

## Work Hard, Play Hard Transcript

### Opening

Meghana: “I would say it’s, and I feel like this is a pretty commonly known thing, but it’s very competitive”

Host: Pristine Lawn, beautiful architecture, vibrant students; all of these are things that come to mind when picturing the University of Virginia. However, despite the beauty and acclaim surrounding the University, not everything is as picture perfect as it may seem. Beneath the brochure-worthy views, students struggle in an academic environment that pits them against their peers, produces feelings of isolation, and demands excellence each and every day. A common sentiment here on Grounds is that UVA students “Work Hard, Play Hard”. It’s an idea that colors students’ understanding of what success looks like.

Host: But should we have to push ourselves to the limit every day in order to experience relaxation and fun? And what happens to students’ well-being when this “work hard play hard” attitude is the norm?

Host: In multiple rankings, UVA has appeared in the top 10 universities with the most depressed student body. Appearing at number six in the Humans of University Report and number nine in the American News Report. Alarming statistics, though anything but surprising.

Host: Welcome to U OK UVA?, a student-produced podcast about mental health and wellness at the University of Virginia. I’m your host, Paolo Vicencio and in this episode, we will be discussing what it is about UVA that results in mental health problems within its community and what contributes to the toxic culture here.

*[Fade theme song]*

*[Audio clips of college students playing outside]*

### Academic Culture

#### Interview with Meghana

Meghana: “I’m Meghana, I’m a 4th year psych major, I’m graduating this December and I transferred from the University of Pittsburgh”

Host: In her days at the University of Pittsburgh, Meghana remembers making spontaneous plans with her friends to go enjoy the outdoors at a moments notice. She remembers that academic competition was left in the classroom, and that students felt free to take part in more light-hearted enjoyments like throwing around a frisbee, having a picnic on campus, or just relaxing outside.

Host: Meghana is one of roughly 600 transfer students here at UVA. Transferring her second year, she came ready to embrace UVA's culture - one that is known to have historical quirks and charm - but found that there was a side of UVA, and of its students, that is not advertised at welcome week.

Host: In the fall of 2021, Meghana was enrolled in Biochem, a notorious weed-out class for students on the premed track.

Meghana: "We were doing worksheets and we were trying to get the answers to the worksheets to turn them in. There were certain people that just wouldn't, no matter whatever you asked them, would not be willing to help out with explaining a problem."

Host: Students feel alone sometimes. Especially in classes that are designed to foster "healthy" competition, there's a sense of heightened imposter syndrome— it's alienating. You're pitted against your peers, sorry, your competitors, and there's no longer the sense of community that UVA is supposedly so well known for. Obviously, we can't make generalizations based on one story, but it makes you think: if students are unwilling to do something as simple as explain a problem to their peers, what does that say about our culture as a whole?

Meghana: "It just kind of shocked me how little some people are willing to give and I don't know exactly why, because it's you know just a little worksheet on a discussion, but I don't know, I guess that was kind of a common thing where some people just, you know, you knew, you knew you could never go to them for help and it was a thing."

Host: But to place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the students would be irrational at best and harmful at worst. There is a deep system of honor codes and policies forged by the administration and staff that instigate this environment.

*[Calm transition]*

### **Interview with Maya**

Host: Maya is a 4th year computer science student in the school of engineering currently working on her capstone project.

Maya: "I think one of the most important things with CS or one of the things, one of the things that professors really try to emphasize is the no collaboration policy unless they specifically say so. So like if there's any aspect of a similarity in code, there's a lot of consequences and the consequences can be really bad, so that really promotes like your own work which is beneficial in some ways, but in other ways it can be really negative because you kind of feel like you're on your own."

Maya: “If you’ve had experiences with internships, you know that like internships are completely different from school life. You are working within a team and you are discussing projects with them...and that’s how the real world would be. So coming back to the school life where you’re super isolated, and, if you are trying to get help from someone, you feel ostracized and like you’re going to get a bad grade or you might even be expelled or something.”

