

**PATHWAYS TO UNIVERSITY:
THE “VICTORY LAP” PHENOMENON IN ONTARIO**

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When Ontario eliminated its unique fifth year of secondary school for post-secondary bound students, policy makers, educators, and the general public anticipated that the province would finally adhere to the four-year model of secondary education common to the rest of English speaking North America. For a significant number of students, however, this outcome did not prove to be the case; a substantial proportion of adolescents, having met their graduation requirements, voluntarily chose to return to their former schools for an additional semester or two of secondary education, a phenomenon referred to as the “victory lap”. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study was conducted among first-year students Concurrent Education students in a small Ontario university and examined some of the factors that motivated students to opt for either the direct entry or “victory lap” pathway to university. Results suggest that the “victory lap”, while being a predominately male phenomena, may be a form of transition anxiety.

Introduction

In September of 1999 the Canadian province of Ontario commenced the process of bringing its system of secondary education in line with other jurisdictions in North America by formally eliminating a fifth year of secondary school for post-secondary bound students. In doing so the province appeared to have finally ended a 78 year long tradition and had established a four- year secondary school program. However, it soon became apparent that a fifth year of secondary school, especially for those students planning to further their formal education, would not be so easily eliminated. For example, King (2005) found that, on a province-wide basis, 33%

of the 2003-04 Grade 12 cohort consisted of students returning for a fifth year (p.18). Of these 47.9% had already met formal graduation requirements (p.50). For the latter group this practice of voluntarily returning to secondary school for at least another semester became popularly known among adolescents as the "victory lap". The purpose of this study, therefore, is two-fold: (a) to investigate the causes of this phenomenon; and (b) to determine whether or not those students who spend additional time in high school benefit either academically or socially after entrance to university.

Literature Review

The current literature on the phenomenon more commonly referred to as the "victory lap" is scant. What follows examines the historical processes through which the idea of the necessity of a thirteenth year of secondary school became so deeply entrenched in the psyche of Ontarians. Additionally the possible contribution of the condition known as transition anxiety is examined as is the hold that secondary schools continue to have on their adolescent clients.

Establishing a Tradition

Revisions to the existing Ontario system of secondary education made in 1921 served to lay the foundation of what was to become a provincial norm of requiring university-bound students to complete five years of secondary school as a prerequisite for admission to institutions of higher education (Fleming, 1971). While presenting an anomaly within the North American context, the existence of a thirteenth grade of formal public education none the less proved to be remarkably resilient in resisting numerous attempts at its reform.

The first such attempt at systemic change was initiated in 1945 with the advent of the Royal Commission on Education (Hope Commission) that proposed the establishment of a three-tiered system in which six years of elementary education would be followed by four years of secondary school, culminating with three years of junior college (Anisef, 1986; Stamp, 1982). Five and one half years in the making, the Commission's report was, in the end, shelved by the existing government in part due its potential to re-open the politically sensitive issue of separate school funding and in part due to the Minister of Education's prior interference in curriculum redesign a year earlier (Stamp, 1982).

The recommendations of the Hope Commission proved to be just the beginning of what was to be a fifty year plus debate. Growing public opposition, especially on the part of parents, to the rigours of the existing system of province-wide grade 13 departmental examinations led to the establishment of a Grade 13 Study Committee in 1964 by the Minister of Education William Davis. Although this committee recommended the abolition of both grade 13 and departmental examinations, in the end the government acted only on the latter recommendation as opposition by universities and secondary school teachers prevented the government from pursuing a more radical agenda (Gidney, 1999). A subsequent recommendation in 1968 for its abolition by the much heralded Hall-Denis Report was insufficient to dislodge grade 13 from its position of pre-eminence in the province's education system.

Having survived the waves of educational reform that swept the province in the late 1960's and early 1970's, grade 13 continued to withstand further challenges to its existence on two fronts. First, the reforms of the late 1960's which had liberalized secondary education in the province through the adoption of policies such as the introduction of the credit system, increased individualization of timetables and a decentralization of the curriculum were encountering

increased opposition from a variety of quarters. Universities and members of the business community, as well as parents voiced their concerns over what they regarded as declining academic standards, lack of curriculum focus and lax discipline in school.

