

## **The Concurrent Education Programme at Laurentian University: What Have We Learned From the First Graduating Class?**

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### **Abstract**

In September 2003, Laurentian University began offering a Concurrent Bachelor of Education in English. As the programme prepared to graduate its first cohort of 13 graduates in the spring of 2007, the researchers realized they had a unique but brief window of opportunity to learn as much as possible from the first graduating class. This article reviews the findings through a three-pronged approach: three ninety-minute focus group sessions with graduating students, the administration of a Likert scale, and an exit interview with each participating student. Key results indicate that students were overwhelmed by both teaching responsibilities and class-based assignments. Their early pre-practicum experiences provided later context for reflective practice during the final practicum experiences. In some situations, the students more readily connected with their associate teacher, while others struggled to find their place in the classroom. In contrast to other studies, results indicate that the teaching practicum is not always the transforming highlight of the professional year.

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## **Introduction**

It is rare to find a study that describes the initial year of an educational program. This research examines the preliminary learning steps that were taken to develop a new school of education where reflective practice frames the program.

Laurentian University is located in northeastern Ontario. Since 1960, more than 33,000 students have graduated from the bilingual and tri-cultural university. A Bachelor of Education programme in the French language has been offered by the University since 1974. In September 2003, Laurentian University began offering a Bachelor of Education in English. This BEd programme is a four or five year programme taken concurrently with an undergraduate degree. Both Primary/Junior and Junior/Intermediate divisions are offered. Currently, all practice teaching placements are local and are completed within the two regional school boards.

Students complete three pre-practicum placements, one each year, beginning in the second year of their undergraduate degree. The pre-practicum placements are 40 hours in length and are completed by volunteering a few hours each week in local educational environments. Most students assist and observe practicing teachers in local classrooms. Some of the participants in this study may have completed an alternative placement in an educational setting outside of a traditional classroom. These “alternative placements” occur in varied locations, including Science North, Children’s Aid Society and N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre.

Students begin their professional year with an initial practicum placement in May immediately following graduation from their undergraduate degree. It is during this initial placement that practicum students are required to write formal lesson plans and to teach.

In addition to the initial practicum, in May before their professional year, the students complete three more practicum sessions for a total of 17 weeks of practice teaching during their professional year. As the programme was poised to graduate its first cohort in the spring of 2007, the researchers realized they had a unique but brief window of opportunity to learn as much as possible from the first graduating class.

What had their experiences been? What were the learning experiences of such a small, close-knit group? How could the programme be improved and changed for future cohort groups? How well had the education programme at Laurentian University prepared the education students for their careers as teachers? These were just a few of the questions going through our minds as we prepared to interview our first graduating class. We wanted to gather as much information as possible about their experiences in the Bachelor of Education programme at Laurentian before they began their actual teaching careers.

## **Participants and Method**

All 13 members of the first graduating class were invited to take part in the study; 6 females and 3 males expressed interest in participating. Participants ranged in age from 23-54. The participants were required to sign a consent form outlining the voluntary nature of participation emphasizing that they were free to

participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. To create a welcoming environment, food was provided at each of the sessions.

The researchers employed a three-pronged approach that consisted of three 90 minute focus groups, the administration of a Likert scale, and an exit interview after completion of the sessions. All participants were given pseudonyms according to focus group protocol. Each of the focus group meetings was videotaped and later transcribed. Two of the participants participated by conference call during one of these sessions, as their placement location prevented them from attending in person.

The questions for the focus groups were determined prior to beginning the study, while the exit interview questions were designed to probe responses gathered in previous focus group conversations.

The first focus group asked students to reflect on the beginning of their Concurrent Bachelor of Education program. The second session probed their first experiences as student teachers. The third session required participants to link their teacher education to practice teaching experiences. In the exit interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as they prepared to begin their teaching careers.

The focus group sessions began with a review of the group rules for focus groups. These guidelines are taken from the work of Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) and reflect the protocol and theory for most focus group work done in education settings. The rules are as follows:

1. Everyone is free to participate
2. All opinions are honoured
3. Confidentiality is assured
4. Everyone has the right to remain a listener
5. The facilitator will stay in a position of respect for self and others
6. The facilitator will respond to various comments as she/he sees fit and probe for clarification where necessary

Since participants were volunteering their time outside of their classes and practice teaching, we knew it was essential to set a welcoming tone during our first session. All students were given tabletop nametags with their pseudonyms on the side facing both towards and away from them. Participants were welcomed and invited to help themselves to food while engaging in small talk before the formal focus group discussion began. Each focus group began on time and concluded promptly after ninety minutes.

