

State of the Academy

an acronym special edition

Our last edition of the year has arrived! World Outlook would like to thank everyone who has contributed to The State of the Academy. Read on about some of the most pressing issues here at IMSA, per popular demand of our community.

in this issue:
Mental Health
Grade Deflation
Residential Life
Sleep Deprivation

With an especially successful Mental Health Initiative (MHI) Week planned by Student Council this year, awareness on mental health has increased on campus. In fact, most people seem to believe that IMSA gets better about mental health every year, but there is no doubt the issue remains prevalent.

“I think it’s a big issue everywhere, especially among high school students,” said Anne Joseph, the Student Health Services Coordinator. And as one alum put it, “There are little to no resources for students with mental health problems...less stress needs to be put on grades and more needs to be put on sleep and healthy habits.”

Most of Student Council’s efforts to combat the issue revolve around their implementation of MHI week, a week devoted to emphasizing resources for help and stress management in order to increase awareness on campus. The goal of the week is to “provide education, resources and awareness to the IMSA community on mental health topics, as well as reduce mental health stigma.”

“[MHI week] has gotten better...Student Council has made events better, improved upon it,” said Tommy Nguyen, 1507 Hall Senator. He mentioned that Student Council would “appreciate more brainstorming, crowdsourcing ideas,” to make the week even more effective.

But on a regular basis? Simply talking to an RC or school counselor can be beneficial for students struggling with their mental health. “We need to understand what others go through, and ask for help and know what the resources are,” said Kevin Lim, a 1507 RC. “It’s not a sign of weakness to talk to people, including RCs; we’re always here to help you guys.”

Of course, some people have also said that to further increase awareness about the issue, MHI should be made a year-long event. School counselor Karen Schwartz believes that “doing more small things that could be more consistent throughout the year could be more effective in keeping people aware of the mental health problems on campus and improving the situation overall.” Schwartz also “would really encourage students to feel comfortable asking for help.”

Student Life, meanwhile, has introduced the “Stress Mod,” allowing students to relax for a period

by skipping a class they usually have. Overall, this has been a beneficial addition for students with mental health struggles, but Nguyen believes they are not for everyone.

“I think that stress mods are useful for a certain kind of IMSA student. Not everyone needs to take one, but it’s a very useful resource to have for some people,” he said. “As long as everyone knows it, though, that’s good enough.”

Schwartz would approximate that there are about “1500 cases of mental health” on campus each year. But with increased awareness among both students and staff, almost everyone at the academy is involved in improving mental health. Nadia Miskowiec, a French teacher, suggested that just a few environmental changes might help: some more color on the walls, adding windows, or even gardening.

“We could set up a project of indoor gardening (living walls, aquaponics, etc.) which would both be interesting for grand challenges (feeding more people healthier foods, responsible agriculture etc.) and also for the general environment of IMSA,” she wrote. “Students could enjoy fresh vegetables and herbs they grew themselves, and plants have been proven to help improve productivity, decrease stress levels and improve air quality among other things...windows would do very similar things.”

Schwartz also believes that little changes will go a long way. She suggests, “From the staff side of it I would say [we should] continually tweak programs that we have in mind, [and] be open to new ideas to see if there’s something else or some other way to help students,” she said. “And [we should have] this community mindset of ‘we’re all in this together.’”



At IMSA, the competition is not so fierce that students fight for a curve. (Cristina Spano)

To anyone outside of the community, IMSA is pitched as an elite, boarding institution, with the mission to “ignite and nurture creative, ethical, scientific minds that advance the human condition.”

IMSA has garnered much acclaim in the past for the success its students achieve and the opportunities it presents to its students. However, in comparison to other elite boarding academies, such as the Phillips Exeter Academy or Deerfield Academy, the argument persists that IMSA gives its students an unnecessary amount of homework, coupled with a harsh grading system and competitive environment.

This argument may be true for some classes, but does not convey the entirety of IMSA. For example, Principal Marie Dahleh says, “IMSA provides students with great freedom, which makes us pretty unique, as students are not limited by requirements and thus can pursue their interests. For example, we do not require that a student take a year of physics or chemistry; only the general expectation regarding the number of science classes exists.”

On the supposed competitiveness, she says, “While the environment at IMSA may be competitive, the need for collaboration is also stressed. Thus, students need to balance their competitive nature with the need to collaborate. Furthermore, students are also supportive of each other as there are peer tutors, and writing center tutors, students who take their own time to help another.”

On the other hand, Amy Keck, the Learning Strategies Coordinator at IMSA, points out that life can still be hard. “IMSA has a fabulous experience, yet is intense,” she says, “Students have come to me in the past regarding issues such as stress, harsh grading, and time management.”

Nevertheless, IMSA students gain skills which will help them thrive at college. Keck says, “The considerate environment at IMSA is partly the reason why students achieve success here, as with our peer tutoring system and supportive residential experience, students are not left to fend for themselves.”

Regarding IMSA's grading system, students comment on IMSA's difficulty level. Julia Husen, the head college counselor at IMSA, says "Colleges are thankful to IMSA as it gives them a grade distribution which indicates that our grading has been pretty consistent and is not inflated. For example, in the class profile of 2017, students received all tiers of grades in each class ranging from C's and D's to A's and B's, signifying that the distribution of grades is varied."

Amy Keck says, "I personally see a B as commendable. Yet to certain students, a B is the end of the world, partly because it is new to them."

Grade deflation is the common accusation, but math teacher Carlo Ordoñez thinks otherwise.

He says, "At IMSA, what we probably see is a lack of inflation rather than active grade deflation, as our grading distribution has been pretty consistent over the years, which I cannot say the same for other institutions."

Dahleh argues for a similar stance, saying, "I do not think IMSA has grade deflation; if anything, it would be a lack of inflation. In the US, the general grade distribution has inflated, which does not match IMSA's environment." She points out she was in the top 10% of her class with a 3.5 GPA in college, but that certainly would not be the case currently.

And as for the college application process, Dahleh says, "We are currently revamping the IMSA profile to better convey to colleges the full IMSA learning experience, as it misses the emphasis on the students' ownership for their own education. In my opinion, colleges need to see how IMSA students step out of their way in pursuit of knowledge, and how they utilize additional intellectual opportunities such as independent studies to satiate their intellectual curiosity."

IMSA certainly grants students a unique opportunity to pursue their own interests with great depth and countless resources. Paula Garrett, a staff member in the Information Research Center, says, "IMSA is very similar to a university; it is astounding how high school students ask such research-oriented questions. And it reminds me of days when I used to work at Fermilab because physicists would come up to me with similar questions."

Ultimately, much of the community believes that IMSA just challenges students to become better versions of themselves.

"I know IMSA is tough, and I am feeling the heat. This year especially," says junior student Dhvanil Popat. "But I also know that in the long run, IMSA will set me up for success due to the skills that I have gained here."



For new IMSA sophomores, internet shut-off and lights-out are sources for struggle. The significantly greater workload and completely new social life are increased by a daily deadline at midnight. When discussing Residential Life, or Res-Life, with students and staff, it seems there are larger disagreements between the two parties about the function of Res-Life and how it should prioritize rule enforcement and support for students. This gap must be resolved to improve the program and life for students.

Area Coordinator (AC) and former Resident Counselor (RC) Rebecca Calvillo says, "Lights out and internet shut off for sophomores was initiated to help not only students transition to living away from home but also ease the minds of parents who are concerned that their students are living away from home and unable to account for their own time." Calvillo brings up an important perspective that is often unconsidered by students: that of parents. When airing grievances about residential restrictions, students rarely consider parents' perspectives on

rules. Staff members, on the other hand, are accountable to parents.

Student Yugan Sakthi ('17) says, "internet shutoff is a terrible idea, as many people have hotspots, and the people that have hotspots tend to be more affluent." That alone is not his biggest issue with the rule. He posits that by instituting such rules, IMSA is telling students they should not be staying up past lights out, in-room, or internet shut-off and still be swamped with work.

Sakthi says, "the job of the institution is to teach students, and, for me at least, it seems like you're punishing students for doing something that's not entirely their fault. If the punishment exists, there should at least be something that supports them in not getting to a point where they must be punished." AC Rebecca Calvillo agreed with this point, but acknowledged that such programs are hard to implement effectively.

There is a fundamental disagreement when it comes to residential rules. AC and former RC Kandyce Baker argues the ultimate responsibility of the RC and



the Res-Life staff at large is the safety and security of students.

Many students, on the other hand, interpret this statement and the roles of the RC as enforcers of the rules rather than counselors. A junior student says, “many RCs that I have had experience with don’t prioritize connecting with students. And although upperclassmen are good for support with a lot of issues, sometimes an adult is needed, and RCs aren’t always available as a first line of support.” Those juniors with extremely supportive RCs point them out as being and it invaluable assets in their most stressful time.

Varying levels of commitment to student engagement in RCs is mirrored by differing levels of strictness in rule enforcement. This inconsistency is another common complaint among students. On this subject, Kandyce Baker described it in short and simple terms, saying, “It’s hard to get 28 people to do the same thing, but we are continuing to do our best to keep each other accountable.”

Rule enforcement and Res-Life entails a variety of punishments, specifically suspensions. AC Kandyce Baker praises the Student Handbook for its specificity, saying, “when a student does a transgression [of the rules], they can look at the handbook to understand potential consequences.” Often, those consequences involve suspension, where students and staff have surprisingly similar ideas and opinions, at least at a conceptual level.

When asked if suspensions are doled out too frequently at IMSA, Baker says, “there are certain things that I think warrant a suspension, especially when it comes to safety concerned.” She added a warning, saying, “I think it’s important not to use specific cases, because it’s hard to make a judgement if you’re not involved in the conversations that happen. Instead, you should look at what the policy states.”

She continued, saying, “If you look at how discipline is moving across the country, you see a more restorative justice approach. IMSA is taking that approach too. The conversations that are happening right now are around restorative justice.” She was not able to offer specific details on how restorative justice can be implemented at IMSA. AC Rebecca Calvillo echoes these sentiments, saying, “I see the importance of issuing consequences for the rules of a society not being met, especially in a community like this. I also think there is a push in education right now to implement more educational, restorative approaches for all students who do not meet those

Student Yugan Sakthi (’17), however, completely rejects the idea of suspensions. He says, “I feel like the idea of suspension is just completely backwards. No matter what the reason is behind the suspensions, you’re harming their education to do better, which doesn’t make sense to me.” He agrees with the idea of restorative justice, just as staff members do. He says, “The punishment should fit the crime in some way.” He offers an example, and says, “if you get busted for drugs in your room, they take you away from two weeks of school. If, for instance, you were forced to become a day student, that would still make more sense [than removal from academics].”

The ultimate responsibility of the RC... is the safety and security of students.

The academy must address the dichotomy between staff who prioritize student safety through rule enforcement and students who desire greater levels of support and education. Restorative justice is a common desire among many involved in Res-Life at IMSA, and should be further pursued.

When asked what these individuals appreciate most about IMSA, their responses were a variation on being surrounded by driven, intellectual, passionate individuals. Continuing to pursue improvement in Res-Life is an endeavor in support of this unique community, and must thus be undertaken with great haste and seriousness.

Even if it's just short of 2 am, many IMSA students might still find "Active Now (103)" on their Messenger apps. So what are we all up for, exactly?

IMSA science faculty member Sarah O'Leary-Driscoll thinks that student sleep deprivation is a consistent problem. "You're all like 'I need to decompress', but you're not done working until like midnight, so your decompression time is 'I'm going to marathon Netflix until 3 in the morning,'" she says. "I know how that works. I don't think it's unexpected."

Many students point to the rigor of IMSA's curriculum as the major cause, but social aspects seem to play a significant role as well. IMSA counselor Kevin Kusy agrees that the largest complaint he hears from students is coursework, but also points out that "students here take on a lot of responsibilities, whether that is academic things, or social things."

Meanwhile, 1506 Resident Counselor (RC) Elizabeth Madigan attributes sleep deprivation mainly to extracurricular activities.

"It's the clubs," she says. "Clubs, teams, and so on...people are either overinvolved or over-social. And it's not just an IMSA culture thing, it's like an American culture thing."

Yet the true state of the average IMSA student's sleep experience remains up for debate. While students like Evan Sun ('17) answer "Absolutely!" to the sleep deprivation question, Kusy believes the opposite.

"I don't think a majority of the students are sleep deprived," Kusy says. "I think there are some students who choose to stay up late for, whether it's academics or personal things, but I don't think it's a majority of students."

On the other hand, physics teacher Dr. Peter J. Dong thinks the level of student sleep deprivation is highly dependent on the time of year.

"Students? Majority? Probably," he says, "Right now, probably. I mean, if you asked me in September, it'd be different. It's probably the worst in May. December is bad too."

From her experience, Madigan expects that students sleep about four to six hours a night; Ashritha Karuturi ('18) approximates five to six as "a good average - I know it's mine." But the Moving and

Learning class here at IMSA, a sophomore year requirement, teaches nine and a quarter hours as the minimum. And it's no surprise that getting a good night's sleep has serious benefits.

From the biological basis, Harvard Medical School's Division of Sleep Medicine writes that "many of the major restorative functions in the body like muscle growth, tissue repair, protein synthesis, and growth hormone release occur mostly, or in some cases only, during sleep." There's also "substance S, a byproduct of energy production that cells release into the blood throughout waking hours," and without sleep, "it looks like there's a toxic substance building up in you, where the more you're awake, the more you see this stuff floating around the bloodstream, and the only way to get rid of it is to sleep."