Second, financially pressured boards of education began to call for the abolition of grade 13 as a means of implementing fiscal restraint. While unsuccessful in their quest to roll back the reforms of the Davis years, these criticisms did result in a re-evaluation of secondary education in the province. The result was the issuance and implementation of a new document *Ontario Schools: Intermediate and Senior* (OSIS), a document that is significant in that it abolished grade 13 without actually eliminating the fifth year of secondary school.

The salient feature of the OSIS document, for the purposes of this discussion, was the creation of the Ontario Academic Course (OAC), a series of courses offered at the senior level of high school and specifically designed to cater to the needs of students planning to proceed to post-secondary education. The satisfactory completion of six OACs became a prerequisite for admission to universities in the province. While OACs could be used as part of the 30 credits required for the receipt of an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), thereby making it possible for a student to complete secondary school in four years, fewer than 15% of students elected to exercise that option (Casas & Meaghan, (1996). Indeed, Casas and Meaghan (1996) reported that between 20% and 25% of students actually chose to repeat one or more OACs in order to boost their grades (at the time only the highest grade for a given course would appear on the transcript), a practice that came to be known as "OAC grazing". As Gidney (1999) observed, "Death by starvation, in other words, didn't work, what grade 13 needed was a stake through the heart" (p. 101).

In the end that stake was wielded as more of a response to political and financial pressures than for any pedagogical reasons. Elected in 1995 on a platform of economic expansion, fiscal restraint, tax reduction, while inheriting a substantial deficit, the newly elected Conservative government revealed its true motivation for eliminating OACs in the Minister's statement to the legislature. As Minister of Education John Snobelen stated, "When the four-year program is fully implemented in 2001, savings to the taxpayers will amount to some \$350 million annually" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, November, 1995).

Since its establishment in 1921, the existence of an anomalous fifth year of secondary school for university-bound students had become what Schein (1997) would have termed a "basic assumption" of secondary education in the province. A basic assumption is an organizational practice that is so ingrained in the collective consciousness of those involved that to act in any other manner is almost inconceivable. Still, the maintenance of a tradition, in and of itself, does not fully account for the victory lap phenomenon. The remainder of this review will examine possible alternative explanations.

The Victory Lap: A Form of Transition Anxiety?

The transition from secondary school to university, according to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), ranks among one of the major life changes similar to retirement or marriage in that it involves the adoption of a new social role. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) found that "there is a growing body of evidence that attending university for the first time entails a transition in young peoples' lives that incorporates a great deal of stress" (p. 6).

Chaskes (1996), using an "immigrant" metaphor to described the transition process, noted that students entering the first year of university go through a process of separation from

their friends, family and previous institution, and must learn to adapt to an entirely new set of cultural norms as well as academic and social expectations. This entails a "resocialization process [that] involves culture shock, "language" acquisition, and the internalization of academic, bureaucratic, and social norms as well as the values and expectations of the college milieu" (p. 79). The cumulative effect of the aforementioned stressors, among others, has the potential to produce a condition known as "transition anxiety" (Sanders & Burton, 1996; Smith, 1997), a condition exemplified by feelings of uncertainty and lack of control, as well as maladjustment, depression, and loneliness (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002-03; Wei, Russell & Zakalik, 2005; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). In its most severe form transition anxiety can have significant consequences. As Tinto (1988) noted, "The stress and sense of loss and bewilderment, if not desolation, that sometimes accompanies the transition to college can pose serious problems for the individual attempting to persist in college" (p. 444). It should not present a surprise, then that many adolescents might choose to delay the transition by making a conscious choice to prolong their high school experience by "victory lapping".

The Allure of Secondary School

The role that secondary school plays in the lives of many contemporary adolescents cannot be underestimated, for it is the veritable center of their teenage universe (Pascoe, 2003). Boyer (1983) summarized this situation in the following terms: "High school is home for many students. It is the one institution in our culture where it is alright to be young" (p.38). Similarly, Sizer (1984) observed that high schools had become "a kind of secular church, a place of national rituals that mark stages in a young citizens' life" (p. 6).