### *Focus Group I Overview and Emerging Themes*

During the first focus group, we attempted to determine what attracted this group of students to Laurentian. We wanted to learn about their greatest challenges and frustrations while at Laurentian. Finally, we began to delve into their very first pre-practicum experiences.

For this group of students, the biggest factor in choosing Laurentian was its proximity to home. As the group consisted of several mature students, many had family commitments that would prevent them from leaving the Sudbury area.

One participant commented, “To come here was a huge, huge deal because like some of the others here I have a family here; two young boys and a wife.”

Participants were frustrated and challenged by the amount of work in the professional year. They were overwhelmed by the assignments during class and the time-consuming nature of lesson planning while on practicum. In addition, students began the initial practicum by being asked to teach 25% of the daily lessons. This proved to be an unrealistic expectation in their opinion. One participant reflected “I did a thesis and that was easier than this,” while another spoke of being pushed beyond [the student’s] comfort zone and commented, “I [found] myself more capable than I ever thought I was.”

Participants also spoke about the value of the non-traditional pre-practicum experience: “It was probably the most amazing experience that I had.” For some, those early experiences gave them authentic insight into a particular division (primary, junior, intermediate) for teaching and learning. As one student said, “I was in a Grade One class, and I guess I learned a lot because I could never be a primary junior teacher.”

### *Focus Group II Overview and Emerging Themes*

Several intriguing themes were noted after our second focus group discussion with students. With increasing confidence, students were more reflective of their professional role in the classroom, and expressed interest in “passing on ideas” to incoming education students. “[We’d] like to warn the next group, that they should start saving teaching ideas right away,” commented one student. “You may not see a list or math sheet as useful right now, but it might be in the future.” The students also made many comments about “being prepared” for the host class, and not hesitating to ask for things like a class list.

A good ten-minute discussion erupted around the importance of familiarizing oneself with the routines of the host classroom. “Some teachers included me in the rules for the classroom, but others just expected us to know them,” mentioned one participant. They seemed to share a common desire to become part of the classroom, and students were willing to “do their part” in order to make this happen. Despite these efforts, two students commented about their “inability” to feel truly comfortable in the host classroom. “There was always a sense that I was a guest and sort of in the way,” one student commented. “And it was worse in the staff room.”

Wadlington, Slaton, and Partridge (1999) highlight that student teachers occasionally have misconceptions about their place in classrooms, often making premature judgments about their supervising teacher’s actions or comments. These assumptions can lead to some dissatisfaction during the placement from the student and host teacher’s perspective. Negotiating these relationships were sometimes difficult to work through, due to the stress that often accompanied these new experiences for all participants involved.

The students had good suggestions for inviting conversation and idea exchanges with a host teacher. Some of these included interviewing their host teacher over a lunch-hour or utilizing a series of questions designed together at the university prior to embarking on the placement. Participants suggested that providing the host teacher with a biography of themselves, prior to visiting the school in person, might be helpful for introducing who they are and sharing

dreams and expectations about teaching and learning prior to heading to the classroom. “I want them to see me as a whole person,” said one focus group participant. Another student proposed that some internal mentoring begin in our program with first year students paired with more experienced education students.

Another area of discussion revolved around the value of alternative placement locations. As mentioned earlier in this article, some students are assigned “alternative placements” that take place in varied locations, including Science North, Children’s Aid and N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre. These placements provide students with a look at education from a broader community sense and also offer an opportunity for students to contribute to social organizations in the city of which they may not have been aware. Initially, some students expressed surprise or disappointment at not being in a “real” classroom, but, upon reflection, the overwhelming response to alternative placement was positive. As one student said, “I had no idea that one-on-one teaching with a struggling learner could teach me so much about teaching!”