Furthermore, mood swings, amplified struggles with mental health, and an overall decrease in performance are side effects of sleep deprivation. In fact, it's even been used a torture technique; Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the author of *The Gulag Archipelago*, writes that "sleeplessness befogs the reason, undermines the will." Johns Hopkins Medicine reports side effects of "cravings for sweet, salty and starchy foods," plus a 50% higher risk for obesity for those who get less than 5 hours a night.

"I feel like, just from my own observation, when you hit a certain point, you avoid doing your work because your sleeplessness is affecting your behavior, and tends to cause you to avoid doing work or to easily spring on distractions, almost deliberately," says Dr. Dong. "I wouldn't say it's not your fault, but it's difficult to control. And it often leads people to perform sometimes destructive behaviors, like drug abuse, but sometimes just stupid behaviors, like large amounts of playing video games."

Karuturi believes sleeping more might make us all better students, and probably better people as well. "[Sleep deprivation] makes people more irritable and stressed," she says. "Its effect on people can cause you to push people away and hurt your relationships. We would all definitely feel better if we slept more; I'm working on it because honestly a good night of sleep makes all the difference, socially and academically."

And unfortunately, the trade-off between sleep and work doesn't seem to weigh heavily in students'

favor anyways. Kusy says that based on his conversations with both students and staff, those that are successful here are the ones who get sleep.

“Usually students who are not getting sleep or have other things going on in their lives, those are usually the ones who are challenged more, whether it’s with time management or stress things or personal issues,” he says. “But I think those who do budget well, and are able to put everything together well, usually are getting a fair amount of sleep.”

Dong adds, “I know some people who have done very well college wise and have gotten plenty of sleep.” And as a senior, Sun definitely doesn’t see sleep deprivation as the prerequisite to success.

“If you think that hard courses, athletics, and extracurriculars are the path to success, you can focus your time on maintaining all of those,” he says, “But that doesn’t require you to be sleep deprived. I think you’ll need to sacrifice a lot and find a healthy balance of the three, but ‘successful’ doesn’t equate overloading yourself with endless things to do.”

So whether student sleep deprivation is widespread or not, sleeping more is a desirable goal. Happily, the IMSA community seems to have lots of solutions in mind.

“There is one camp of teachers and administrators that believe that the solution is to control your time more, for us to control your time first,” Dong explains. “Others say some combination of either it’s futile to try to control kids’ health, they will work a way around it, or that it’s detrimental to them.”

O’Leary offers set study hours as a possibility. “One of the things we’ve talked about is really to have some quiet hours, at least for study time, so that people can be more productive and then have more social - balance the social life,” she says.

Madigan, for one, suspects stricter guidelines would only cause student backlash.

“From the students, I think that the student body would absolutely revolt if we made it like, a 9 pm in hall versus 10 pm in hall during the week,” she says. Instead, Madigan advocates for a shift in attitude – help out people who are stretched too thin.

“As a community, I feel like we could support someone saying no better,” she advises. “Some people are like ‘oh, come on, you can make it work.’ But you could be like ‘mmm this really is not a good thing for me,’ and the other person could reply ‘Oh, okay, great! Thanks for letting me know that.’”

English faculty member Dr. Adam Kotlarczyk would really like to see the students do something about the situation. He says that he’d prefer “a student led push to make sleep a priority.”

“I know for a fact that there’s a couple of students here who prioritize sleep,” says Kotlarczyk. “A student led initiative would be way more effective than old people telling you, ‘this is what you have to do.’” Sun agrees that students need to come together, pointing out that instant animosity against changes is rather detrimental to finding solutions.

“I think the onus for improving our sleep culture lies on the students and the reception for change. Students need to get together as a community and say ‘look, we want this to change,’” he says. “It seems that with every little change that gets made here, students immediately resort to complaining about it in one form or another. I’m sure there’s not a single group of people on campus that would not be more than willing to contribute to a collaborative campaign against sleep deprivation, but it starts with students being open to conversation and potential changes that may seem restrictive and frustrating at first.”

But maybe there still remains some value in staying up...at least every once in a while?

“Can I add on that IMSA ‘night-life’ is also part of the experience?” Karuturi says. “I’ve had numerous 3 am conversations with my roommate when I probably should have been sleeping and that’s okay. I think IMSA being residential means you get to spend some your nights opening up to people and getting to know people in ways you’d never imagine.”

In fact, she never regrets those nights. Though she does agree that staying up all the time might not be such a great idea.

“It’s also extremely important to take of yourself,” Karuturi says. “I hope everyone finds their balance.”