UCSB

Stimulating Success

Raab Writing Fellowship

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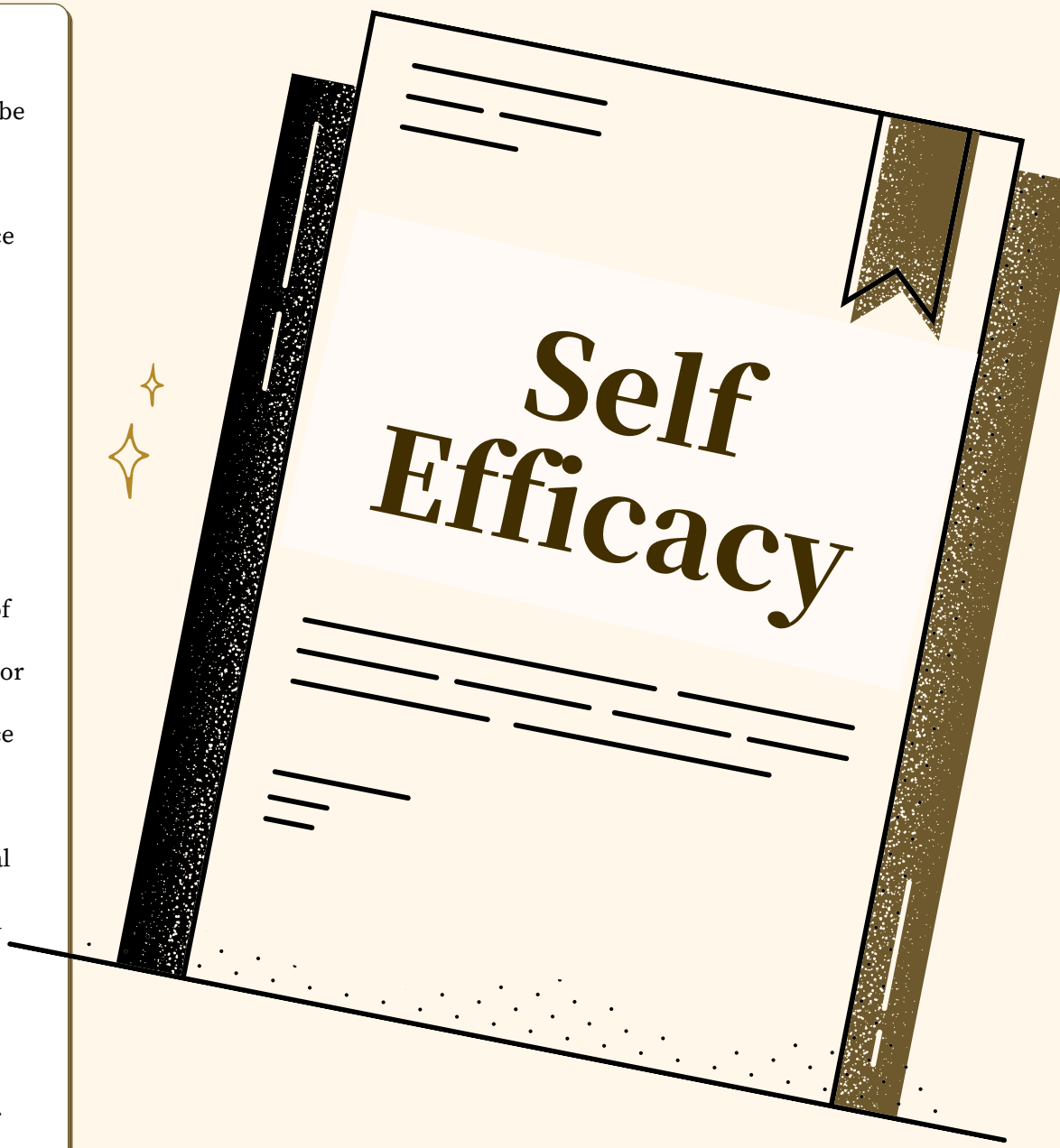
Stunted Growth

"College is a game of balance, basically; if you're not winning, you're losing."

This literature intends to investigate the true cost of shortcuts to academic and personal success in undergraduate university life. Many students inadvertently sacrifice their mental health in attempts to parlay time, engaging in non-effective study techniques that inhibit long-term learning and engagement. Such practices are propagated by high-stress environments, much like that inhabited by the professional learner. Based on the analyses of past literature and student interviews, the current research hopes to highlight barriers to student success and suggest practices that promote healthy living for young adults in higher education.

