

“Comparison and Commencement”

Produced by: Olivia Richine, Eleanor Barzun, Will Peritz, & Nada Bencheikh

[Overlaid sound clips of noise inside a busy restaurant; plates clattering and people chatting]

[Light, atmospheric, contemplative music plays]

Carissa: “I actually had met somebody at a restaurant a couple of weeks ago, and it was a friend of a friend and she introduced her to me, and the first question she asked me was...what’s your GPA and what’s your LSAT? And it’s just questions like that that are really daunting and just really... anxiety inducing”

Host: That was Carissa, a 4th year politics major here at UVA who’s planning on attending law school next fall. Her story pretty much sums up the constant comparison and the competitive atmosphere that can overwhelm UVA students as they prepare to leave campus and embark on their post-grad journey. There's an unspoken expectation that the minute you step off the stage with a diploma in hand, you need to have your entire life figured out.

Host: “Do you think you feel any pressure to not be behind others?”

Carissa: “100% of the time. And that’s probably my biggest insecurity right now is not having something set in stone. The majority of my friends are engineers. And they have all accepted full time jobs in awesome companies, and are making a really great salary. And it's hard to feel like, ‘oh, I'm going to accrue \$250,000 in debt instead over the next three years.’ And so it's sometimes challenging to feel like you're not in the same boat as everybody else.”

Host: Carissa’s just one of many students struggling with feeling behind. Ella, a 4th year pre-med student, shares the same uneasiness about future plans.

Ella: “I live in a house with ten girls and a lot of them are Comm students or Econ majors or Engineering, so most of them know where they're going to be next year, who they're going to be working for, what they're going to be doing, how much money they're going to be making. And I don't really know any of that...so it’s definitely stressful.”

[Light, atmospheric, contemplative music fades out]

Host: It can feel like everyone has landed a prestigious fellowship, received a high-paying job offer, or been accepted to their dream grad school. The constant worrying about keeping up with

or outperforming others can be all-consuming. It's a recipe for poor mental health. So why do 4th years at UVA entangle their self-worth with grades, test scores, and job prospects? To the point where students like Carissa feel self-doubt at what's supposed to be a fun dinner with friends? Why is the UVA college experience distilled down to a GPA count or LSAT record? Because at the end of the day, we all know, it's so much more than that.

[Series theme song: "Deep End" by Makaih Beats plays]

Host: Welcome to U OK UVA?, a student produced podcast about mental health and wellness at the University of Virginia. I'm your host, Olivia Richine, and in this episode, we'll be diving into some of these questions, and more, about the common feelings of comparison and competitiveness that fourth-year UVA students experience, especially as they begin making future plans for their lives after graduation.

["Deep End" by Makaih Beats fades out]

Host: Before jumping in, let's talk numbers. According to a 2021 Healthy Minds Study Survey, stress levels among college students have been steadily on the rise. Across more than 133 campuses in the U.S, 44% of college students reported symptoms of depression while 37% reported anxiety disorders. UVA was one of the campuses involved in this study. With high unemployment rates and the soaring cost of living, it's no wonder college seniors in particular might feel anxious and depressed. The cost of tuition has also grown, leaving students with mounting current or future debt as they approach graduation. This financial burden, coupled with a competitive job market, only adds to the stress. Devin, a 4th year McIntire Commerce student, is navigating this uncertain post-graduation landscape....trying to snag a job in an already-saturated market

Devin: "I had a summer internship at a big bank this past summer, and kind of realized it wasn't the best fit for me and what I want to go do after I graduate. So right now, I'm kind of exploring and doing a lot of networking. I've been looking into consulting and looking into people who work in hospitality management, as well as marketing roles...advertising. So a lot of informational chats. And it can be stressful, because those usually don't really go anywhere, especially in this economy right now."

Host: The consulting market that Devin mentioned is one of the most chaotic and competitive fields in the world. Indeed.com lists it as number 7 on their list of "21 of the most competitive jobs right now." UVA students seem driven to pursue extremely cut-throat and lucrative career paths like this, fueled by the expectation to excel. But for many prestigious companies, you can't expect a job simply from applying. You have to be "on their radar". And getting on their radar

means networking. Whether it be LinkedIn messaging recruiters, cold call emailing alumni, or participating in one of the most stressful events at UVA: Career Fairs.

Alex: “I’m a marketing student assistant at UVA in the career center. Basically a job fair. A whole bunch of different employers from all different industries will come together, usually at a huge convention center. Basically, it's a way for students to be able to network with different companies that they might potentially be interested in...learn more about the companies that they would like to work for.”

Host: After speaking with some 4th years about their struggles with the recruiting process, I decided to visit a job fair for myself, to get a sense of the environment.

[Sound clips of background noise inside the UVA Career Fair]

Host: I would describe it as a LinkedIn feed in the flesh. The echoing of student’s rehearsing elevator-pitches, the shuffling of resumes, and the hum of nervous energy hung in the air. I felt underdressed, even though I had no intention of speaking to any recruiters. I was surrounded by packs of students gathered around company booths, adjusting their name tags and fidgeting with their button-down shirts. It felt like a battleground for 4th years attempting to secure their future. A fight to see who could stand out the most. It was impossible to interview anyone inside, so I lingered outside the doors for a while, hoping to gain insight into students' opinions and emotions after leaving the event. The first thing I noticed was that not everyone was in the mood for a chat. Some students, eyes wide with panic, rushed past me, glancing at their watches as they headed to a class they may have already been late for. I was also greeted with a lot of polite “no’s” from students who just sat on the floor, head down, looking like they ran out of energy for conversations with strangers. Thankfully, I was able to have the chance to speak to a couple of 4th year students who attended the fair.

Host: “How would you describe the atmosphere inside the event?”

Student Interviewee 1: “I think it's very stressful. And I feel like it’s very competitive as well. Like, some people were like, cutting me in line and kind of trying to get to the front to talk to the recruiter. So I think very stressful. Competitive.”

Student Interviewee 2: “I've definitely come in in the past, not really having a clear path of who I wanted to talk to anything. And it's super overwhelming and stressful. And then you leave feeling like, I spent all that time standing there...what did I gain from that?”

Student Interviewee 3: “I think the competition is really high. Like, I've waited in the line for 20 minutes just to have a 5 minute—maybe not even a 5 minute—talk with a recruiter or a current

employee. Because everyone just kind of jumps in and wants to get their name out there. And I feel like they're cutthroat for no reason.”

Host: Everyone seems to be sacrificing time and energy, for no real outcome besides a lower self esteem. The UVA career fair feels like a microcosm of the transition from student life to the real world, where anxiety mingles with ambition, and the path ahead is unpredictable. I also asked about how the job application process was going for some of the 4th years I interviewed.

Host: “ How many jobs would you say you’ve applied to so far?”

Student Interviewee 4: “ I think 30 plus”

Student Interviewee 5: “Like 30 or 40”

Student Interviewee 6: “ Probably like 50”

[Sound clip of computer keyboard typing]

Student Interviewee 7: “I would say about 60 to 70 right now”

[Sound clip of computer keyboard typing fades out]

[Melancholy piano music plays]

Host: Imagine filling out 50 plus applications. Writing cover letter after cover letter. And getting all the right references. More often than not, these efforts don’t lead to a job offer.

[Overlaid sound clips of Host reading aloud a slew of rejection letters]

Host: These rejections can really hurt.

[Melancholy piano music plays fades out]

Host: I actually ran into a friend of mine outside the UVA job fair. He’s a 4th year commerce student who is still searching for work post-grad. When I first asked him about how he felt about the career fair, this is what he said:

Student Interviewee 8: “It's a little stressful at first, but when you kind of move around, get to meet people and talk to other students who are kind of in the same boat as you, it's not that bad. And it gets pretty entertaining and engaging.”

Host: But when I turned off the recording mic, his posture relaxed and he started explaining how he really felt about these kinds of recruiting events. I turned the mic back on and told him to:

Host: “Answer completely honestly, right now.”

Student Interviewee 8: “I mean yeah it does kind of suck. I thought this was for the career fair.”

Host: “No, it's not.”

Student Interviewee 8: “So basically, I go to a lot of these and I get interviews for the first, second, and third rounds. You know, even when I get to the end stage, I've been denied a lot recently. So that's been really difficult. And basically, I have to start from square one today.”

Host: When I asked him to explain more in-depth about the vibes of the career fair, he said:

Student Interviewee 8: “You barely get any facetime with these companies. Like, look around. Some of the companies are really prestigious, and you want to talk to those people. But like, there's no availability there. There are already students flocking around there. It's difficult in that sense I would say”

Host: I did take a look around, and I didn't love what I saw. I was glad when it came time to get out of there.

[Sorrowful music with cello plays]

Host: The job search is just one of the many post graduate paths that fourth year students can find themselves in. No matter what you choose to do after UVA, everyone is dealing with the pressure to measure up to their peers. My conversations with Ella about her experience with comparison at UVA highlights this.

Ella: “So I started volunteering at a hospital. And I had my training shift. I don't know why I wasn't really thinking about this, but one of my friends works in the hospital as a scribe. And so I went in to volunteer. And I saw her, working as a scribe, and I don't know, it just made me feel kind of like I was behind, or I wasn't doing the right things, or that she was doing something better than me. So that definitely was kind of a weird experience because in my head when I went to volunteer, I was like ‘Oh, I'm doing this, I'm gonna volunteer in the hospital. Like, that's gonna look great on my application.’ But then I kind of went in, I was like, ‘Oh my God, other people are doing other things that might look better on their applications.’”

Host: Devin, who we spoke to earlier, describes how not having an exact plan laid out ahead of her can feel a lot like total failure.

Devin: “I think that a lot of kids in Comm or in other parts of UVA, in general, are just super competitive. We all worked really, really hard to get here to this college in the first place. And then it's just this constant climbing up this ladder to reach for something else. And if you don't quite have it figured out, it's kind of like you're doing something wrong.”

[Sorrowful music with cello plays]

Host: Although the challenge of figuring out your path after college can be extremely stressful, it's also important to take a step back and look at it from a more positive perspective. Take Devin's professor's words as an example:

[Slightly hopeful music plays]

Devin: “My professor actually told me to stop calling it a crisis. And he said, you need to reframe how you think about this entire thing. It's not a crisis. This is normal. You are now looking at entering an industry that maybe doesn't recruit as early as investment banking, or consulting or these finance jobs that ultimately didn't make you happy. And now you just need to rework how you're looking at the world and you're not doing anything wrong. You're not having a crisis by any means.”

Host: It's helpful to re-frame this stress as an important phase of self-discovery...as something that might actually be productive in the grand scheme of things. The pressure to have a clear, well-defined trajectory can be intense. It's easy to feel isolated at UVA in the face of relentless competition. However, the truth is that each and every one of us feels like we don't have all the answers. As a fourth-year student myself, one of the reasons I created this podcast is to foster a sense of shared experience among UVA students. I want to help them realize that they're not alone in navigating stress and anxiety about the future. I hope hearing from others who are going through similar challenges fosters a more supportive culture here. I hope it moves us further away from all the comparison and competition. Personally, I want to take Carissa's following advice to heart in these next few months:

Carissa: “While focusing on applying to law school is great and necessary, I think it's also important to take breaks and be surrounded by the people that I love being around because this is my final year here. And probably the last time we'll all be in the same place. So I think taking the time to be with the people you care about is as important too.”

[Sound clip of friends laughing and talking]

Host: Graduating from college marks the end of an era, and it's vital to savor these moments with the friends and community members who matter most. Post-graduation uncertainty, after all, is just a temporary chapter. Hopefully, it's the friendships and relationships we forge here on grounds that will be long-lasting.

["Deep End" by Makaih Beats plays]

Host: This podcast was produced by Olivia Richine, Eleanor Barzun, Will Peritz, and Nada Bencheikh 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.

["Deep End" by Makaih Beats fades out]

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