Lee, Bryk, and Smith (1993) identified student engagement as one of the two outcomes of secondary education, the other being academic achievement. Engagement refers to the school conscious nurturing of “such positive behavioural manifestations as participation, connection, and integration into the school setting and its educative tasks” (p. 176). In a similar vein, Libby (2004) makes reference to school attachment, school bonding, and school connection, all terms used to describe a variety of forms of affective bonds established between students and the institutions they attend. In seeking to establish these bonds, secondary schools have developed elaborate systems of ceremonies, artifacts, and rituals designed to provide their students with both rites of passage (individual) and rites of intensification (group oriented) that mark specific stages of their secondary school careers, and that serve to engage students with the institutions they attend (Hoffman, 2003). These include, but are by no means limited to, events such as the junior and senior proms, various rallies and awards ceremonies, as well as that culminating rite of passage, the formal graduation ceremony at the end of four years. The allure of secondary school may be particularly strong among males, given the relationship between extra-curricular activities in the form of athletics and emergent adolescent perceptions of masculinity (Pascoe, 2003). Furthermore, the importance of the aforementioned affective institutional bonds should not be ignored. Given the time and effort that secondary schools devote to creating safe and nurturing environments for their students (Jones & Frydenberg, 1988), it should not be surprising that some students would choose to prolong the experience rather than being “forced to leave a place that they love” (Brody, Brody & King, 1986, p.3).

Summary

Overall, the attempt to bring Ontario's system of secondary education in-line with the four-year North American norm has met with only limited success in that a number of adolescents continue voluntarily to extend their secondary school years, a phenomenon that can possibly be attributed to a number of factors. First, but not necessarily foremost, as Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) observed, secondary schools have long proven themselves to be all but impervious to change. Simply stated, having been established, the practice of requiring university bound students to spend at least five years in high school became a "basic assumption" (Schein, 1997) in the minds of many and thus a part of the "grammar" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) of secondary schooling in the province. Therefore, the victory lap phenomenon might possibly be viewed as an unofficial continuation of a long-standing tradition.

Finally, the proponents of the new four year programme may well have underestimated the centrality of the secondary school to the adolescent world. As previously indicated secondary schools invest a great deal of time and effort in actively seeking to engage their students. It should not be surprising, therefore, that at least some adolescents would be reluctant to explore new uncharted waters and/or to sever those extant and strong nurturing bonds.

Methodology

The validation of statistically significant findings in an objective survey instrument by reference to material (anecdotal comments and observations) is the principal advantage of the mixed-methods research protocol. To ascertain why secondary school graduates would of their own volition return to secondary school, this was the logical approach.

Research Design

A mixed-method research design similar to the methodology advocated by Phelan (1987), as well as by Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, (2004), was employed in this study. In this approach, qualitative methods are used to generate areas of inquiry that are later verified through qualitative means. Qualitative methods are then used to construct “a coherent and understandable picture of the phenomenon under study” (Phelan, 1987, p. 35). Specific to this study, qualitative means by way of an extensive literature review were employed in order to reveal themes related to student engagement at the secondary school level, issues related to the transition from secondary school to university, and an examination of preliminary studies regarding the impact of the shortened secondary school program on first-year university students in Ontario. These themes then formed the basis for the development of the survey instrument used in the study. Quantitative methods were then employed to determine whether or not there were significant differences between those participants who proceeded directly to university from secondary school and those who engaged in a “victory lap” in relation to a variety of variables presented in the survey instrument. Participants’ replies to an open-ended response item were then analysed qualitatively in order to verify and provide an in-depth explanation for the aforementioned statistical analysis.

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 180 first-year students (123 female, 57 male) enrolled in a Concurrent Teacher Education programme at a small university located in the Canadian province of Ontario. Of these 107 (59.4%) indicated that they had proceeded to university directly from high school, 43 (23.8%) were admitted having spent at least one additional semester in Grade 12,

and 30 (16.8%) stated that they had gained entrance as mature students or on some other basis such as community college transfer. For data analysis purposes the latter were deleted, leaving an effective final sample of 150. Of these 104 (69.3%) were female and 46 (30.7%) were male. Participation in the study was both anonymous and voluntary.

Whereas the faculties of education in many North American universities are relatively small within the context of the overall enrolment totals of their host institutions, the situation with regard to the composition of the survey population is rather different. At this particular university Concurrent Education students, who are primarily admitted directly from secondary school, comprise a considerable proportion of the overall first year intake. The opinions expressed and reflected in this survey, therefore, are representative of many students making the transition to the first year of university from secondary school at this institution.

