SEPTEMBER 2022

ENGWELLNESS MME UNDERGRADUATE NEWSLETTER

Produced by: the ENGWellness Ambassador

Your New ENGWellness Ambassador!

Hello hello! It is so wonderful to meet you all! My name is Spencer and I will be your new ENGWellness Ambassador for the Fall 2022 Term! I am a 4th year psychology student here at the University of Waterloo! I got interested in psychology through volunteering in specialized-care homes throughout high school. As of right now, I plan to pursue a career in mental health to learn how to help people as best as I can!

At UW, I've been a part of the 2022 Science Orientation Team welcoming in the new first year students (and hyping up those 2nd year students who wanted to enjoy some in-person orientation!). In my free time I love the outdoors; going on hikes, camping, or kayaking whenever I can! I am also a HUGE fan of the video game Dark Souls! Anyways, I am SO excited to be a part of the ENGWellness team and can't wait to meet everyone one of you!

WELLNESS BREAK

Wash the dishes. Vacuum the floor. Do the laundry.

None of these tasks sound exciting, or particularly inviting. But if I think about it, imagine life without it, I start to see how it can be enticing.

In my experience, physically active breaks are the best for recharging your mental energy. The main reason I feel tired isn't due to any physical, muscle-related fatigue. It's because I've been thinking too much. Schoolwork, job search, hobbies, they all require thinking, and sometimes, just like my arms and my legs, my brain gets tired. Take vacuuming the floor as an example. It's a monotonous chore, but that's exactly what I need. Turn off your brain, and let your body do the work. After vacuuming for around 10 minutes, I am constantly surprised at how refreshed I feel upon returning to my work. It's two birds with one stone. I recharge my mental capacity, finish my work faster, and the floor is spotless as a result! Household chores are probably the most efficient things I do.

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT? AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ANDREW MILNE

How do you think students should frame the idea of success?

It depends on what you mean by success. Students come here to earn a degree and get a job, sure, but academic success is not the only thing that exists. Hopefully, students are here because they've got something they want to get out of the program, and you're either aware of or are trying to be aware of what that might be. So success would be moving towards that and achieving some level of that and it's a lot bigger than passing your courses and it's a lot bigger than getting a good job. It's about living a life that you're happy with. A life that you're happy with now and a life that you're happy with after you graduate. It's a lot broader than just your school and your work, and it depends on having connections to the important people in your life, and it depends on feeling that you have a meaningful life.

What do you mean by a 'Meaningful Life'?

Part of living a meaningful life is being more conscious about what you actually need and what others around you need and what the world as a whole needs, and you're a lot more conscious about what you have and what others have. So it's a lot more thinking about needs versus wants. The way my grandmother put it is that the pursuit of happiness is the root cause of the unhappiness in the world. So, a meaningful life is one where you think is worthwhile. It doesn't have to be paid work, it can be volunteer, child rearing, care of others. But in all cases meaningful work is where you think about broader life outside of work, near and far, people you know and you don't know, and how your life is contributing to a better society.

What notable behaviors, beliefs, values, habits, have you seen in students that are able to achieve this "success"?

It's the people who are looking more broadly at the longer horizon, which I realize is very hard: you're in the grind of a school term and applying for coops and assignments, projects, and exams are coming due. It's really easy to get tunnel vision, and to stop looking broadly and to have your horizon shrink to the next deliverable or exam or deadline. But then you'll lose sight of the broader goal, and you'll lose sight of the meaningfulness, so, in terms of behaviors, it's keeping that broad and long horizon view. In terms of beliefs, it's about knowing that you're connected to others, both near and far, and those that you know and don't know. An interesting discussion I had with someone recently was about the first sign of civilization in humans. People were arguing back and forth about what would be the oldest thing that could survive like pottery or painting, but then someone's response I thought was brilliant was that people would need to look for evidence of a *healed* broken bone. This is because, without civilization, if you had a broken leg, you were dead. Nobody could care for you so you'd be eaten, period. Whereas if you're in a community, people help each other so seeing an injury like that that's recovered would indicate that people were helping others which is the fundamental aspect of civilization. I would argue that anyone who thinks that humanity is a lost cause and that people are garbage, that they're wrong. Humanity is not a lost cause, and people do care about each other. But you need to believe that and you need to value that, and it's really easy to lose sight of that. So keeping all that in mind, thinking about the bigger picture of the work you're doing, thinking about why it is that you're going through the grind of deliverable after deliverable, assignment after assignment, and exam after exam, thinking about why it is that you do what you do is really important.

What does "academic success" mean to you?

Not good grades. There are people with good grades who can't apply anything: they can just write tests well. Employers recognize this too, and are a whole lot more interested in "do you understand it?", "can you apply it?", so my definition of academic success is that you've learned it and that you understand it and that you can apply it. Even if your grades don't really reflect that. So how do you achieve this definition of success? You focus on deep learning, and gaining that understanding of knowledge and practice into your life, into your brain, and into you as a person. That takes a lot of scaffolding. It means you try to draw the connections between the math course that you took last term and the fluids course that you're taking this term or the materials course that you took last term and the heat transfer course that you're taking this term. You need to do that even though it'd difficult: information is given to you in a compartmentalized fashion in your undergrad so you have to do the work to de-compartmentalize it.

In order to do this, you need to put in the work and challenge yourself. If you don't, you'll really only learn it on a surface level and it's not going to build on what you already know, and it's not going to be a good foundation for building on in the future. Ideally, when you do all that your grades will go up, but sometimes they won't, and that's ok. Your grades matter a lot less than you think when you leave school.

Given the difficulty of an Engineering degree, how would you recommend students find time outside of school?

It partly relates to what I just said about your grades mattering less than you think. Don't chase grades at the expense of all else. Learn things deeply, which makes a good scaffold so you can build each term rather than trying to cram each term and class to re-learn things. It boils down to you needing to make the time prioritize sleep and rest, and you have to prioritize recreation outside of school. Doing so makes you a better person, and it makes you more able to study and focus when you need to. Given time away, you feel more rested and can more easily convince yourself to sit down and be productive with school. Down in the nitty gritty, there's lots of study habits like pomodoro, where you're scheduling your time as effectively as possible. You're not trying to grind for three hours on calculus, you're taking a useful break, then you come back and do some materials, then taking a break then doing some circuits. It's actually a lot like cross training: being a student is a lot like training in a gym or dojo. You can't expect to lift ten times the weight all at once. At the end you need to lift a little bit more over time and train your body, and you can't train for three hours on one thing. You're going to exhaust your muscles in the same way you'll exhaust your brain. So you really need to build those breaks in, and you really need to schedule your life so that you do have time for the important things because you're going to suffer and it's not going to be worth it.

What are some common pitfalls students have during their degree?

I'm repeating myself now, but a big one is the tunnel vision focus on grades as opposed to the broad horizon view of deep learning. Having a narrow focus will lead to getting less sleep which will mean it takes longer to study and that becomes a vicious cycle. Shallow learning or disconnected learning from just focusing on one thing can make you ignore all the important questions like "what does this mean for my other courses?", "what does this mean in the grand scheme of things?", "where could I use this on my co-op?. So tunnel vision is really easy to do and is a common pitfall.

Another really common pitfall is not seeking help when you need it. The world is a society, Engineering is a society, MME is a society, your class is a society, so seek help from your society when you need it. Seek help from your TA, your prof, seek help from the undergrad office, seek help from the ENGWellness team and Sam. Too many people just try to power through and it can lead to things really falling apart which is a major problem. The third one, and I haven't really talked about this yet, is that there are times when you do just need to grind, when you do just need to buckle down and do it. Ideally you do this every day, and every week and you focus, and you get your nose to the grind stone. A big issue is that a lot of people tend to procrastinate when things get hard, they put things off but all that does is set you up for a harder long term, and so refusing to face those challenges as they come is another common pitfall.

What advice would you give to someone who feels overwhelmed and is considering giving up
Seek help. Hopefully you have supports in friends, family, classmates, whatever it may be. You need to have supports, You can't do this on your own. Ideally, before you're overwhelmed you'd be getting support from people so as to not reach that point, but when you're there, they are there to help you out. I remember I was in fourth year and I was feeling overwhelmed from planning for a wedding, planning for a move, planning for grad school, FYDP, and doing courses. So I was very overwhelmed and what I needed in that case was I needed support, and I talked with my family and decided OK, I can get through this. And if you're struggling with a bunch of things come talk to the undergrad office about a reduced load or taking a term off. If you're thinking about giving up it's a good idea to take a term off to decompress to think about strategies for living a more balanced, healthy life. The time off can sometimes help you remember why you're here and put things into perspective. Sometimes also there isn't a why, and sometimes you are in the wrong place, and sometimes that's something you'll need to face. It's better to face that fact sooner than later.

How important is it for students to have things they enjoy and pursue outside of school?
It's incredibly important. You're here to be a student, and you're not here for the rest of your life. A good theory that I really like is to have something called your third space. So you have your family life, your work/school life, and you have your third space. The third space is not home, and it's not work, but its something else. This is where you have connections other than the people you work or live with, and that's important because you're not always going to get along with the people you live with. There are going to be times when school and work are horrible and you don't want anything to do with them and you need an escape. And even if everything is wonderful, in order to be a complete person you'll need to have a third space. The third space could be church, faith groups, sports clubs, boards etc.