University marks a period of expedited growth among students. There is great pressure to succeed in its fast-paced environment and effectively attend to one's schoolwork, self-care, and social sphere. Unsurprisingly, it can be difficult for attendees to find balance in this new lifestyle. A study of students in Brazil saw that adjusting to college can cause psychological hardship, varying from situational concerns to psychiatric disorders (Loreto, 1972). Students with various levels of academic achievement are afflicted, as performance does not necessarily indicate one's mental state (Sundqvist, 1973). Rather, it is the stress a student endures, and the management of that stress, that correlates with negative physical and mental health (Ricker-Boles, 2021). Subsequently, it is imperative that universities equip students with positive coping mechanisms to implement in times of duress. Universities should also make students aware of coping habits to avoid, preventing the adoption of behaviors that might eventually worsen one's psychological state.

Upon acceptance to university, students are expected to be primed with effective study practices and self-care regimes, but this is not always the case. Tactics that once saw to high-school success may not cater to the responsibilities of secondary education (Kumar, 2015). These tactics often require reevaluation, but student resiliency fluctuates. In consequent, one's academic persistence may decline without adequate guidance (Hartley, 2011). The decline in student self-efficacy is of particular relevance, as self-efficacy serves as a moderator to anxiety's effect on GPA (Pychyl et al., 2000). Resilience shares this moderating power, implicating cumulative GPA while maintaining a strong association with mental health. Furthermore, efforts to increase resiliency and self-efficacy have the potential to promote academic success in undergraduate students. Institutions may emphasize these attributes as assets to positive coping.



Impediments to Success

Without intervention, students may engage in negative behaviors to cope with the hardships of undergraduate education (i.e., sleep deprivation, social isolation, alcohol consumption, drug abuse). Negative coping mechanisms solve or delay situational issues but bear lasting psychological implications on those who employ them.

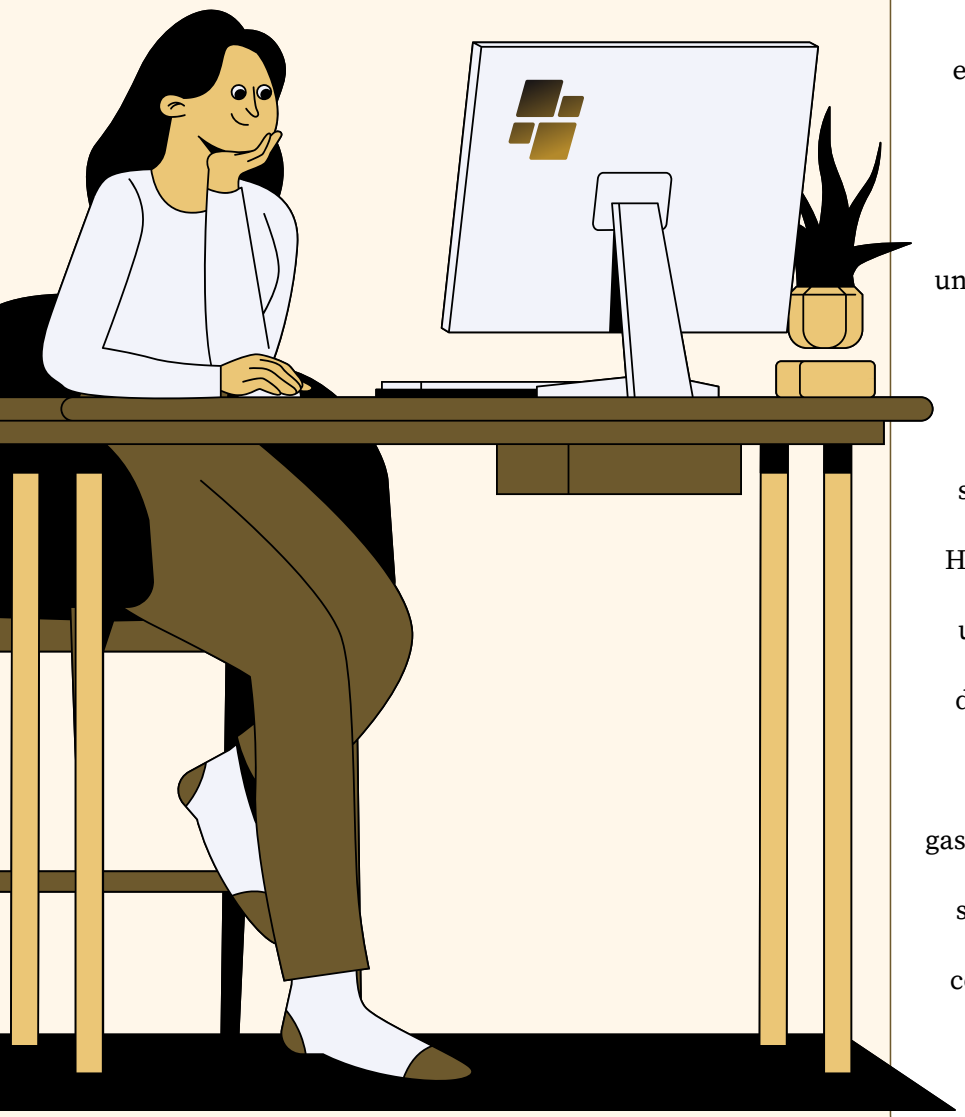
Temporarily alleviating stress or lightening one's workload, negative coping becomes addictive, or repeatedly employed for short-term needs. The behavior is unsustainable for long-term function, as the absence of catharsis leaves sees to one's crippled psyche. Students who do not realize their affliction may continue the self-destructive behavior, cultivating unbridled stress and substandard mental health in developing young adults.

“I was using stimulants to study and decompressing with alcohol. It was a vicious cycle...”

Mental health literacy can help students avoid impotent coping habits. As a result, many institutions mandate mental health literacy training as an early intervention program for student wellbeing (Reis et al., 2021). Early intervention is essential to treating mental illness, so these efforts are especially important to a population so prone to depressive symptoms.

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) affects a great deal of college students, manifesting in precursors like poor self-efficacy and coping skills (Bickham, 2016). An inactive lifestyle may also contribute to depressive episodes, and undergraduate students are at greater risk for increased sedentary time (Moulin et al., 2019). Additionally, about 50% of this population is greatly susceptible to internet addiction, which is associated with further behavioral and lifestyle outcomes (Salama, 2020).

Undergraduate proclivity toward these trends is cause for great concern. In order to mitigate their risk factor, institutions must increase counteractive training to promote mental health education among students. As such, resources should be available to inform students of their population’s vulnerability to personal or academic crises.



This training should also include holistic information on the use or abuse of illicit amphetamines. Consumption of this prescription medication temporarily enhances an individual's ability to focus, allowing them to maximize academic performance for a short period of time (Evans & Smith, 1963). As a result, amphetamines are commonly enlisted as a study hack for undergraduate university students. In a convenience-sample of U.S. college students, as many as 35.5% of participants reported using amphetamines without obtaining a prescription (Low & Gendaszek, 2002). Users are reportedly motivated by strengthened concentration, alertness, or bodily sensation (Teter et al., 2005). However, many users are not aware of the disadvantages to illicit amphetamine use. Countering the stimulant's study advantages, users will experience many depressive factors once the effects of the drug wear off. With repetitive abuse, symptoms can even extend to MDD, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, and gastrointestinal issues (Vo et al., 2015). To advocate against a holistic assortment of self-destructive behavior, preventative programs should address these hidden consequences. In doing so, lifestyle training will enable students to combat the multifaceted mechanisms of negative coping.

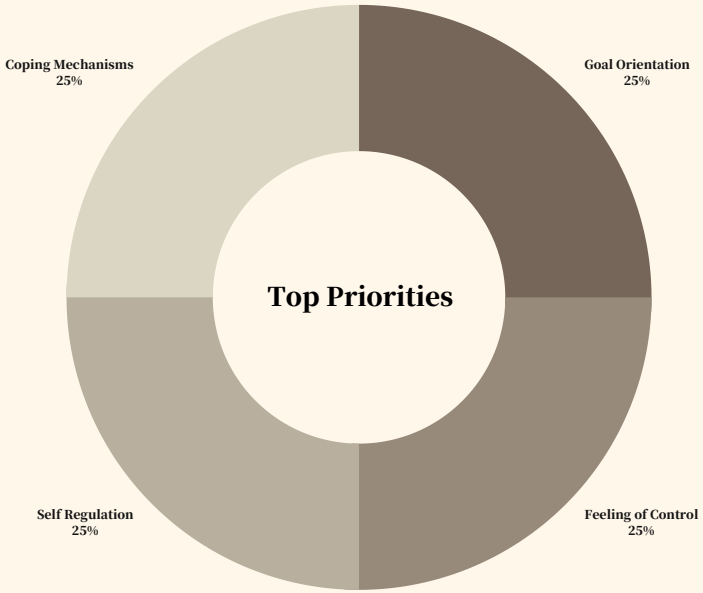
Training

Overview

- Encourage students to be an active participant in their personal and academic success
- Provide factual, straightforward information about possible hindrances and aids to balancing university life