Instrument

The principal means of inquiry was a survey questionnaire adapted from Sheppard's (1993) *History Preparation Survey*, an instrument developed to assess the extent to which university students believed that their secondary school educations had prepared them for studies at the post-secondary level. The adapted questionnaire consisted of three parts with the first section soliciting specific demographic information from the participants. This section included items such as gender, age, entrance to university pathway, and participants' expectations regarding anticipated changes in grade-point average at the end of the first semester in comparison to their final year of secondary school results.

The second section consisted of two checklists which asked respondents to identify the rationale for their choice of pathway to university. Among the options available to subjects who

chose to spend at least one additional semester in grade 12 were the following: (a) a desire to improve the participant's grade-point average for university admission purposes; (b) retaking specific courses to improve their marks in those courses; (c) to take courses that were previously unavailable as a consequence of timetable restrictions; (d) taking additional courses in order to broaden their knowledge base in preparation for future post-secondary studies; (e) an interest in playing sports or continued participation in other extracurricular activities offered by their former high schools; (f) gaining additional maturity before proceeding to post-secondary education; (g) a desire to remain with their peer group; and (f) choosing to spread grade 12 over two years in order to devote additional time to part-time employment. Options available to participants who proceeded directly from grade 12 to university included the following; possessing a grade-point average that was satisfactory for university admission; having (a) taken the appropriate courses required for admission to the postsecondary program of their choice; (b) feeling mature enough for university; (c) and wishing to move on with their friends among others. Participants were also provided with the opportunity to provide their own rationale for their pathway choice.

The third section of the questionnaire was made up of 10 five-point Likert format (1=*strongly disagree* through 5=*strongly agree*) items designed to measure respondents' perceptions of the extent to which they believed that their final year of secondary school had adequately prepared them for the challenges they faced during their first year of university. This section included such items as subject content knowledge, the acquisition of academic and study skills, and their adjustment to the university social milieu.

The questionnaire also included an open-ended response item that allowed respondents to reflect back on their chosen pathway to university by responding to the question "Looking back, do you think that you chose the pathway to university that was right for you?"

Data Analysis

As previously, indicated both quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed in the analysis of the data generated by the questionnaire. Quantitative analysis consisted primarily of the use descriptive statistics and group comparison techniques. In the case of the former, descriptives were utilized in order to ascertain the extent of the phenomenon being studied and to quantify the various rationales provided by participants for their chosen courses of action. A two-tailed T test was employed as a group comparison technique in order to ascertain whether or not there was a significant difference in the degree to which either sample group perceived that their final year of high school had prepared them for university-level studies. The two groups consisted of subjects who had proceed to university directly from grade12 and those who had delayed university entrance by voluntarily returning to secondary school for at least one additional semester. Group comparison was conducted in the basis of 10 independent variables that measured participants' perceptions regarding the extent to which they believed that their final year of secondary school had adequately prepared them for university-level studies. There are three areas of comparison: (a) the acquisition of academic subject content; (b) the development of a variety of academic and study skills; and (c) participants' adjustment to the social environment of their campuses.

Qualitative data were generated by respondents' replies to the open-ended response item. Their contributions were transcribed and, as themes emerged, were assigned what Miles and Huberman (1994) have referred to as "descriptive codes". Results generated by the separate data streams were triangulated in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the results (Merriam, 1998).

Limitations

1. The sample was restricted to first-year Concurrent Education students and, therefore, may not be representative of the wider first-year university student population.
2. Results represent the responses of students attending a specific institution at a given point of time, and therefore may not be generalizable to students at other institutions.
3. The limited sample size reduces the viability of extrapolating the results to larger populations.
4. Given the disproportionate number of females in the sample, the results may be reflective of a gender bias.
5. Students self-reported their anticipated academic results half-way into the first semester. This is a limiting factor since many first-year students do not have a clear perception as to how they are doing in university until their end of term grades are issued.

Results and Discussion

The following represents the presentation and analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data generated by the survey instrument. Topics include: (a) gender differences in the role of extra- curricular activities and perceptions of maturity in pathway choice; (b) participants' perceptions of readiness for post-secondary level studies; (c) differences between victory and non-victory lappers in terms of perceived preparedness for post-secondary education as well as anticipated academic outcomes; and (d) participant's reflections on the efficacy of their chosen pathway.

The Victory Lap: A Largely Male Phenomenon?

