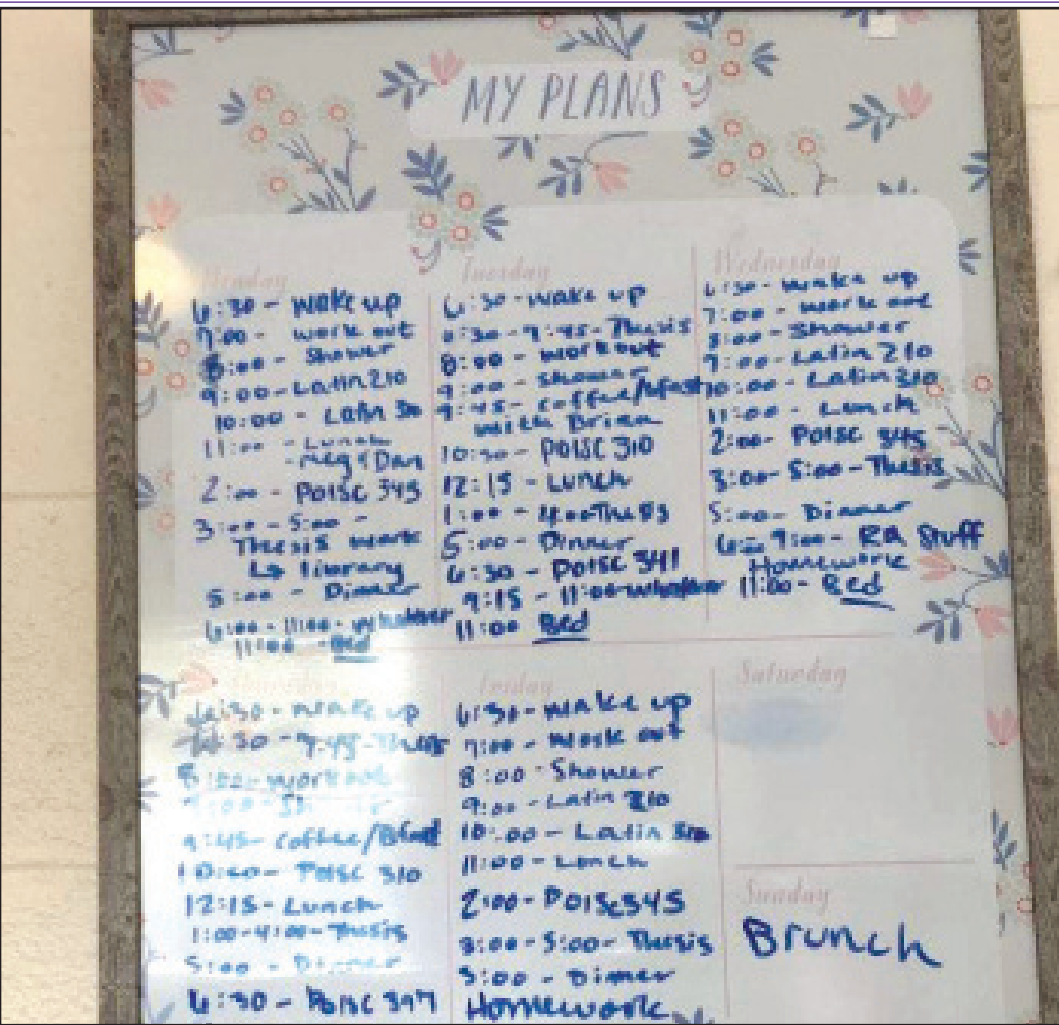


# features



SUBMITTED BY RACHEL WYANT

Rachel Wyant (2018 alumna) dealt with her senior project by breaking up her day into a tight schedule. She was organized to stay on top of her stress, and successfully defended her capstone in April.

