

## “Perception vs. Reality”

*Produced by Kate Newton, Greg Cho, Christina Liu, and Nour Goulmamine*

### Opening

Host: When you hear the names Edgar Allen Poe, Tina Fey, and Georgia O’Keefe, what words come to mind? Success? Wealth? Fame? These people also happen to be alumni of the University of Virginia. Even without name-dropping, it’s easy to picture what UVA represents: a top 5 public school renowned for attracting bright, high-achieving, and engaged students and shaping them into industry leaders.

Host: What is less acknowledged is UVA’s rank as the 6th highest in the US for having the most depressed student body. The challenges faced at UVA cut across all disciplines; my co-producers and I spoke with students from different pockets of the University, and they all emphasized the struggles they face, especially when it comes to thinking about their majors and future careers.

Danika: The sciences and STEM in general at UVA is just very draining...

Heeran: It does bring you stress like having to work on certain pieces that take, I mean like some pieces of mine have taken like 48 hours and that’s just distributed over like a week and that’s a lot of time.

Abrar: The nursing school itself is difficult because we’re a very strict schedule compared to the other majors around in here at UVA...

Host: This semester, my co-producers and I have been looking into how different majors can affect our mental health and well-being. To clarify, we are not experts in anthropology or sociology, or in a position of authority like a university administrator—we are just curious students. We wanted to chat with other undergrads to see if what we often hear and believe about certain majors matches the realities of those students.

*[ U OK UVA? theme song ]*

Host: Welcome to U OK UVA? A student-produced podcast about mental health and wellness at the University of Virginia. I’m your host, Nour Goulmamine, and in this episode, my team and I explore the relationship between majors and mental health, perhaps debunking, or at least complicating ideas about which majors are the most detrimental to students’ well-being.

Host: Within UVA’s rigorous academics, there’s a student body that prides itself on its high academic standards and diverse interdisciplinary majors. We interviewed more than a dozen students from STEM, arts and humanities, and commerce, which are the areas of study we’ll focus on in this episode.

Host: We had never fully considered how undergraduates perceived the different disciplines on Grounds. For instance, which of your friends ‘works’ the hardest, in your opinion? If you had to swap assignments with someone else for a week, who would you want it to be? At the same time, how much do we actually know about a major before we declare? What about majors that we consciously don’t choose ourselves? We talked to students about their experiences to see if certain perceptions match reality.

### **Interview with Jason Borst**

Host: As a Computer Science major myself, I’ve always imagined the STEM disciplines to be filled with exhausted students unable to devote time to anything other than their studies. However, asking others about their experiences quickly challenged my assumptions.

Jason: I think feelings isn’t something I would normally think about towards my major, but I’ll give it my best try. I would say overall, I’m content with cognitive science. I think the word I would use is relief.

Host: Jason is a fourth-year student at UVA studying Cognitive Science with a concentration in Neuroscience on the pre-med track.

Jason: And eventually I decided on cognitive science because I felt like it was the best major to ask the question of what a mind really is. And I liked that it took an interdisciplinary approach to understanding that.

Host: Jason is one of the liveliest individuals I know. He’s quick to crack a joke and loves hanging out with friends or playing games when he needs a break from his rigorous studies. But despite pursuing a major he’s genuinely passionate about, Jason finds himself swamped with an overwhelming workload. Between school, research, extracurricular activities, and studying for the MCAT– an exam critical for Medical School admission– he struggles to stay afloat in a never-ending sea of responsibilities, commitments, and homework.

Host: We asked him how he felt about his studies and his course load throughout his four years at UVA.

Jason: I think with the busyness of my schedule, with the rigorous course load of some of these premed classes, the ability to take classes that I want to take in a major that I’m passionate about makes it a lot easier for me to have a balanced schedule. So when I take things like organic chemistry, things like cell biology. I have the fun classes that I’m interested in, that I want to take, and that can help me pursue my career as well as have a college that I can remember that was meaningful.