Our second focus group gathering also provided students with an opportunity to talk about their personal feelings within the classroom. Three students mentioned that their host teachers seemed to lack the ability to offer positive constructive criticism which made them feel somewhat uncomfortable. From this discussion, some conversation about hospitality in general arose; this turned into a rather intriguing examination about respect for, and rapport with, host teachers. One participant commented: “You have to respect the way your teaching associate has set up the class.” Another noted: “I never felt like the classroom was really mine until I was teaching full-time.”

We asked what we could do to assist with the “settling in” stage of a student-teaching placement, and the students had an idea. “It would be nice to get a phone-call or an email from a faculty advisor at the beginning to ask how things are going,” answered one student. Many faculty advisors do this already, but to make it a consistent request of all faculty seems like a positive move for the future.

The final minutes of our second focus group discussion encompassed increased feelings of empowerment in the classroom setting. “I liked it when my associate said “It’s your call...I don’t need to see your lesson plans anymore.” Hodkinson and Hodkinson (1999) discovered that student teachers have a strong desire to “fit in” to the social culture of the school. They attest that students have a strong desire to be perceived as “real” teachers in the school community. Another student mentioned how wonderful she felt when a supply teacher was in the classroom for the day and said, “[You’re] in charge—they know you better than they know me, so go ahead.” The students were visibly radiant as they shared these comments with us. It was clear that they were made to feel that [they’d] crossed the threshold of “student teacher” to “practicing teacher” and were entrusted to “take charge” with absolute trust from another professional.

### *Focus Group III Overview and Emerging Themes*

The third focus group took place during the students’ final teaching practicum. The focus of these questions was on the experiences participants had during their student teaching placement.

According to Schön (1987), the practicum allows student teachers to practice the science of teaching they have learned in their education programs and to apply that learning to the problems of everyday life.

Participants pointed out the importance of a welcoming associate at a time when they were feeling particularly vulnerable. Schön (1987) reveals that these feelings of vulnerability, thoughts of incompetence, lost confidence and feelings of loss of control are common among student teachers. It is interesting to note that feelings of professional inadequacy surfaced in each of our focus group sessions.

When asked to rank the most important factors in a successful placement, participants indicated that the single most important factor was a caring associate. The second most important factor was a welcoming school. The final most important factor was their ability to bring a positive attitude to the placements. Participants told us the most important thing they could bring to their placement was a confident and positive personal attitude. This confidence is enhanced when participants feel welcome in their associate's class.

These findings are consistent with research conducted by Cherian (2007) in which he states, "Throughout all data sources, participants felt that one of the most significant aspects of student teaching was a caring associate." In Cherian's study, teacher candidates describe a caring associate as one who wants you in his or her class, is open minded, and wants to get to know you.

While some participants described their placements as the best part of the program, others had difficulty with the artificial nature of a student teaching placement. According to Cherian (2007), teacher candidates rely on their associate to provide technical guidance, procedural guidance as it relates to routines and policies, and encouragement. It is clear that these take place when an authentic professional relationship has been nurtured from the beginning.

Some participants described feeling like an intruder arriving in classroom with established routines. While they felt compelled to honour those routines, they also wanted to apply some of the theory to which they had been exposed in their classes. One participant compared the placement to being a teenager when she said, "what I had heard... was that the best part of the whole programme was going out on placement. Which sets you up; if you didn't have a very good placement, you started to kind of freak out. It's [like], they say the worst thing you can tell a teenager is that these are the best years of your life."

### **Overview and Emerging Themes From Our Exit Interviews**

During the exit interview, the researchers were acutely aware this would be the last time this group would be available to us. The exit interview questions touched on issues that had not yet been discussed and were triggered by related literature. Questions involved technology in the classroom and support of each other using technology to extend the professional dialogue. During their e-conversations students exchanged ideas about parental engagement, coping with stress, the characteristics of a good faculty supervisor, and feedback from associates.

At this point in our research, the students were completing their last practicum and their increasing confidence was reflected in their responses to our questions. They spoke of their desire to have their own classroom.

Participants experienced a range of successes in their attempts to integrate technology in their classrooms. Some were able to deliver complicated lessons using data projectors and the internet, while others found many of the computers in the classroom did not function consistently. Their responses varied depending on the school to which they were assigned.