Do you have any student success stories you'd like to share?
There are a ton of stories of students who have a very rough transition from high school to university. It's a huge transition of responsibility and maybe it's your 1A term or 1B, but the first year terms are very tough, and I know many people that struggled through their first year who went on to succeed in upper years once they got their feet under them. They got better success strategies, better setup of their life, and found successful ways to learn and it shows. I know plenty of people who struggled with design in first year and that's fine. Then some of them went on to become TAs for the course, others went on to do design projects in their coop.

People grow, people change, and that's a very good thing. At the same time, I also know people who realized Mechanical engineering or engineering in general wasn't for them, and I'm actually really glad they realized that and some of them are really happily studying things like math right now. I've actually got a nice little 3D printed math toy from one of them because we had a discussion about what they wanted out of life and why they were here, and they decided to switch over to math and it worked out. Other people have changed into careers like paramedicine (happy I haven't had to meet them on the job). But I also know people who have struggled in the program, questioned why they're here, and continued on after taking a term off or getting a reduced load or something like that. Or in extreme cases fail a term, and have to come back and do it again. But I've seen in all those situations, students take that failure, realize that failure does not define them, that the failure of a term is only that; a failure of a term. It's not a failed person, its not a failed life. If you're struggling in a term and you withdraw from it, it's not a failure, it's an event; a choice. Once they take time away they can figure out how to have a more successful life, a more meaningful life, a more balanced life and come back and succeed and do really well. I've taught some of them after they've returned and you know it's really good to see them back and being successful.

Anything else you wanted to share with the MME undergrads?
Focus on what's important in your life. School is important, but there's many things that are more important and you need to balance it with those things. You certainly can't sacrifice your life, your health, and your connections for school. Make connections with people and value those connections and nurture them. The biggest thing is that we admitted you because we figured you had every chance of success; we figured there was every likelihood that you would be successful as a student, that you would learn here, that you would grow here, and that you would graduate from here. Stick with it, come seek help when you need it, because we're all still confident that you can make it through, and we believe in you.

WHAT'S HAPPENING AROUND CAMPUS?

Therapy Dogs - October 24, 5:30pm - 6:30pm in E5 3102

Bystander Intervention Training - October 26th, 5PM – 8PM
Facilitated by Stacey Jacobs from the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office!
Those who complete this training will receive a certificate!
Food, incentives & prizes will be provided!!
More details will be released via email! Keep an eye out!

Conrad Grebel Music - TBD!
A massive hit in the summer term, Conrad Grebel's music ensemble will be returning to the E7 pitch space to serenade us!
Stay tuned for more details! (in November!)

And this is just the beginning of an awesome event filled term!

Be sure to follow our Instagram account (@uwengwell) for updates, new events, and volunteer opportunities!

WELLNESS REPRESENTATIVES
The goal of the Wellness Representative initiative is to help monitor and enhance the well-being of MME and ECE Undergraduate and Graduate Engineering students in an organic, peer-supported manner. This is done not only by championing wellness initiatives and promoting wellness strategies within these departments, but also by encouraging interactions amongst peers that would occur organically anyways. If you are interested in becoming a Wellness Representative or want to learn more about what Wellness Reps do, visit our 'Get Involved' page on the ENGWellness Website or click the hyperlink!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following mental health supports are available to you
Counselling Services: 519-888-4096

The following crisis supports are available to you as well
Crisis Services Canada: 1-833-456-4566 or text 45645
UW Police: 519-888-4567 ext. 22222

Academic Support
- Student Success Office: Compilation of learning and life skills resources.

Contacts to book a one-on-one coaching session:

Sam Vandekerckhove (MME) - srvandek@uwaterloo.ca / ENGWellness@uwaterloo.ca
Leah Foster (ECE) – ljsims@uwaterloo.ca / ENGWellness@uwaterloo.ca

ENGWELLNESS CONTENT

Check out our ENGWellness resources including mental health pages and PSAs. All resources as well as previous newsletters can be accessed under the ENGWellness Content section of our website.

ENGWellness Content
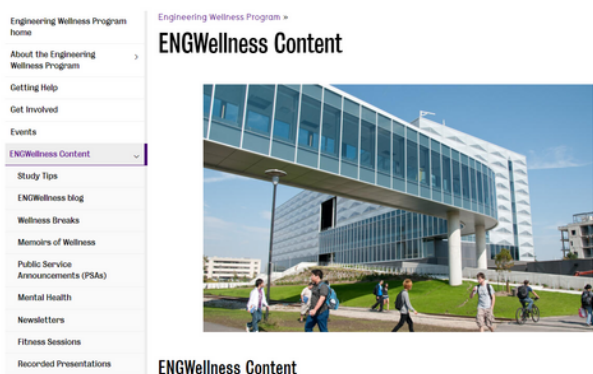
STAY CONNECTED

Be sure to follow us on social media to stay connected and updated.

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LEARN 'COURSE'

Get news and access to our content modules through our ENGWellness Learn 'course'! Students can enroll using the Self-Registration function within Learn.

WATERLOO LEARN

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