Host: He goes on to talk about the need to impress and the pressure placed on people’s shoulders because of the pre-med track. This notion stems from the unfortunate reality that academics at UVA are laced with competition, with students vying for a slight edge on an exam curve or battling for a spot at a top medical school.

Jason: Yeah, there's a lot of stress that comes from the premed field. I would say number one is just the competitiveness of going into that field. It could be 100 students applying to one school and then they only take five. So, yeah, there's a lot of pressure to do well to maintain that GPA, to do well on that MCAT score, have the prerequisites that all the schools are looking for, while also demonstrating that this is something you're serious about with clinical experience, volunteering, EMT research, getting a publication, you name it. So, yeah, just putting that on top of all the classes and all the busyness of a college student, it's a lot of work and I think that can definitely play a toll on people's mental health.

*[ Catchy marimba jingle ]*

Host: The real challenge in STEM at UVA isn't just the coursework, but balancing it with extracurriculars, club commitments, research, socializing, and personal downtime, which can ironically affect your GPA despite making you a well-rounded student.

### **Interview with Joe Kratz**

Host: When I think of students in the humanities, I imagine a more flexible, tailored lifestyle- writing papers, and utilizing art to engage with subject matter closely aligned with their personal interests. I think of nuanced grade breakdowns and Socratic seminars, where students can 'succeed' by best arguing their point or explaining the depth of a Shakespeare play. Joe Kratz, a fourth-year student, explained that the humanities at UVA come with invisible layers that contribute to a stressful and demanding academic path.

Joe: I've always known that public service is what I wanted to do. I grew up outside of DC. My mom is a teacher, my dad volunteered my whole life. My whole family just growing up outside of DC. Public service was always something that just felt like the next step. The idea that if you can serve, you should.

Host: Joe is one of many UVA students majoring in Political Philosophy, Policy, and Law, commonly referred to as PPL. However, his journey in coming to study at UVA is unique, shaped in part by his mental health. Initially, Joe planned on attending West Point for college as a way to fast-track a career in public service. He had even received a letter from West Point stating that they had a spot for him. Unfortunately, his college journey took an unexpected turn.

Joe: I think that that was a moment of a lot of growth for me cause it was initially incredibly frustrating. I got my recommendation from my senator, I got a letter from West Point saying that they had a spot for me, they were just waiting on final pieces of paperwork. I was in, I was going to West Point. And then I got a medical disqualification because I had seen a therapist in high school. And so, because I had seen a therapist in high school and basically admitted to West Point that I had dealt with anxiety throughout my entire life, they were like you can't come to West Point.

Host: At the same time Joe was applying for college, the Trump-Ukraine hearings were happening and at the top was an American diplomat in Ukraine that had attended West Point. This was a figure Joe looked up to, but after his medical disqualification, he found himself frustrated and dealing with new levels of anxiety.

Joe: I remember I got a call from my contact and he was like hey imma shoot straight with you like this is what happened, and I remember crying. I was at high school late, working on the school newspaper, and so I got the call. And I think it took me a while to come to terms with that like, basically that like in taking care of myself I had missed out on an opportunity.

Host: Joe brings a unique perspective as a UVA student, coming into this school with a keen understanding of how his mental health impacts his academics. I asked him how his academic work here affects his mental health and stress levels.

Joe: This is going to be a very therapized answer from someone who has gone to years of therapy, I think that my anxiety, which I think comes from other places, latches onto my nerves or my stresses about academics. I think in some ways, academics accentuates my anxieties or offers me a sight for me to be anxious about something, but I don't think that the academics themselves are the core underlying value there.

Host: Joe credits his perspective to regularly attending therapy throughout high school and college. Although Politics is a stressful field, especially in a college setting where students often compete with each other for internships and leadership roles, Joe explains that his anxiety comes from himself as much as it does from others:

Joe: When you deal in politics and policy, for one you have to deal with a lot of really large outspoken characters and personalities, and I think that that in a lot of ways sets up a really clear people to compare yourself to. Which I think for many people, myself included, offers again another site to be anxious about. You know, x person got this very outspoken internship on the hill or this person is doing this work or recognized by so and so. And then I think especially when it comes down to it, like if you run for a political position and I think that a lot of politics student at UVA tend to run for more student leadership positions than I think non humanities students do.

*[ Crunchy guitar chords ]*

Host: While those studying humanities do have more flexibility in choosing their career paths, this doesn't necessarily lead to a decrease in stress. As we've seen from Joe's experience as a PPL major, stress and anxiety within the humanities can come from grades and deadlines as much as it can from comparing yourself to more successful students.

*[ Crunchy guitar chords ]*

## **Interview with Maddie McCollum**

Host: For our last interview, we dove into the McIntire School of commerce, referred to by its attendees as the “Comm School.” UVA itself is already perceived as one of the best schools in Virginia, but with its own application process, a low acceptance rate, and specific student requirements, being a student in commerce brings its own set of challenges, largely influenced by the perceived prestige of the school.

Host: Students in the Comm School often get a bad rep within our school’s community. I’ll admit, I’ve held the belief that those in Comm can forget the World exists outside of their building. I have often thought that undergraduate business degrees are ‘easier’ than the rest, and often those undergrads think too highly of the academic rigor they face.

Host: However, we learned about a new side of the Comm school when we talked to Maddie McCollum, a fourth-year commerce student concentrating in marketing and management about her decision to pursue commerce.

Maddie: Well, I think I’ve always been drawn to create a field, but I knew I needed to do it in a business setting to make it more strategic. So I needed an area that blended both creativity and strategy, and marketing was just the perfect fit for me. But outside of that, management is good just for learning about people and how organizations function and how to make them more efficient.

Host: Despite Maddie’s take on her major remaining relatively positive, after talking to others in the comm school, we found that the perceived status and prestige can fuel an “imposter syndrome.” Whether conscious or unconscious, students feel pressured to do certain things in order to belong. This feeling carries beyond academics, spreading into extracurriculars as well.

Maddie: When you’re in the comm school, it’s very like, everyone that you talk to is on the exec leadership of some prestigious club. It’s crazy. I didn’t even know that there were so many positions out there. And if you’re not on one of those, you’re running a startup or developing an app or volunteering or whatever. For applying, they’re super, super important because, well, I tell everyone that I mentor for getting into the comm school, you have to be involved in one club that you’re really passionate about. Whether it’s consulting or finance, volunteering, whatever, you have to be involved in one to even have your application be looked at.

Host: In this culture of constant comparison and a hyper-awareness of the impact your choices can have on your future, it’s easy to let your decisions be guided by what you believe will impress your future bosses and supervisors. Sadly, students often prioritize activities that seem impressive on paper, sacrificing their mental well-being and personal interests in the process.

Maddie: Looking back on last year, I had to do this gen ed program essentially where you go through all these crazy classes and it's all in one, it's super overwhelming and there's an undercurrent of group projects and they kind of made it like a life or death situation, which I thought was ridiculous because like, why do you need to have this life or death mentality when it's just transact and commerce?

Host: What Maddie's talking about is the ICE program. The Comm school requires third-year students to go through a rigorous program that, as Maddie put it, seems much more intense than it needs to be. This extreme perspective and overwhelming focus on the curriculum only intensifies the pressure to succeed- and the fear of failure that feeds into students' anxieties.

Maddie: Comm has a very specific individual within the CAPS program that knows all of the acronyms in the Com School and is only counseling and psychological services. So, we have one counselor who's dedicated to Com students, who knows all the acronyms, and only sees Com students. Would that raise a red flag in you? Yeah, probably. It's in the stall seat journal. They're like, go see our CAPS counselor, which is like, I think that's indicative of the culture.

Host: As Maddie implies, the Comm school fosters a culture of immense pressure that leads to anxiety and a decline in mental well-being. Whether it's triggered by academic pressure or social expectations, the perceived prestige and competitiveness of the school is something that takes a toll on mental health. Before speaking with Maddie, I had never realized just how difficult Commerce could be, and was shocked at the stress experienced by so many in the school.

*[ Reflective arpeggio ]*

## **Conclusion**

Host: My co-producers and I sat down to talk about this experience of interviewing our peers, and we reflected on how our own conscious and unconscious perceptions have changed.

Christina: What I was gonna say for Jason's is that my perception before was like really stressful, bunch of stuff to do, if you choose a major that you're passionate about and it doesn't necessarily have to be like biology, then you can actually enjoy it. And then I guess another thing that I found interesting is like you're required to do all these extracurriculars and like all these things, but then ultimately it helps you become more well rounded. I just thought that was interesting because like amongst all the stressful things, you're still able to find a way to manage that and enjoy it I guess.

Host: Yeah, I kinda agree with that. I was more surprised with Jason especially as someone who's in STEM. I was kinda a little surprised when he mentioned being able to take breaks. And I feel like a prominent thing with

him at least was being able to balance his extracurriculars and things like that even though it was a struggle. I just always have this stereotype of e-school students being totally focused on work.

Kate: I was most surprised with the comm. Because we interviewed so many people and I did a lot of the comm interviews, and that experience can just really vary. Like some people, and I think it varies a lot on like how you choose to approach it. I found that the people that we interviewed that were really really bought into it were definitely a lot more stressed out and they were a lot more stressed out about perception than necessarily their coursework. But the people who we talked to who could sort of step back and be like “it’s silly,” were the people that were both doing well in their own perspective and were also happy. So I think that that range was surprising because I thought, I think we all went into it kind of thinking that people in each of these disciplines are kind of one mindset, all or nothing, but it’s really about the individual approach that sort of decides how they’re gonna feel and how it’s going to affect them mentally.

Host: Yeah I also kind of wanted to point out the emphasis of the stress put on commerce student because of the reputation UVA has. At least for me personally, I don’t have many friends majoring in commerce, so most of my friends that are majoring in business are from other schools. I was kind of surprised with listening through the commerce interviews of just how stressful it was. At least compared to the experiences of my friends, they definitely do not have this level of stress in their business schools that commerce students do.

Greg: Yeah I think one interesting thing about comm is that they actually work with companies. Like I know this semester, a lot of the third and fourth years are going through their pitch ideas to companies that have paid McIntire a lot of money to come up with a solution for them. And I think that is a very unique experience that students put a lot of effort into that, like just trying to put out your best work for these companies that will actually use these applications in real life. So I think that that just puts a little more pressure on you than just like a paper, where it’s like a number grade. Like these are actually going to affect individual people but through their business.

Host: This episode goes beyond class discussions. It delves into our personal experiences at UVA, how we manage stress, and the dynamics of our college community. Jason, Joe, and Maddie’s experiences underline the varied effects of university life’s stress and the importance of support and balance. The key message? Empathy and understanding are crucial. Every major, from biology to studio art, brings unique challenges. Let’s focus on supporting our passions and being there for others in their journey.

## **Outro**

*[Fade U OK UVA? theme song]*

Host: This podcast was produced by Kate Newton, Greg Cho, Christina Liu, and Nour Goulmamine as part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA. A full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript. Thanks for listening!

## **Works Cited**

"Greyleaf Willow" *Greyleaf Willow - Blue Dot Session - Free Music Archive*

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Blue\\_Dot\\_Sessions/Resolute/Greyleaf\\_Willow/](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Blue_Dot_Sessions/Resolute/Greyleaf_Willow/)

Makiah Beats. "Deep End." 2022. Free Music Archive.

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Makiah\\_Beats/deep-end/](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Makiah_Beats/deep-end/)

"October 21st 2020 Sunset by audiomirage" *Freesound*,

<https://freesound.org/people/audiomirage/sounds/540705/>

"Wondrous 1L61 by Setuniman" *Freesound*,

<https://freesound.org/people/Setuniman/sounds/269275/>