Redefining Student Success:
Moving from competition to a supportive learning environment

August 21, 2019
The University of Alberta acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 territory, and respects the histories, languages, and cultures of First Nation Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada, whose presence continues to enrich our vibrant community.
66.5% of students reported feeling overwhelming anxiety

66.8% of students reported feeling very lonely

Image credit: unsplash.com
CYCLE OF ANXIETY

- More students are attending University than ever before
- Creates a pressure to perform at higher levels in order to set themselves apart and access opportunities
POSITIVE COMPETITION

- Focused on self-improvement
- Motivates us to reach goals
- Encourages performance
SOCIAL COMPARISON

- Social comparison is unavoidable in a University setting
- Seeing that we aren’t on top can affect performance and mental health

Image credit: artstation.com
U.S. Air Force Cadets
- Observed increase in cadet performance when socializing with high achievers
- Intentionally mixed low achieving cadets into squadrons with a large number of high performers
- Remaining cadets were placed in squadrons together

(Carrell, Sacerdote, & West, 2013)
WHAT HAPPENED?

A) Under-achieving cadets performed better with the influence of the high performers

B) Under-achieving cadets scores fell when faced with direct competition from high performers

C) Middle-of-the-road students suffered from not having the motivation of high-performers

D) Both B and C
COMPETITION LEADS TO ISOLATION

Competition focuses our attentions on how we stack up against others instead of working with them.

Students become pitted against each other.
Stress and anxiety can erode a person’s effectiveness which can impact their academic performance.
REFRAMING BEHAVIOUR

Faculty tend to consider the following student behaviors uncivil:

- failing to participate or express interest in the course
- coming to class unprepared
- making demands and unreasonable requests toward the instructor (e.g., extended deadlines, make-up exams, extra credit opportunities)
- disrupting class by arriving late or leaving early

Knepp & Frey, 2012
“When the pressure students feel to get good grades, to maintain scholarships and financial aid, and to gain access to post-graduate opportunities clashes with faculty members’ attempts to maintain academic standards while promoting learning, the encounters can be heated, uncomfortable, and stressful for all involved” (Gilroy, 2008).
Students tend to find the following professor behaviours uncivil:

- Presenting lectures at a fast pace with little to no student involvement or interaction
- Acting in an aloof, distant manner toward students, or conveying to students that they are a burden
- Surprising students with unannounced assessments or unanticipated exam questions
- Permitting students to belittle or ridicule classmates
SUPPORTIVE LEARNING

Principles to create an learning environment that encourages student growth:

- Ensuring safety
- Establishing trustworthiness
- Maximizing choice
- Maximizing collaboration
- Prioritizing empowerment

Carello & Butler, 2015
Consistency  Community
Communication  Clarity
Cooperation  Choice
Care
COMMUNICATION

Let students know what to expect

Clarity
- Complete syllabus
  - Explicit guidelines
  - Lay out your own boundaries
- Explain the “why”

Consistency
- Stick to the syllabus
  - If changed, give choice
- Stick to your boundaries
- Provide samples
Participatory decisions encourage commitment and performance

- Help determine class policies
- 1-time extension
- Choose assignment weights
- Rolling due dates
COOPERATION STRENGTHENS COMMUNITY

Student interaction validates shared experiences and goals

- In-class discussion groups
- Critical debates
- Case studies
- Individual + Group quizzes
Above all,

Be kind
Students respond to the environment that they are in.

If we want students to flourish, we need to create an environment that encourages growth.
Thanks for your participation!

Questions? Contact the Community Social Work Team
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REFERENCES