## Seniors: projects, careers and classes *Dealing with stress before you graduate*

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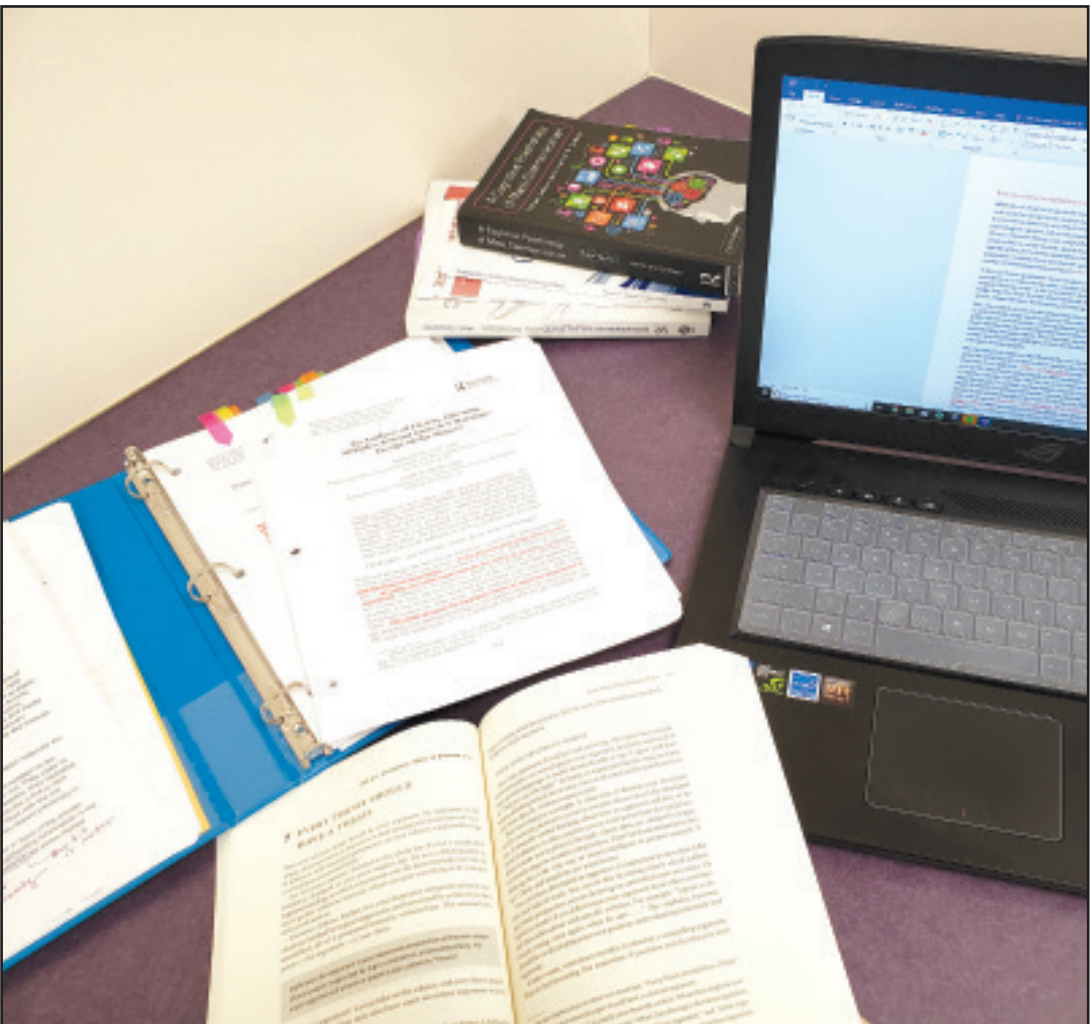
Graduation. Exams, papers, capstones, readings, assignments. The life of a university senior in the spring semester is one of stress. With concerns about careers, current schoolwork, final projects, and personal life, seniors face up to the world, preparing for that next big step. “Before graduation is a high-stress time,” Dr. Oscar McKnight, the Director of Psychological Counseling, said. When approaching graduation, students’ mental health can suffer under the effects of this stress. Seniors can find themselves falling into two categories, according to McKnight: anxiety or depression. “It goes both ways,” he said. “For some students, depending on their personality profile, they get very anxious for graduation because they’ve got to find a job, they’ve got to pay off their loans, all this sort of stuff.”