As previously indicated, the adjusted sample consisted of 150 participants (104 female, 46 male). Of these 107 (71.3%) had proceeded to university directly from grade 12 while 43

(28.7%) had chosen to spend at least one additional semester in secondary school following graduation. An examination of the data generated by the survey instrument revealed the existence of a definitive gender disparity between the two groups in that 47.8% (22 of 46) of male respondents reported having taken a victory lap compared to 20.2% (21 of 104) of their female counterparts. Further quantitative analysis confirmed the significance of the aforementioned results with the mean for those who proceeded directly to university being 1.776 (SD=.4190) compared to 1.488 (SD=.5058) for those who took a victory lap, $t=3.573$, $p<.001$. Qualitative data derived from the open-ended response items casts further light on this apparent gender dichotomy, particularly in two areas: (a) the influence of participation in extra-curricular activities, especially sports; and (b) respondents' perceptions of their levels of maturity.

The opportunity to continue their participation in extra-curricular activities, most notably sports, appears to be central to the decision of a significant number of respondents to return to high school for at least one additional semester. Of the 43 participants who indicated that they had taken a victory lap, 22 (51.1%) stated that continued participation in extra-curricular activities was a factor in arriving at their decision. Of these students, 13 (59.0%) were male and 9 (41.0%) were female. The importance of sports participation was further underlined in their open-ended comments. Representative samples include the following: "The only reason that I was considering returning for was sports (football) but I thought university was more important" (Male); "The only reason I would have stayed was to play sports and I do not believe that is a valid reason to stay back" (Female); "Also in my high school, people who do the 'victory lap' do it to play sports" (Female); and "All my friends who stayed back did it to play an extra year of sports" (Female).

The other area in which a gender dichotomy appears to exist is in participants' perceptions of whether or not they had attained a sufficient level of maturity to attend university. Indeed this issue proved to be the leading rationale given by respondents for extending their time in high school with 23 (53.5%) of 43 participants citing the need to acquire additional maturity as one of the reasons for their staying. (Respondents were given the option of choosing multiple responses therefore, percentages may exceed 100%). Of these 13 (56.5%) were male and 10 (44.5%) were female. Analysis of the replies to open-ended response item reveals the nature of the gender differences in thinking with males being more apt to admit to feeling unready for university than their female counterparts. Males expressed their rationale in the following terms: "I would have been 17 if I had of gone straight to university, which is too young to live on my own in my opinion" (Male); "I was in no rush to get into university at the age of 17" (Male); "Yes, I think that I chose the pathway to university that was right for me because I was not ready to go to university after 4 years of high school I was in no rush" (Male); and "Yes, my path was right, I was too broke and too green to have had any success at university" (Male).

Conversely, their female counterparts who eschewed the victory lap expressed a definitive desire to move on to the next stage in their lives. As they stated, "Yes, I feel that I have chosen the right pathway to university. One reason why it because I wanted to get my studies done right away and not waste a minute of my time" (Female); "Yes, I feel that it was right for me. High school had nothing more to offer me" (Female); and "For me it would have been a waste of time to go back to high school as I thought I was well prepared for bigger, more challenging things" (Female).

Overall, gender appears to have played a significant role in the decision on the part of a number of participants to forgo or spend additional time in secondary school, with the victory lap

being a predominantly male phenomenon. This gender dichotomy appears to be, at least in part, the result of two factors: (a) the males' desire to continue participation in extra-curricular activities, most notably sports, and (b) a perception on the part of many males that they lacked the maturity to proceed to post-secondary studies.

Perceptions of Readiness

Apart from an intention to play sports or gain additional maturity, a desire (or need) for academic upgrading appears to have been a motivating factor among those who choose to spend additional time in secondary school. This factor motivated 22 (51.1%) respondents who indicated that they returned to enhance their overall average in order to improve their opportunities for admission to university, 18 (41.8%) who returned to improve their standing in a specific subject area, and 16 (37.2%) who wished to take additional courses to broaden their knowledge base. The qualitative data confirms the aforementioned results. As participants stated: "Yes, I choose to take an extra year because I wasn't sure what I wanted to pursue in future studies. The extra year helped me to think about it while increasing my grades" (Female); "Yes indeed, I decided to stay back an extra semester so I could gain a few more courses and increase my average" (Female); "I had to go back for English, but in general my 5th year of high school was easy classes, where I did not have to put much effort into classes to achieve 90% + in my classes" (Female); "I feel it was right for me. It gave me a chance to improve my average allowing for a better entrance scholarship" (Female); and "Yes, taking additional courses at high school allowed me to explore more options I was interested in and to complete some courses that I was interested in taking at high school and was unable to beforehand" (Male).

