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## **The Capstone Course and Research Opportunities: The Importance of Research at the Undergraduate Level**

Dr. Sarah Clancy, PhD

Assistant Professor

Faculty Advisor, McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology

Honours Social Psychology Program

Department of Health, Aging and Society

McMaster University

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology! The journal was created and developed by fourth year Honours Social Psychology undergraduate student, Namya Tandon, in Fall 2019. Fourth year undergraduate student, Ranuli DeSilva, serves as Assistant Editor, while Jordan Graber, who is entering her fourth year of undergraduate study in Fall 2020, is the graphic designer for the journal. In Fall 2019, Namya Tandon approached faculty and staff in the Honours Social Psychology Program to discuss the idea of launching a student journal. At that time, Namya asked if I would serve as the Faculty Advisor for the journal. During that early development stage, Namya attended workshops and information sessions with the Office of Scholarly Communication to learn all about journal design, undergraduate journal publications, and the intricacies of taking on the role of journal editor. Along with Dr. Tara Marshall, Director of the Honours Social Psychology Program, we devised a set of publication eligibility criteria to ensure the process was arms-length from any student, who past or present, who may serve as a member of the editorial board while at the same time being enrolled in the fourth year capstone course in the Honours Social Psychology Program. Namya has worked tirelessly to launch the journal, recruiting an assistant editor, Ranuli DeSilva, and a graphic designer, Jordan Graber, to bring this excellent platform for student research to fruition. The entire editorial board should be commended for their hard work and dedication on the launch of this journal. I am honoured to be the Faculty Advisor for the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology, working alongside such intelligent, talented, and dedicated students.

I want to provide some context on the Honours Social Psychology Program regarding the research work that is developed in the capstone course, which has the potential to be published in the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology. The Honours Social Psychology Program started as a new program at McMaster University in 2010. From 2010-2012, Dr. Lori Campbell and Theresa Marin oversaw the development of the Program. From 2012-July 2019, Dr. Dorothy Pawluch served as Program Director. In July 2019, Dr. Tara Marshall began her term as the current Program Director. The incredible students, Program Directors and overseers, faculty, and staff, have all contributed to the growth and development of the Program over time. I began my association with the Honours Social Psychology Program in Winter 2014. Since that time, I have taught numerous courses at the undergraduate level, including the capstone

course, SOC PSY 4ZZ6. It is the capstone course from which the research studies featured in the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology were developed and completed.

The capstone course in the Honours Social Psychology Program is rather unique, as many programs and departments do not have a required thesis course. Year after year, I hear a similar sentiment from students about how excited they are for a practical, experiential component to their learning experiences: the capstone course is an opportunity to put all of the learned skills and knowledge into practice, while also building on students' existing skill sets and academic experiences.

I have been fortunate to supervise over 70 research projects and over 350 students during the six years in which I have supervised and taught the capstone course, SOC PSY 4ZZ6. The capstone course is completed from September-April, with students working collaboratively in groups to develop either a quantitative (data collected via an anonymous online survey) or qualitative (data collected through in-depth interviews) project, based on a shared topic or area of interest. All projects have received ethical clearance from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB#: 0327). The projects are not without their difficulties or challenges, as for many, this is the first-time students are engaging in field work, especially a project completed in groups that spans over 8 months of their academic career. While each group is supervised and guided through the steps and stages of the research process, the process itself is one of both academic and personal self-growth and development. Students not only learn academic and research skills, but learn about their own strengths, interests, as well as how to work collaboratively in groups, develop stronger communication skills, and importantly, further refine their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As a result, I have witnessed first-hand the hard work, dedication, learning curves, exploration, and excellence of these undergraduate students through all stages of the projects. It has been a pleasure supervising the students and seeing their projects develop over time into insightful, in-depth, and interesting social psychological studies, three of which are included in this inaugural issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology.

The papers selected for publication in the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology must meet a minimum standard of excellence of a grade of 85% or higher on the final thesis paper submitted for the capstone course, as per the publication criteria developed collaboratively by Dr. Tara Marshall, Namya Tandon, and myself. The capstone course and the work published as outputs from the course highlight the importance of opportunities for undergraduate students to engage in field research with human participants. As you will discover when reading these three articles, our undergraduate students are emerging young scholars interested in exploring socially relevant and important topics impacting their fellow peers. The three studies included for publication in this edition including the following (ordered alphabetically by study title): **A First Year to Write Home About: A Quantitative Study of First Year Housing Environment and First Year University Experience** by Julia Bilanzola, Josina

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Bouwman, Erika Keys, Emma Owen, Makayla Roth, and Aisha Syed; **A Qualitative Study of Self-Validation among First-Year Undergraduate Students in STEM and ARTS Programs** by Ranuli DeSilva, Tessa Hinkel, Emily Pooran, Taylor Smiley, Alysha McDonald, and Namya Tandon; and finally, **McMaster Varsity Student-Athletes Perceptions on Accessing Social Support Services** by Rose Adusei, Shanya Aguilar-Andrade, Karmen Chazi, Tiah Di Benedetto, and Elias Srouji.

The research studies in this first volume and issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology are diverse, yet similar: each published study represents a facet of the lived experience of student life, whether it is the transition to living arrangements during one's first year of university, the identification and feelings of self-validation and worth associated with membership in one's program, or, the access to and perception of social support services on campus among varsity athletes. Each of the articles identify research-to-action initiatives based on the findings of the study. While the sample sizes are not generalizable, the research findings speak to the broader importance of including students' voices, opinions, and experiences as part of any changes, developments and/or initiatives directed towards the student population at McMaster University. For example, campus (both on and off) housing can learn more about the experiences of first year students, as identified in Bilanzola et al.,'s (2020) study, to make changes to improve the first-year experience of incoming students and foster a positive first-year transition and experience, regardless of one's place of residence. Furthermore, faculty advisors in the 6 faculties at McMaster University, along with members of those faculty communities (students, student groups, faculty, and staff), can become informed about the degree to which students feel connected, confident, and validated to and by their programs, as well as strategies to improve the lack of connectedness or feelings of competency to make positive, effective changes, as identified in the study by DeSilva et al., (2020). Lastly, the athletic community, particularly the varsity athletic community, can hear about the limitations and perceptions among students about accessing social support resources, as investigated by Adusei et al., (2020). This information could be used to develop strategies to reduce stigma regarding seeking support services, increasing pathways to information and access to supports and services. Therefore, all three studies highlight the importance of incorporating student perceptions into program development or refinement, as well as service changes or modifications, to ensure supportive environments that foster student growth and development.

I hope you enjoy reading the interesting and socially relevant social psychological research studies of the three respective groups featured in this edition of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology. The hard work of each student group, as well as the entire editorial team of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology, should be recognized and applauded. A warm congratulations to all involved in the publication of the inaugural edition of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology!