



noluthando’s poem, penned as a matriculant two years ago, reminds us of the academic expectations, pressures, and tensions that often leave many students feeling overwhelmed.

As an occupational therapy professor with over 20 years’ experience working with youth in both schools and higher education settings, I’ve seen how navigating educational environments is an ongoing journey that extends into tertiary education. Too often, success in higher education is equated with academic performance, usually overlooking the many other facets that are a part of student life. We also tend to imagine achieving educational success as an independent learning endeavour that linearly progresses with certainty.

And yet, we know that this straight pathway is not always reflected in students’ experiences, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and questioning their abilities to succeed in tertiary education. Students are often advised to push through their feelings of overwhelm, as this struggle is viewed as a necessary part of performing well. How do students navigate this?

While academic performance and achievement matter, finding meaning,

belonging and connection throughout the learning journey is needed to facilitate a grounded way of being. Being grounded enables students to frame their goals in ways that recognise the living, learning, and socialising areas in which they are developing.

Evan Rauch famously said, “Other people’s lives seem better than yours because you’re comparing their director’s cuts with your behind-the-scenes.” Contextualising experiences as *part* of life, rather than your *whole* life, helps us see that no matter what it is, there are always different pathways and options to consider.

Practically, students can use reflection and self-talk to notice what is going on for them and find people who can lend a listening ear to help them make sense of what they are thinking and feeling. It also means finding their rhythm both in activities of day-to-day life and recognising the time demands of different days, weeks, or terms. Creating and maintaining a rhythm requires disciplined nurturing and finding spaces, people, and activities that resonate with what one is growing.

Learning contexts must actively consider how they might be shaping students’ experiences, as it becomes

increasingly complex for students to navigate all the demands. Supported education practices provide students with individualised and practical support to navigate their learning environments and goals. Instead of mulling over options on their own, it helps students find networks of people to discuss these with, to learn about the different possibilities. This collective way of sense making still leaves students to decide, but makes the mental load of finding a way forward easier. It opens up options for creative problem-solving and new ideas. It aligns with a whole-university approach that considers how students’ backgrounds and contexts, as well as the institution’s context as a whole, contribute to student mental health and well-being.

All people encountering students can work to create the kind of spaces where students can grow and fully develop themselves. As students persist in their learning, we can ask ourselves: How are we working with students to grow beyond focusing solely on academic metrics of success?

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Untitled

Pressure
To be the best and do better than the rest
Aiming for As in every test
Comparing yourself to the girl whose marks are “perfect”
For school seems to have become one big contest
A place for the gifted and academically blessed

So many of us are becoming depressed
Because we didn’t get that 80%
But what if I were here to suggest
That you need not do better than your best?
See, striving for perfection is an unrealistic quest
It makes us envious and leaves us upset

I know we all want to one day drive a fancy car or own a private jet
But I think it’s time to give our goals a reset
And quit comparing ourselves to other people’s success when
We’re not there just yet

I want you to see yourself as your biggest rival and greatest inspiration
As you’re working hard to get this education
And whilst becoming successful can be your end destination,
You must believe in yourself first, and let that be your foundation

So, after this I have one request
When the pressure’s too much and you’re feeling stressed
I want you to pause, take a deep breath
And remember
That all you need to do is *your* best

Noluthando Ngcobo 2023, second year UCT Speech Language Therapy student

While academic performance and achievement matter, finding meaning, belonging, and connection throughout the learning journey is needed to facilitate a grounded way of being. Here’s how we can nurture student success.

BY ROSHAN GALVAN

Beyond the grade