Proponents

- Identify: Counterproductive coping mechanisms and study habits amongs students
- Assess: Feasible changes in lifestyle and environment
- Implement: Tailored strategies to serve students' individual needs



The remainder of this literature purports to recommend stress-management techniques for success in a university environment. These strategies aim to reduce stress, maximize self-efficacy, and challenge dependence on self-destructive behaviors in students. They may be emphasized in lifestyle training for undergraduate attendees, noting that these programs are cost-effective to institutions and effective in alleviating student stress rates (Macaskill, 2018). Studies show that reduced stress is correlated to greater self-efficacy, as well as bettered goal orientation, feelings of control, self-regulation, and coping strategies going forward (Hsieh et al., 2012). These psychological variables, in turn, may translate to greater academic performance and feelings of satisfaction in the university environment.

**graphic data is based on small pool of anonymous interviews*

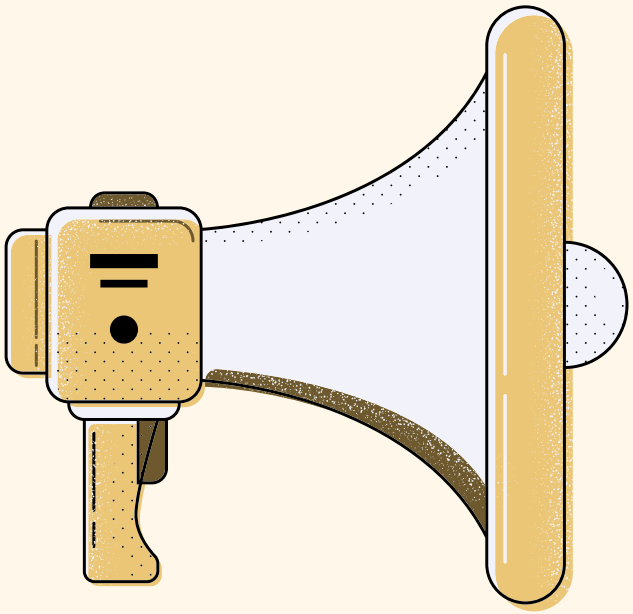
"If I could go back to freshman year, I would change so many things."

Looking Ahead

Current Literature

Although a plethora of literature exists on the stresses that students undergo in university settings, there is a need for more robust research on effective responses to this stress. More specifically, there is room for further contributions to the literature of suggested coping mechanisms that optimize student wellbeing. That said, current research emphasizes exercise as the supreme channel of stress-management.

Regardless of age, gender, or other personal characteristics, exercise is universally accredited with preserving mental and physical health (Schlict, 1994). In fact, exercise relieves the feeling of high stress that perpetuates low self-efficacy (Gurney, 2021) and can provide relief after just one episode of exercise (Wininger, 2007). Additionally, consistent exercise reduces the risk of becoming addicted to the Internet, remedying a common affliction for university students (Koçak, 2018).



Call for Further Research

There are barriers to relying on exercise as a sole coping mechanism, so it is critical to highlight further behaviors to promote student efficacy. Advice heeds students to be proactive in their learning, but it is often brushed off in the name of repetition and common sense. However, research reveals that students who manage their time and organize their study materials are actually much more likely to succeed, predicting academic achievement and feelings of self-efficacy (Yang & Bliss, 2014). Additionally, this type of learner is often equipped with greater coping habits than their unorganized peers (Rijavec & Brdar, 1997). Further enforcing this strategy in a learning setting may be of great help to students, especially when provided with scientific and statistical backing for this phenomenon.

Closing Comments

Attending university is no doubt a privilege to young adults around the world, for these years afford students with enviable academic opportunity and enrichment. That said, almost any young adult can attest to the difficulties that ensue when adapting to such a stimulating environment. Ensuring that students have resources and training is essential to preserving their mental and physical health in such instances of uncertainty. Additionally, positive coping styles serve as an asset to adjustment periods, mitigating stress for an untampered academic performance (Cherkil et al., 2013).

Over time, young adults have become desensitized to the sleuth of counsel for living a fulfilling, healthy life. This information must be reintroduced to professional learner, translated in a manner that reawakens constructive physiological and psychological responses. With pragmatic coping techniques, these students will be effectual in finding and maintaining balance in the undergraduate setting. It is only when an individual masters this care of the self that they may tend to their latter spheres of academia and socialization.

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Additional Information

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