Non-victory lappers, on the other hand, expressed a different point of view. For, example: “ Yes I feel that I chose what was right for me because I did not need to upgrade there was no reason for me to stay at high school” (Female); “I have excellent marks coming out of high school and had all the required courses for my program. A lot of my friends stayed back and they have told me they thought it was a waste of time” (Female); and “ For me, it would have been a waste of time to go back to high school as I thought I was well prepared for bigger more challenging things” (Female). Moreover, for at least some of these subjects the idea of remaining in high school had already lost much of its allure. As they commented: “I was ready to leave the dramatic high school atmosphere” (Male); “”Four years was more that enough time to be in high school and I got sick of it very fast. I couldn’t stand the drama that came with high school & I felt I was constantly being babysat (Female); and finally, “High school was too complicated & stupid” (Female).

Summary of Reasons for Staying

Overall, the victory lap appears to be, in part, a gender based phenomenon. Male participants were significantly more likely to have chosen to spend additional time in high school than their female counterparts, and appear to have been motivated by a different set of factors. In this instance, the primary motivating factors appear to be two-fold: a desire to continue participating in extra-curricular activities, namely sports, as well as a perceived need to acquire an additional level of maturity before attending a post-secondary institution. Gender differences apart, the need/desire for academic upgrading also appears to have played an important role in the decision- making process as well, with students returning for an additional semester or more in order to improve either their over all academic standing, or their results in specific subjects.

Whatever the motivation, the question remains: Did taking a victory lap have a significant impact on initial their transition to post-secondary education?

Participant Outcomes: Mixed Results

Quantitative data analysis produced mixed results in terms of (a) participants' anticipated overall grade-point average at the end of the first semester of university, and (b) the degree to which respondents' perceived that their grade 12 experience had provided them with specific academic and other skills in preparation for university entrance. In terms of anticipated end of first semester grade-point average, spending additional time in high school, appears to have paid dividends to those who chose that option. Specifically, 32.5% (14) of participants who chose the victory lap pathway anticipated that their end of semester grade-point averages would increase when compared to their final year of high school in contrast to 9.3% (10) of their direct entry counterparts. Conversely, 44.1 (19) of victory lap respondents anticipated a decline in their grade-point averages compared to 64.4% (69) of those who entered directly from grade 12. The statistical significance of the above was confirmed by means of a two-tailed t test with the mean for direct entry participants being 2.189 (SD=.9963) compared to 2.837 (SD=.9983), $t= -3.598$, $p < .001$, for those who chose the victory lap route. These results, however, should be viewed with a certain amount of caution in that they are based on respondents' self-reported estimates midway through their first semester of university and may, therefore, represent, among other things, an overly optimistic/pessimistic assessment on the part of individual subjects based on fragmentary results.

The survey instrument was also designed to measure subjects' perceptions regarding the degree to which they believed that their grade 12 experience had provided them with specific

academic/study/writing skills as preparation for post-secondary education. Adaptation to the university social milieu was also assessed. As the data presented below in the Table indicate, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups.

Table

Perceptions of Preparation for University

Variable	Direct Entry		Victory Lap		<i>t</i>
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	
General level of preparation for university	3.74	1.01	3.65	.87	.54
Subject content knowledge	3.79	.94	3.69	.82	.62
Preparation for essay writing	3.35	1.20	3.36	1.03	.97
Acquisition of study skills	3.10	1.20	2.95	1.27	.68
Note taking	3.20	1.30	2.95	1.08	1.09
Research skills	3.36	1.13	3.55	1.17	-.89
Working independently	3.73	1.07	3.71	1.09	.13
Amount of reading expected	2.55	1.30	2.69	1.37	-.59
Social engagement	3.65	1.07	4.00	.99	-1.83

Note 1: Degrees of freedom for the *t* tests were as follows: General level of preparation for university 147, all other variables 146.