Participants observed the complexities of modern family life and its impact on positive parental engagement. The noted with surprise that small gestures such as a kind word in an agenda appeared to encourage parents to communicate more openly with the teacher. After a student teacher included a kind word in an agenda, she developed a link with the parents. "I got feedback like, 'He [didn't] understand his homework last night.' Now at least, I know he tried to do his homework."

We were also interested in the concept of student support. Two of the participants used e-mail and MSN several times a day to share ideas and support one another. Others did stay in contact but on a less frequent basis. The use of e-mail emerged as a strong support mechanism especially when on practicum.

When asked about stress, one participant noted, "Stress is a funny thing. [It's] something you handle for a long time and [snaps fingers] suddenly it becomes too much." The demands of the programme combined with the pressures of relationships, major life changes, and decisions result in a high stress environment. "I think I broke down four different times this year," commented another. This group relied heavily on each other for support. While other persons with whom they had relationships tried to provide support, participants felt only someone "going through" the programme could completely understand their particular stresses.

When asked what made for a good faculty/student relationship, participants expressed their need for a faculty supervisor who was approachable, sincere and flexible. This comment links with previous conversation we had about the importance of a caring host teacher.

As is common with many student teachers, participants struggled with classroom management. They sometimes felt overwhelmed by the demands of delivering a lesson at the expense of addressing classroom management issues. It was evident that although these students had been exposed to classroom management literature, it was during the practicum these theories were put to the test. Associate teachers often provided expertise in making classroom management decisions. The associates had the advantage of attempting different strategies and determining to which of those strategies this particular group of students would respond.

### **Responses to Likert Scale Questions**

We created a Likert scale to assess some areas of interest that we were unable to measure through the focus group format. The Likert scale is a psychometric measurement device often used in questionnaires or surveys after focus group work is conducted. Likert scales are used to determine personal levels of agreement to specific statements. In this survey we used the following gradation of opinion from one to five; with one meaning 'not important' and five meaning 'extremely important'. We asked students about their attitudes and experiences during the concurrent education program. Of the nine students who participated

in the study, five responded to the Likert Scale. As a result, it may be unfair to draw conclusions from such a small sample.

The findings of the Likert-Scale suggested that:

1. The students indicated that it was very important for them to complete their Bachelor of Education degree at Laurentian.
2. Students indicated that it was very important to be placed in a school setting for their Pre-Practicum Placement (PPP).
3. Students indicated that being in a small university was extremely important to their experience in the education program.
4. Students indicated that immediate feedback was extremely important.
5. Students indicated that being placed in a local school was extremely important.
6. Students indicated that participating in the Ministry of Education workshops was of value.
7. Students indicated that being able to share with colleagues throughout the programme was extremely important.
8. Students indicated that having an advisor from the School of Education faculty was very important.
9. Students indicated that having early observation experiences (PPPs) during undergraduate years was very important.
10. Students indicated that being a participant in this research project was extremely important.

### **Findings of This Study**

The results of this research follow the evolution of the Bachelor of Education from its infancy to its present state where it is continuing to grow. Results from focus group conversations and interviews have not been completely analyzed at present, but initial findings indicate great learning and value in the “experiential piece” of the program—specifically the pre-practicum placement and alternative placement experiences. Many students are not able to recognize the value of such placements until the theoretical and additional final year teaching experiences come together. Schön (1987) states this is the part of a reflective practicum, where students must dive in fully before they completely understand what it is they’re trying to learn

The final year of the programme prompted participants to reflect on what they had learned through a more process-oriented lens. This final year challenged them to consider their role as teachers and learners in a new light entirely.

Participants expressed a shift in confidence from their first PPP to the last placement. When observing teachers in their first PPP, many students admitted that they thought teaching looked easy and felt very confident about their ability to teach. Russell (2001) suggests the myth persists in our culture that “anyone can teach.” Their understanding about the many complexities involved in teaching grew with successive visits to school communities and conversations with colleagues in the field.

Participants felt overwhelmed by the assignments required of them during their practice teaching. They felt a great deal of stress during their professional year while they also experienced a sense of empowerment and personal growth. This growth and stress is a part of the transition from pre-service teacher to

competent teacher (Mills & Satterthwait, 2000). Wadlington, Slaton, and Partridge (1998) suggest that such stress can have a detrimental effect on personal growth and learning during the practicum.