Host: Having interned at multiple fortune 500 companies over the past couple of summers, Maya has a good idea of what she’s talking about. The real working world not only encourages collaboration, it almost requires it in order to succeed. Policies like Maya mentioned do not accurately reflect this aspect and rather hinder the possibility of having a functional learning community by pinning students against one another instead of working together as a team. Beyond that, they make students feel like they have no one to turn to in times of difficulty, which is often discouraging.

Host: Now while this policy is ultimately detrimental in a community sense, its goal is to protect academic integrity, which is necessary in an educational institution. Despite its negative side effects, this policy at least serves a genuine purpose: teaching students to problem solve independently before turning to collaboration for assistance. In so many words, learning to be self-reliant. However, there are practices outside of this one that foster the same feelings of inadequacy and isolation, but have zero functional use.

Maya: “The professors can sometimes pit you against one another. Like for example, in one of my CS classes, they had a ranking board of who was able to get a better programming assignment done so those types of rankings can really affect how you feel and your placement in the class.”

Host: Clearly, there is no reason to outwardly rank students and their achievements. It serves no purpose other than as a watered down fear mongering tactic to pit students against one another. Colleges as institutions, and UVA in particular, are predicated on the idea of a cohesive learning community that encourages students to uplift one another. When the individuals in that community are ranked using achievement metrics, it implies that the better you perform as compared to your peers increases your inherent value. This is a dangerous practice to encourage as it links perceived achievement with self worth.

*[Keyboard clacking]*

Host: Imagine you have a rough stretch of assignments all due in one week, and something has to take a back seat. That assignment’s sub-optimal performance then gets paraded around for the whole class to see. If this persists, there is a thread that is slowly being weaved that indicates to students that if they fall short in something, they are now lesser than their peers. Over time, this is bound to have adverse effects on students’ mental health.

Host: Of course, it is important to remember that these tactics and rules in place don't affect all students unilaterally; there are different levels of overlap depending on your major. But, the point remains that practices like this exist in one form or another.

So as much as we can point fingers at our peers, there are clear and obvious structures put in place by administration that hinder students' ability to lend a hand to one another.

*[Theme song]*

### **Exclusive Clubs/Competitive Culture**

Host: However, the term "competitive culture" doesn't apply solely to academics, but is rather intertwined throughout aspects of student life. Most students would think that the hardest part is over after getting accepted into UVA. But, no more than a month after school begins, students are thrown into yet another rat race – applying to UVA's clubs and Contracted Independent Organizations - better known as CIO's - which are student managed organizations. These CIO's are considered key parts of the University's entrepreneurship efforts.

Host: The competitive nature follows students into these clubs, which are, funnily enough, meant to serve as an escape from the stressors of academic life. Many of the clubs here at UVA boast certain levels of exclusivity and often require an application of sorts in order to be considered for membership.

Host: To give just one example of this phenomenon, we can look to UVA's McIntire School of Commerce. Think of it as the business school here at UVA whose applications open for second years each fall. To succeed in the highly selective McIntire admissions process, students who are considering applying are urged to present an application that boasts a high GPA and to have extensive involvement in clubs and CIOs on grounds. Of those clubs, the ones that carry the most weight in the process are the commerce clubs, which are clubs centered around UVA's finance and business community here on grounds. A handful of these clubs have nearly a 90% acceptance rate into the commerce school. Since the McIntire acceptance rate normally hovers around 60%, it's no surprise that these clubs with elevated acceptance rates are a hot commodity amongst first year hopefuls. Without the help of previous connections, time, or knowledge of advanced business topics, students often find the process to get into these clubs exhausting and challenging. These clubs that would normally help foster student knowledge in whatever field they specialize in are really just another step in the race to success.

Host: Not having much insight on this application process myself, I talked to Chloe, a current student in comm school, to see exactly how cutthroat it is. During our conversation, she mentioned that, without previous knowledge or connections, she found it hard to get "the inside scoop" on how the 5-6 target clubs compared to each other in terms of quality. Confused, Chloe reached out to upperclassmen who gave her some insight and, soon after, she began her many applications to these clubs. She did all of this, on top of school and her other extracurriculars, within her first 3 weeks at UVA.

