

## REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

# Burnt out and broke: Inequities in the Post-graduate Application Process During the COVID-19 Era

**Nicole Agaiby**, McMaster University; **Tamara Gutić**, University of Ottawa; **Sanya Vij**, McMaster University

## INTRODUCTION

It is without question that the post-graduate application process is a significant source of burnout for many students. Nevertheless, as three first-generation, soon-to-be graduating students, we noticed clear discrepancies between ourselves and our peers regarding these experiences. We realized that burnout specifically linked to postgraduate applications during the COVID-19 era presented an opportunity to discuss privilege and access for non-first-generation applicants. The following narrative discusses overlapping themes such as finance, mental health, and opportunistic inequities from the perspective of cross-disciplinary students, having gone through the application process for various graduate and professional programs this past year.

## FINANCING THE PROCESS

To start, financial inequities place significant barriers on many students, particularly first-generation students. The postgraduate application process consists of many fees that may not be accessible to all applicants. Standardized tests cost anywhere from \$300-\$500 per take, with preparation materials ranging from \$50 into the thousands. These tests can create barriers in accessing post-graduate education and often dissuade first-generation students from even contemplating these streams. Despite the payoff that may occur once these careers are pursued,

the fear of failure and financial ruin ends these dreams before they can begin. Questions such as “is it worth it?” arise. Is it worth it to pursue these tests, applications, and risks if we do not get in? While this fear exists for all students, first-generation students face further cultural challenges and mental blockades exacerbated by financial inequities.

These financial barriers and fears often pressure first-generation students to choose between underpaying internships and the value they may bring, versus working solely to earn necessary finances - despite the lack of “value” this brings to resumes. Many first-generation students are unable to garner financial support from their parents. For those that can, there exists a cultural block. We feel as though we owe it to our parents to pursue opportunities without cost to them. Taking time off work to study is one of the most significant risks we can take, and as first-generation students, we constantly feel like we are thinking ten steps ahead. If we do not get a specific score, will that time off have been worth it, how could we make up those hours? Even though our parents do not explicitly impose these financial pressures, having seen their sacrifices for our success, we feel as though it is our duty and obligation to impact them negatively as little as possible.

The post-graduate process as a first-generation student feels like a never-ending cycle of fear and uncertainty. We were constantly investing time and money with a persistent fear of failure and the pressure of making our parents’ sacrifices

worthwhile. These feelings have been persistent in each of our pursuits, and they continue to linger as we approach achieving our dreams and embark on more financial risks, while wondering if the payoff will make it all worthwhile.

### **OPPORTUNISTIC INEQUITIES**

In the postgraduate application process, individuals who come from a place of privilege and who are not first-generation students can access a wider breadth of connections aiding them in their academic and professional pursuits. These connections can lead to guidance for standardized testing preparation, applications, seeking mentorship, and even connections with admission panelists. Many first-generation students lack these connections simply because of recent immigration. This accessibility disparity makes the difference between an application portfolio that is average or below-average versus one that is rich with experience, mentorship, and preparedness. For some people, guidance in the application process can be as simple as phoning a few relatives with direct or indirect experience in a given field. For us, this looked like connecting with people on online forums, reaching out to professionals on LinkedIn and attending application workshops free of charge. Coming from various backgrounds and cultures, we all agreed that this disparity led to debilitating self-doubt and a sense of “not being in the loop.”

It is also essential to address opportunistic inequalities even before the application process begins. With many professional programs being high in competition, shadowing hours become a preferred asset to one’s application file. Alongside shadowing, many programs value research and professional experience relevant to the field of interest. Consequently, the themes discussed above translate equally here. Possessing foundational roots equates with a high chance of opening the door to more valuable opportunities. Throughout our undergraduate career, we witnessed various colleagues gaining portfolio-building experiences simply through a family connection made with a program director. With these inequalities in place,

first-generation students must stand out in an academic environment that unfortunately rewards “knowing the right people.”

### **COVID-19 AND MENTAL HEALTH STRAIN**

These inequities seemed to be exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19. As the world slowed down, the pressure to pursue higher education stayed the same, forcing us to work tirelessly while facing an abundance of uncertainty. It seemed that no amount of research or networking could prepare us for these changes, as opposed to the connections engendered through the generational establishments. This was further amplified by the possibility of losing our jobs over the summer, adding to the significant financial strain that accompanies this process for first-generation students.

Our mental energy was quickly drained, and we felt burnt out throughout the application process. It was all that consumed our minds, to the point where it was a topic of everyday conversation, and the fear of failure was prevalent like there was no tomorrow. This worry was deeply rooted in wanting to make our parents proud, not only because of cultural pretense but also because they had made many sacrifices while investing in our future. In a way, we wanted their support to be “worth it.” In addition—thoughts about what family “back home” might think surfaced, making it appear as though this type of success was the only option. This situation severely affected relationships with friends and family, as well as physical health and mental wellbeing. Well aware that other students were experiencing a similar circumstance, it was an isolating experience regardless, further aggravated by the pressures of being a first-generation student.

Furthermore, seeking mental health resources in first-generation communities is often accompanied by stigma and negativity.

---

Though we were aware that getting help may alleviate these pressures, we were faced with the fear of being perceived as weak by doing so. Our judgment was also clouded by comparing our situation to that of our parents and remembering the conditions in which they started a life in a new country without having access to mental health resources or a strong support network.

Overall, though this process is already draining for many individuals, it was accompanied by a sense of conflicting identities and intense amounts of guilt for many first-generation students. We have more privilege than our parents, yet we face challenges that are unique to our own situations, perhaps in comparison to many of our peers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this process, it is clear that these inequities are rooted in discrepancies in generational establishment. For first-generation and immigrant students, this leads to the state of “burnt out and broke.” We hope that this narrative resonates with other first-generation students and educational institutions as they work towards addressing these concerns. We strongly believe that efforts can be made to support students who are “set behind” by virtue of their (lacking) establishment while maintaining the integrity of the process as a whole.