One participant compared the learning experiences in the education programme to being pregnant and giving birth. “The professional year is like being pregnant,” she said, “while the first year of teaching is like having a newborn. Others tell you to rest while you can because it will only get worse.” Since many of the study participants were mature students with younger children at home, their lives were complicated by the demands of family life.

The students expressed pride in being the first graduating group, but also frustration at having to experience the growing pains of a new and growing program.

### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Modifications**

As a result of the small size of this first graduating class, the participants were extremely close and felt a sense of pride in their role in creating and modifying the program. In response to their discussions and suggestions during this study, the following modifications have occurred within our program.

#### *Alternative Placement Expanded*

At present, the structure of the Bachelor of Education programme remains the same with students completing three pre-practicum placements prior to their professional year, but the role of the alternative placement has been expanded. For example, in 2007, all students in their second year completed an alternative placement. Alternative placement options have expanded and now include thirteen options from which to choose. These placements include: The Sudbury Art Gallery, Community Builders, Frontier College, Sudbury Libraries, Life Skills Club, The Learning Disabilities Association of Sudbury, Risk Watch, Better Beginnings, Better Futures, and the Sudbury YMCA as well as those established at the beginning of the Program.

#### *Implementation of the Student Profile*

Based on feedback from participants, all pre-practicum students are now required to submit a student profile to their pre-practicum hosts and the School of Education. This document provides the pre-practicum host with an introduction to the student as a whole person. It includes information such as the focus of their undergraduate degree, their teachable subject, their home town, their interests and hobbies. This document eases the transition to the classroom by providing the host with a glimpse of the student beyond the Bachelor of Education programme.

#### *Increased Pre-Practicum Options*

The final pre-practicum placement may now be completed in the spring/summer prior to the final undergraduate year to allow students more time to focus on the demands of thesis work or internships. In many cases, this pre-practicum is done in the students' home community, allowing them to establish contacts prior to beginning student teaching.

### *Gradual Teaching Responsibilities*

The teaching requirement of the first professional year placement has been reduced from 25% of the day to 12% of the day. This has afforded students the opportunity to spend more time observing and assisting associate teachers with less pressure to perform as acting teachers in the classroom setting. Even though this change has been made, Laurentian University's education programme still exceeds the Ontario College of Teachers requirement for practicum days in a school setting. In 2006, the practicum consisted of 76 student teaching days. In 2007, it had 68 days. These totals do not include the pre-practicum placements (PPP) which total another 15 days.

### *New Mentorship Program*

In the interest of demonstrating the importance of nurturing and maintaining extended professional relationships between beginning teachers and those with expertise, a mentorship programme was launched this year. This has provided new students with a faculty mentor prior to beginning their first pre-practicum placement. These mentoring groups meet monthly with specific agendas aimed at assimilating new education students into the programme and providing a personal connection for all students beginning in our program. This mentoring initiative was launched in response to faculty and student concerns about a feeling of disconnectedness between their undergraduate degree and the bachelor of education degree.

### *Increased Student Choice in Third Final Placement*

An exciting innovation was created to accommodate students' desires to build relationships with school boards in their home communities. Students, who have demonstrated exceptional teaching abilities in the initial practicum placement and in their first and second practicum, now have the option of requesting their final placement in a school of their choice.

### *Associate Teacher Training Offered*

In 2007, the Practicum Office discussed with local principals the option of offering associate teacher training. Principals advised that such training was not likely to be well received in light of the current demands on teachers, and may in fact be seen as an additional commitment. As a result, the Practicum Office is considering implementing an early interview between the associate and the student to establish clear expectations and improved open communication.

### **Further Research and Concluding Comments**

As a result of the initial findings in this work, two of the researchers have decided to examine stress during the professional year. Another researcher is exploring the assumptions, beliefs and contradictions of family engagement observed by pre-service teachers in their school placements. One of the researchers is currently surveying associate teachers regarding their experiences with student teachers.

Of the 13 students in the first graduating class, three are currently employed in long term occasional teaching positions. Five are teaching on a supply basis. One graduate has opted out of the workforce to raise children. Those not employed in schools are working in education-related fields. Five of the 13 graduates have decided to further their education and one of these graduates received the prestigious Ray Ryan Prize for Curricular Studies. She is pursuing a Master's degree related to education.

