

Dogs and Degrees: The Impact of Therapy Dogs in Affect Among Working Undergraduate Students

By Kennedy Smye, University of Guelph-Humber

University students today are facing increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional strain. For many, these challenges are made even more complex by balancing academic responsibilities with part-time employment. While campus wellness initiatives such as therapy-dog visits have become more prevalent, most research has treated students in one general group. This has left an important question unanswered: do students who are working while completing their studies benefit in the same way from these supports?

This study set out to address that gap by focusing specifically on employed undergraduate students, a subgroup that often faces additional time pressures, financial stress, and reduced access to traditional mental health services. Participants took part in a brief, unstructured therapy-dog session lasting approximately 5-10 minutes and completed a short questionnaire before and after the interaction to measure changes in mood and emotional state.

The findings were encouraging, even a short interaction with the therapy dogs led to meaningful improvements in how students felt. Overall, positive emotional states increased, while negative emotional states decreased immediately following the session. Importantly, these benefits were consistent regardless of how many hours students worked each week. This suggests that therapy-dog programs are not only effective, but also well-suited for students with demanding schedules.

Looking ahead, this research points to several important opportunities. Expanding therapy-dog programs across campuses, offering sessions at times that accommodate working students, and integrating these initiatives into already existing student wellness services may help reach a wider range of students. Overall, this study reinforces a simple but powerful idea that small moments of connection can make a meaningful differences. Therapy-dog programs offer a practical way to support student well-being, particularly those balancing employment and academics. As student mental health continues to be a growing concern, these programs represent an impactful piece of growth and commitment to student well-being.

Results Tables and PANAS Questionnaire

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Variable	Overall (n = 32)	
	n	%
Gender		
Female	29	90.6
Male	2	6.3
Non-binary/ third gender	1	3.1
Year of Study		
Year 1	5	15.6
Year 2	8	25.0
Year 3	12	37.5
Year 4	6	18.8
Program of Study		
Psychology	15	46.9
Justice Studies	6	18.8
Early Childhood Studies	5	15.6
Kinesiology	5	15.6
Business Administration	1	3.1
Average Weekly Employment Hours		
1-9 hours	9	28.1
10-19 hours	21	65.6
20+ hours	2	6.3

Table 2. Means, standard deviation, minimums, and maximums for PANAS pre and post-session.

Variable	M (SD)	Min	Max
Positive Affect (Pre)	31.22 (8.14)	15	44
Negative Affect (Pre)	19.97 (7.31)	10	41
Positive Affect (Post)	36.59 (8.47)	18	49
Negative Affect (Post)	13.12 (4.15)	10	26

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) Instructions: This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and indicate to what extent you have felt this way before and after the therapy dog session.

Word	Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
Interested	1	2	3	4	5
Distressed	1	2	3	4	5
Excited	1	2	3	4	5
Upset	1	2	3	4	5
Strong	1	2	3	4	5
Guilty	1	2	3	4	5
Scared	1	2	3	4	5
Hostile	1	2	3	4	5
Enthusiastic	1	2	3	4	5
Proud	1	2	3	4	5
Irritable	1	2	3	4	5
Alert	1	2	3	4	5
Ashamed	1	2	3	4	5
Inspired	1	2	3	4	5
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5
Determined	1	2	3	4	5
Attentive	1	2	3	4	5
Jittery	1	2	3	4	5
Active	1	2	3	4	5
Afraid	1	2	3	4	5

Developer: Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063–1070. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063>

There are two subscales of the PANAS:

1. Positive Affect (items 1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, and 19). Higher scores represent higher levels of PA and are associated with pleasurable engagement with the environment.
2. Negative Affect Score (items 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20). Higher scores represent higher levels of NA and reflect a dimension of general distress summarizing a variety of negative states such as anger, guilt, or anxiety.

3. Max points 50 per subscale