ality, then cause different effects in students. While some students become motivated and make a plan, the students prone to depression “have a tendency to shut down,” McKnight said. Students in each group tend to either believe that they will not find any employment or that they will find the perfect job after graduation. According to McKnight, both are unlikely just after graduation, but these conclusions stem from the expectations of the students. Seniors Dani McBride and Shannon Bitzer find a large increase in their stress levels growing closer to graduation. “All of the workload gets more intensified, and you realized you got to finish up to get the GPA where you want it to get out, so the stress builds up very quickly,” Bitzer said. Bitzer also observes this pressure in her fellow graduating seniors, in online posts and casual conversa-

projects. The students are focused on these senior projects and they find extra pressure as they face the same stress of moving on from university and normal assignments as other students, McKnight said. “At the very time where they should be relaxing and cruising through because school is ending, they’re trying to finish off their thesis,” McKnight said. “And once they do complete their thesis, the stress doesn’t go away because they wish they were planning for this stuff the last three months.” McKnight also finds students creating “artificial timelines” of their lives, plotting out when they believe their life events should take place. These unrealistic timelines provide further unnecessary pressure on students, so he recommends graduating seniors to practice patience. While the project itself causes pressure, the pressure combined with the stresses of the usual assignments and of finding a job

pleting the major’s exit exams, a semester-long project ending in an oral interview to determine her grade. Bitzer must complete the business major’s senior capstone and assessment, also additional work. “I’m a little nervous because it’s built up information from the past four years,” Bitzer said, “but you forget that stuff, and if I don’t pass it, I’m going to freak out because what did I just pay for if I can’t graduate.” Both McBride and Bitzer find the stress originating from the assignments themselves and from personal life as well. The underlying competition of peers, as well as pressures from family, can heighten the strain of graduating. “There’s a lot of pressure of graduation whether it’s from people around you or your professors or your parents or trying to get a job set up,” Bitzer said. “It builds up because you’re not really sure, or you are sure and you’re just nervous.”

in physical health as well. Anxiety and depression can create physical illness, McKnight said. Alongside the physical health problems that can result from mental health decline, the university years are a psychological state of life referred to as “identity formation,” and this stage is when “you define who you are as a human being,” McKnight said. If a student experiences depression or anxiety through their experiences at university, McKnight said that this can carry over into future endeavors, as one’s mindset in college sets the standard for one’s mindset and expectations for the student’s future. While the stress to graduate can ripple throughout a students’ life, students can recognize “what their natural feeling is” and can acknowledge if their stress has elevated their anxiety or depression, McKnight said. “When your thoughts start spiraling, or you start feeling anxious or depressed, or your heart starts beating and your pulse starts going up because you start thinking of this, you know that’s not normal,” McKnight said. When students reach that point of self-realization, McKnight said that the counseling and career services are there. Both resources work toward assisting students in two separate spheres of a student’s life. While career services “help do the mechanical things” such as interview practice and resumé assistance, McKnight and the counseling services focus on the personal things and the lifestyle of a student. In terms of relieving some of this pressure seniors experience, McBride and Bitzer find themselves watching movies and catching up on sleep. “Try to manage everything else so you feel like the bigger things don’t consume you,” Bitzer said. Making time to do personal activities and talk with friends is important to avoid letting the time slip away, McBride said. McKnight recommends avoiding second-guessing and focusing on one issue at a time, instead of all of the tasks at once. “The step is not to become your own worst enemy,” McKnight said. “Sometimes people overthink things, and the only thing you have to do now is just graduate. A lot of things will fall into place.”



KAITLYN MOORE

On top of regular course work, seniors have to take time out of their schedules for internships, research, papers and projects.

On the other hand, other students can “become overwhelmed” and therefore depressed, McKnight said. These two separate responses, dependant on the senior’s person-

tion. As this stress manifests itself in different ways but affects most of the graduating class, and it can be more intense for those students completing senior capstones or

also can affect the project, as some students find themselves unable to finish the thesis or capstone, McKnight said. As a social work major, McBride observed increased stress in com-

As personal relationships can cause specific pressures on certain students, the mental health coping mechanisms that respond to this stress can manifest into a decline