Someone once stated that change and growth in education can be compared to moving partially set "Jell-O" pudding across a table. Such is the nature of the challenges ahead in our teacher education programme at Laurentian University. One provincial initiative may sway us in one direction, yet a student's voice may push us to consider another perspective. The researchers involved in this study are committed to inviting student involvement through reciprocal communication, and know that an important key to improving our programme in small baby steps is through listening—and hearing—the suggestions and ideas from our future educators. The students in our programme have much to teach us through their actions, their thinking and their teaching.

As of February 2009, the researchers continue to be in contact with the original cohort of 13 students. The graduates have remained connected with each other even though they have moved on. It is the intent of the researchers to bring this group of graduates together once more to investigate the continued impact of their engagement in the programme and in this research project. The researchers intend to examine transformative practices that have occurred as a result of this initiative. These will include a closer investigation of the issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the classroom.

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## **APPENDIX I**

### **Focus Group One Questions**

1. Thinking back to your application days, what were the appealing factors that led you to apply to Laurentian University to pursue a degree in education?
2. Do these factors still hold true for you today?
3. What has surprised you most about your learning experiences here?
4. What has been the most challenging or frustrating part of the experience?
5. How did you react when you were told where you would be doing your first student teaching placement (PPP)?
6. What would you have liked to change as a part of your first placement (PPP)?

## **APPENDIX II**

### **Focus Group Two Questions**

1. If you could offer some advice to the new group of education students about their first placement (PPP), what would it be?
2. Did this first experience shape the philosophy of teaching and learning in any way? If so, how?
3. What assumptions did you make about your first experiences in schools (PPPs) and how have these experiences evolved over the years that you have been a student here?
4. In what ways were you an apprentice in the classroom?
5. When did you feel you were “taking charge” of things? What were the factors contributing to this belief?

**APPENDIX III****Focus Group Three Questions**

1. What had you heard about practice teaching prior to heading into the schools?
2. What are the qualities that you believe make a successful practice teaching experience?
3. What connections do you see between the teacher education programme and your student teaching?
4. How might Laurentian's education programme improve in making these connections stronger?
5. How ready do you feel for a full time teaching position? Please talk about this further.

## **APPENDIX IV**

### **Exit Interview Questions**

1. What things did you learn when a substitute teacher was in the classroom?
2. How was that experience different from other days in that classroom?
3. What technologies did you use in your teaching and how did they assist you in the classroom?
4. What new technology did you explore while in the classroom?
5. How did you and your peer group use e-mail or MSN to become a learning community?
6. What were some of the themes that emerged in these electronic communications?
7. How would you describe this experience in terms of safely sharing your thoughts?
8. What surprised you about parental/family engagement at your schools?
9. How did you handle stress during your professional year?
10. How might you describe a healthy relationship between a university supervisor and yourself as a student teacher?
11. What characteristics would a good supervisor have?
12. Describe a situation where your tried a lesson and your associate teacher coached you on improving the lessons or trying a different strategy?
13. What was that conversation like?
14. How would you coach someone through a similar situation?

## APPENDIX V

### The Likert Scale

In this research project, we are interested in learning about your feelings or attitudes about your experiences throughout the concurrent education programme at Laurentian University. You will be invited to indicate how closely your feelings match the question or statement on a rating scale.

The scale is from 1 is not important to 5 is extremely important.

1. How important was it for you to be accepted into the concurrent education programme at Laurentian University?	1 2 3 4 5
2. How important was it for you to be placed in a school setting for your placement?	1 2 3 4 5
3. How important was it for you to be in smaller university classes during your professional year?	1 2 3 4 5
4. How important was it for you to be given immediate feedback during your practicum sessions?	1 2 3 4 5
5. How important was it for you to be placed in a local (as opposed to Southern Ontario) school setting?	1 2 3 4 5
6. How important was it for you to participate in Ministry of Education workshops throughout the year?	1 2 3 4 5
7. How important was it for you to have sharing opportunities with your colleagues in the program?	1 2 3 4 5
8. How important was it for you to have an advisor in the faculty of education?	1 2 3 4 5
9. How important was it for you to have early observation placements during your undergraduate years?	1 2 3 4 5
10. How important was it for you to be a participant in this research project?	1 2 3 4 5