Title of Project: Pandemic, Stress, and Overload: Cultivating Space for Contemplation in the University

Undergraduate Students: 2 MIT students will each be hired for 2 terms at $1,250 per term

Required Skills: excellent communication skills, ability to work in a team environment, organizational skills, good research skills

Suggested Skills: digital skills, interviewing skills, ability for self-reflection and interest in personal growth

Term of Employment: September – December 2021; January- April 2022

FIMS Investigators:
- Ajit Pyati
- Pamela McKenzie

Graduate Student
- Janet Allen, PhD student, Library and Information Science

Description of Project

With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing apace and the move to online teaching now several months underway, it is important to be aware of the impacts on student mental health and well-being from this unprecedented environment. Even prior to this pandemic, North American universities identified a growing stress epidemic amongst student populations (Böke et al., 2019). Now, with phenomena such as Zoom fatigue (Robert, 2020) becoming a reality of our online-intensive pandemic world, we must also understand how students can cope with the unique and ongoing stresses of this time in healthy ways. Moreover, as we eventually emerge into a post-pandemic world and university environment, identifying spaces, strategies, and practices that can promote student wellness, wholeness, and resilience will be increasingly crucial.

Given this context, this study explores the concept of information overload as experienced by both undergraduate and graduate students at Western. While some scholars have downplayed the significance of this phenomenon (e.g. Bawden and Robinson, 2009), a growing body of literature is validating this concept at an affective and psychological level (Morrison and Gomez, 2014; Himma, 2007). In addition, academic interest is growing around the use of contemplative practices to address the stresses many people experience in an information-intensive world (Levy, 2016; Pyati, 2019). Contemplative practices can refer to increasingly popular practices such as mindfulness and yoga, but
also communal practices that involve storytelling, dance, and sacred ritual (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, n.d.).

The objectives of this study are to:
- understand and examine the lived reality of information-intensive related stress for both undergraduate and graduate students;
- identify coping strategies that students are employing;
- identify gaps in these coping strategies; and
- formulate recommendations at both an individual and structural level to alleviate student stress and to potentially promote the concept of “contemplative space” at a university-wide level.

To address the first three objectives, the research team will develop and administer two surveys (one for undergraduates; one for graduate students) and focus group interviews (on Zoom if Covid persists) for deeper narrative detail. The last objective will rely heavily on documentary research (e.g., relevant scholarly literature on technological stress, student anxiety, how other North American universities are integrating contemplative practice and spaces into their student experiences, etc.).

### Support and development of Undergraduate Student Fellows

Undergraduate (UG) Research Fellows will be involved in all aspects of the study, including survey design and conducting focus groups.

The students will ideally have strong research skills and a keen interest in student well-being. They will be key collaborators, particularly for their input on undergraduate experiences during the pandemic and dealing with technology-related stressors. They will conduct literature reviews, create and deploy surveys, develop and conduct focus groups for undergraduate students on campus, analyze data, help write reports and/or scholarly articles, and engage in other relevant tasks as part of the project team. Through their participation, students will learn about information overload, contemplative practice, and student well-being.