Host: Luckily, Chloe's hard work and grind paid off. But in some cases, underclassmen face rejection upon rejection, which only continues to perpetuate the low morale among students, especially considering that they are already juggling academics and a social life in college.

Host: For students at the University of Virginia, high achievement in any area will never be enough. It's all about where they stack up relative to their peers that gives them the most validation and ultimately contributes to UVA's competitive culture.

*[Audio clips of college students playing outside]*

### **Self Governance**

Host: To get more involved at UVA, a lot of UVA students will participate in student self-governance. It's very common for UVA students to take on big leadership roles that might otherwise be performed by paid professionals. One of the leadership roles that a lot of students try to obtain is with HRL, the Housing & Residence Life, as RAs or resident assistants at the dorms.

Host: But there are also many other large organizations at UVA that offer a lot of opportunities for students who want to be leaders such as the Student Council or Class Councils and Trustees which are all entirely composed of UVA students.

### **Interview with Austin**

Host: Austin Amacher, a fourth-year biomedical engineering student at UVA from Alexandria, VA has had personal experience as an RA and Senior Resident (SR) with HRL.

Austin: "We've had administrators come in and be like it is insane that you have students doing jobs that at other major universities, and comparable ones like UNC Chapel Hill or Duke, other ones, where these are paid professionals to do these things and you guys are students who, other than being full-time students because that's one of the requirements of being in these extracurriculars, but you're also doing a full-time job."

Host: Like Austin was saying, at comparable universities to UVA such as Duke, they don't hire students for these big leadership roles. Instead, they hire working adults.

Host: Many of UVA's organizations that perform important work for the University are composed of students. The Honor Committee and University Judiciary Committee are examples of prestigious organizations where students are in charge of taking leadership roles instead of paid professionals.

Host: UVA even says on their website that they are taking a "groundbreaking approach to self-governance, providing students with a variety of opportunities to govern almost every

aspect of life on Grounds”. While other universities like Duke University and the University of Michigan have their own version of UVA’s University Judiciary Committee, they have faculty or staff working with their student leaders. This is in contrast to UVA where the University Judiciary Committee is solely composed of students.

Austin: “That extends to all these different clubs, if you’re in STUDCO, if you’re in HRL, if you’re even in UJC, Honor, all these others ones and it goes far beyond it, I’m just thinking of the big ones. That is where immense, inimitable pressure is put on students and then faculty or just like our supervisors are just like, ‘yeah, we’re here to support you!’.”

Host: Many students feel the weight of UVA’s expectations on them to take on leadership roles, but Austin makes an important point,

Austin: “UVA will be fine if you don’t, like if you don’t you know, if they don’t have a Vice Chair of Selections. They’re going to get a new one next year, they have paid professionals. The University will still be standing if you don’t do all your extracurricular responsibilities, it’s like you are a person first, you’re a student second... and then you’re whatever these positions are. But it’s so far down the totem pole and it should never come at the expense of your mental and physical well-being.”

*[Calm transition]*

## **Conclusion**

Host: There is no one thing that defines the culture here at UVA. It’s an isolated student mindset. It’s a lattice of harsh academic practices. It’s a university being run by students. There are clearly strides to be made in all aspects of our lives in order to improve the quality of student mental health here at UVA that starts with asking the right questions, and we need to be asking those questions.

Host: What is talked about in this episode and the episodes that follow are not just an exaggerated stories in order to create more captivating content – there are very real things that require a unified alliance for the support of mental health.

Host: At the time of recording, The UVA and greater Charlottesville Community ARE slowly healing from a deadly act of violence committed by a student on grounds. As we mourn the passing of our peers, it’s as important as ever to understand our own minds, the institutions around us, and the ways we can help each other grow. We can never stop investigating; it’s crucial to the betterment and growth of our community, especially when the time comes to lean on one another for support.

*[Silence]*

## **Outro**

Host: This podcast was produced by Jade Burns, Kathia Crawford, Paolo Vicencio, and Prachi Joshi 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!

*[Fade theme song]*

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