragment the flow of momentum in the fall semester making it somewhat counterintuitive to its intended purpose and thus, acting as a barrier to successful implementation (Howlett et al., 2009).

Similar to Agnew et al. (2019) who found that the varying timing and placement of break as a result of being attached to Thanksgiving week has an impact on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the break, we found that while the fall break surveys overwhelmingly showed students liked the timing of the break where it was, qualitative discussions with students and faculty suggested that the timing of the break might come too soon in the semester. Initially the break fell at six weeks, directly in the middle of the semester but every subsequent year, the break came five weeks into the fall semester. As deliberated in minutes from USAC, discussions regarding policy implementation (timing and placement of the break in the semester) were ultimately decided by the registrar's office and were based on the least amount of disruption to the timetable with a one day earlier start to the semester and a condensed December exam timetable. The ultimate decision for policy implementation was an organizational one, not a student or faculty one, which ignored the need for the implementation of the policy to be student mental health centered. This is in part due to the unique nature of policy implementation in higher education (Scott, 2018) and the idiosyncrasy related to faculty and departmental jurisdictions and attempting not to overstep these jurisdictions that can create implementation issues (Timmerman & Metcalfe, 2009). This is not an uncommon policy-related implementation issue in higher education. Consequently, organizational factors often triumph over person-centered approaches due to set structures in higher education that are difficult to change (Mavrogordato & White, 2019). At the institution, in this case, this resulted in implementation pitfalls that served as barriers.

Barriers to implementation are problematic because they can create challenges for faculty and staff trying to support students' mental well-being that can lead to negative academic outcomes (DiPlacito-to-DeRango, 2016) and ultimately, failure of the policy (Howlett et al., 2009). DiPlacito-DeRango (2016) suggested that one way of overcoming these barriers is to maintain continuity of the actors involved from policy creation to implementation and evaluation. However, at the institution described here the USAC, was initially involved in providing the need, scope, and design of the fall break policy but, there were ultimately many other actors involved in not only the decision-making process but also the implementation of the policy. In the end, while the fall break policy was brought forth as a recommendation by USAC, it was Senate's decision whether to maintain the break and how to implement it. Consequently, these implementation barriers (Howlett et al., 2009) ultimately had an impact on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the break (Pilato et al., 2021b).

Barriers to implementation and any related problems need to be thought about ahead of time and built into the design of the policy (Howlett et al., 2009; Reale & Seeber, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2011;). We found that discussions around implementation issues during the design of the policy are evident in the meeting minutes from USAC and Senate in our exemplary case. This is a good thing as the design of a policy can determine implementation success or failure (Howlett, 2009). However, while this case

included implementation evaluation, that was presented to decision makers and governing institutional bodies and should have served as a facilitator, implementation was not revised as a result which only exacerbated its pitfalls (Howlett et al., 2009). In higher education evaluation is often a component to funding early in the policy cycle that ends up being independent of the policy, especially when done as a post-research assessment as was the circumstance in this case (Reale & Seeber, 2013). Initially, it was deemed necessary to evaluate the implementation of the policy but at the outset, this evaluation was an independent component of an outcome evaluation that did not influence implementation decisions. This is unfortunate because the implementation decisions made during the creation of the fall break policy influenced its perceived effectiveness by students and ultimately, served as a barrier for successful implementation (Pilato et al., 2021a; Poole et al., 2018). One possible explanation for this could be due to the information asymmetry between policy makers and academics in higher education resulting in any policy modifications being influenced by the complex layers of policy implementation (Reale & Seeber, 2013). When this happens, evaluation can be seen as a barrier to implementation (Howlett et al., 2009).

The reality is that when compared with Howlett and Ramesh's (1995) implementation stage of the policy cycle, the actors and activities involved in the fall break at this institution may have hindered its implementation. While implementation evaluation was included and the policy actors compliant, the issues related to timing, placement, and lack of policy alternatives served as barriers to successful implementation that could have been mitigated (Howlett et al., 2009).

## Policy Implications

This research advances evidence in relation to how institutional policies are implemented in higher education. Policy learning resulted from this critical appraisal of a mental health policy, highlighting the need to effectively implement mental health policies using evidence and the barriers to student mental wellness that may arise if not. While this research provides an exemplar case of a fall break policy at one post-secondary institution, the policy learning is universal. If baseline data regarding the implementation of the fall break would have been collected prior to its implementation, we could have possibly avoided the implementation issues that arose.

Decisions made during the creation of the policy had a direct impact on its implementation (Pilato et al., 2021a). Implementation issues, specifically, the timing of the fall break, had an impact on how students and faculty experienced the break and their perceptions on its impact on student mental health (Agnew et al., 2019; Pilato et al., 2021a). This is the challenge when collecting evidence ad hoc. Perhaps including students in the discussions on the timing of the break prior to its creation could have mitigated some of these implementation issues (DeWelde & Stepnick, 2015; Elwood, 2013; Pilato et al., 2021a). Research suggests that this type of co-creation process can be valuable for both students and administrators in higher education (Dollinger & Lodge, 2019; Hands & Freckelton, 2019). Moreover, in our post-hoc evaluation we can not only see how important these implementation issues are to the life of the policy but how implementation decisions did not change as a result. Consequently, evidence-based decisions are important to implementation success or failure and should be considered as part of the evaluation process (Howlett et al., 2009). As the policy naturally progresses so can decision makers change, students change and campus climate can change with a new shifting focus on mental wellness initiatives, over time, new implementation issues may arise and so implementation will need to progress with policy changes (Pilato et al., 2021a, 2021b).

## Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

This research sought to critically appraise the implementation of the fall break policy at one mid-size university post policy implementation in the face of the challenge of a lack of baseline evidence. Future research of policies in higher education should include pertinent baseline data as this can influence implementation outcomes (Hanney et al., 2003; Howlett et al., 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Another limitation is that data was only collected from students during the first three years of the policy and as the ebb and flow of the semester changed as a result of the break, so did the timing in relation to calendar year and when Thanksgiving falls. Future research of this mental health policy in higher education should further investigate the best timing to implement the break in order to provide optimal outcomes for student mental wellness. Finally, since only one administrator agreed to be interviewed,

understanding the implementation challenges that may have arisen from this perspective may not be well-understood.

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