Note 2: 5= strongly agree, 1= strongly disagree

The above results were also reflected in participants’ open-ended response item remarks as they revealed mixed feelings concerning the pathway they had chosen. For example, while many of those who proceeded directly to university from grade 12 stated that they had been well prepared for the transition, others expressed second thoughts about their decision. The following are representative of the former: “I feel that coming out of Gr. 12 I did feel adequately prepared for university. Sometimes I feel that I wish I had stayed for an extra year, but I don’t think it would have done anything for me” (Female); “ I do think I chose the pathway right for me

because I felt that I was ready for university and my marks were more than qualified for getting into university" (Female); and, "Yes. I believe I was ready to move on from high school to University. For me, it would have been a waste of time to go back to high school as I thought I was well prepared for more challenging things" (Female). Others were more reticent. For example, "I feel that going straight into University was difficult and perhaps one more year at high school would have better prepared me. University is A Lot more difficult than I expected" (Female); and "...high school did not fully prepare me for university, I feel completely overwhelmed with the work load and certain expectations that are unlike those of high school, which ultimately result in marks that are much lower than with what I graduated grade 12" (Female). Conversely, others expressed a different point of view, "I decided to stay back an extra semester so I could gain a few more courses and increase my average. I wasn't ready to go to school yet and I am glad I waited an extra year" (Male), as well as "Yes, it wasn't until my 5th year of high school that I learned to work hard in school, which allowed me more confidence in my academics" (Female). Finally, others commented on the impact that a chosen pathway potentially has on a participant's adjustment to the social aspect to university life. Representative samples include these comments, "Many aspects of university life would have to wait too such as drinking and partying" (Male), and "...four years is not enough as most students would only be 18 then turn 19 in university where they are allowed to drink legally which affects your social life at university" (Male).

Overall, it would appear that the victory lap is, to a certain extent, a gender-based phenomenon with males being significantly more likely to extend the time they spend in secondary school as opposed to their female counterparts. Their rationale seems to have been anchored in two factors: (a) a desire to continue their participation in extra-curricular activities,

most notably athletics, and (b) a perception on their part that they lacked the level of maturity necessary for success at the post-secondary level. Female participants, on the other hand, appeared to be more interested in moving on to the next level of education, and often expressed a greater degree of self-confidence in their readiness to do so.

Finally, there appears to be little or no significant difference, based on the pathway taken, between the two groups’ perceptions of the degree to which their grade 12 experiences adequately prepared them for university. Participants belonging to both groups expressed mixed emotions regarding the pathway they had selected. While some who had chosen the direct route to university expressed reservations regarding their decision, others who had taken the “victory lap” path now regard that option as having been a waste of time. Both groups agreed that being a year younger impacted on their social lives at university.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the data generated by this study and other sources that the long standing Ontario tradition of students spending five or more years in secondary school in preparation for university entrance remains very much alive for many students. In fact, it might well be argued that for some it remains a basic assumption of secondary school life in the province. While it is risky to over generalise, it is possible speculatively to attribute the “victory lap” phenomenon to two factors identified earlier.

First, the “victory lap” may represent a form of transition anxiety as secondary school students seek to prolong their sojourns in safe predictable environments where they have accrued a degree of social status, rather than venturing forth into the uncharted territory of post-secondary education. This motivation is evidenced by the number of participants who attributed

the rationale for their pathway choice to their need to acquire additional maturity before moving on to the next stage of their formal education. Conversely, those who had proceeded to university directly from grade 12 indicated their readiness to move forward with their lives stating that they felt that high school had nothing further to offer them.

Secondly, the “victory lap” phenomenon serves to further illustrate the centrality of the high school to the lives of many adolescents. The fact that many students chose to return after formally graduating primarily to continue their participation in their schools’ non-academic programming is a testament to the drawing power of these institutions. This interpretation proved to be especially true for adolescent males for whom sports was a particularly strong enticement. This allure, however, is not universal as non-victory lappers made clear their satisfaction with being liberated from what they termed the “drama” of secondary school life.

Finally, there appear to be differences between male and female participants’ responses both in terms of their motivation for choosing the victory lap pathway as well as in their propensity for doing so. While close to half of male participants opted to spend additional time in secondary school, only one in five of their female counterparts did so. In terms of motivation the gender differences may be succinctly summarized in the following terms: females do the victory lap to acquire additional academic credits, males to participate in sports and to gain maturity.

Overall it would appear that the most recent attempt by the Ontario government to create a truly four- year university-preparatory secondary school program has been only partially successful.

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