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Education Notes bring mathematical and educational ideas forth to the CMS readership in a manner that promotes discussion of relevant topics including research, activities, issues, and noteworthy news items. Comments, suggestions, and submissions are welcome.

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The COVID pandemic has magnified many of the challenges that universities have been facing for quite some time. Although administrators and instructors might rank these challenges differently, they will agree that the concerns about the psychological and personal well-being of their students and faculty top the list.

Post-secondary institutions have developed strategies and created resources in an effort to help their students (for instance, by hiring additional wellness and mental health counselors). We believe that such efforts will have positive effects on some of their students' overall well-being. However, there remains an obvious, but hard, question to answer: What is it in an incoming undergraduate student's life that may negatively affect their motivation, cause frustration, stress, and anxiety, and jeopardize their academic success?

Needless to say, we are not in the position to provide a comprehensive answer to this question. Instead, based on our experiences in working with thousands of students over many years, and supported by research (see, for instance, [1, 2]), we suggest a component that could shed some light onto it. Our premise is that a number of challenges that novice undergraduate students face are related to, or exacerbated by, the expectations that they successfully navigate through academic and non-academic situations which require a certain level of emotional, cognitive, and/or psychosocial maturity (*maturity*, for short).

In our view, recognizing that the process of increasing maturity is an important part of becoming a university student is an step forward. Why? Because *we can help* our students (and we have been doing it, routinely) to better manage their own abilities and overall potential in the university setting, and thus help them to respond to their academic and non-academic challenges in more adequate, appropriate, and satisfying ways.

What do we mean by *maturity*? Researchers in education have conceptualized the transition from high school to university using the anthropological notion of the *rite of passage* [3, 4]. A rite of passage involves events in an individual's life (such as the birth of a child, graduation, or entering a spousal relationship), where their customary life routines are disrupted or distorted, thus creating a "life crisis." With the help of their community, and through an experiential and/or learning process (which could, and often does, take a long time), the individual makes necessary modifications to their life routines to overcome the "crisis." As a result, they become more mature, with an enhanced understanding of themselves and the world around them, and thus, better prepared to face future challenges.

Incoming university students, typically in their late teenage years, enter their institution with a set of habits and expectations brought from, and affected by, their high school education, family and other personal and societal experiences. The forces of the rite of passage into becoming university students disrupt many of these habits and expectations, and this is, in our view, a significant cause of growing pains, anxiety, and frustration that our students experience.

To illustrate what this disruption brings in, we mention two common scenarios.

We need to iterate that at a university, the final course grade is calculated based on the course outline, written before the course starts, and agreed upon by students, instructors, and the institution. However, some students are surprised that their requests to "boost" their grade (for instance, by completing extra work) are flat out rejected, in order to ensure equity and fairness of the course assessment.

Some of our first-year students are not prepared to accept the post-secondary culture of a strict academic integrity conduct. Unlike high school, the sanctions for cheating in university may be severe even for the first offence, and could range from a mark of zero, to a failed course grade, or even suspension.

The rite of passage to university demands a mature approach to a real struggle, or to an anticipation of challenges when students question their ability to negotiate them successfully. Instead of accepting it as a necessary step in their learning process and an integral part of growing up, students dread – what they deem is – a failure. Not facing it earlier in life or school (due to, for example, "helicoptering" by their teachers and parents), they feel paralyzed by a failed test or a low course grade. This inability to effectively face real, or anticipated, failure and to move on, or not reacting quickly enough at the signs of a problem and postponing until it's too late, are in our view, a significant cause of students' distress. Instead of proactively reacting to the first signs of trouble, or attempting to learn from their mistakes, some students are quick to blame their instructors.

We have seen students, including those who are committed, hardworking and academically capable, experiencing serious crises. There may be many reasons for this: from the pressure to obtain good grades, to overestimating their abilities by signing up for a larger than manageable course load, to not knowing how to study effectively, to the

pursuit of a subject that really does not resonate with them. On top, often unknown to their instructors, students might be dealing with financial problems, or with a break-up in their family or in their relationship, or with a serious illness or death of someone close to them; they might be saying that they are depressed, or silently suffering from a (learning) disability or possibly not even being aware of it; or they might be experiencing boredom and loneliness due to the lack of meaningful social contacts.

Anthropology teaches us that a rite of passage can succeed only when the individual undergoing it is supported by their community (by seeing its member in crisis, the entire community is in crisis and needs to react). But who constitutes this community in our students' transition to university?

Students frequently turn to their instructors, who they see for 3 to 4 hours a week, for help and assistance with both academic and non-academic challenges. One of the reasons is that the "system" (e.g., student support, mental health, or wellness programs and assistance), students say, is often too slow to respond, or too complicated to navigate [5]. Thus, we, the course instructors, must become a part of that community, even though we are not trained nor equipped to handle many of the challenges that our students face. We are also aware (or fear) that, if we do not respond to a student's plea or concerns, academic or not, and something happens, we may be held liable for not taking the necessary steps to prevent it. Not to mention how such an event would affect us mentally and otherwise.

These days, university is expected to be that "community" that will guide students through their rite of passage, and even beyond. Universities are becoming all-inclusive spaces whose mission is to address a wide diversity of students' needs, from academic, to mental and physical health, to social interactions, and beyond. Universities regulate their students' relationships and sexual behaviour, give advice about recreational substance use, provide social spaces (e.g. student clubs), offer financial advice and support, create safe environments, and so on. The proverbial village that is supposed to raise a child seems to have shrunk to the boundaries of a university campus.

University instructors have realized that teaching their beloved subject only does not suffice to help their students reach the next stage of their professional and personal lives. To support students' psychological and personal well-being, the instructor needs to find the means to guide their students on their path to maturity. Sometimes this includes causing growing pains, by insisting on high academic standards. Sometimes the instructor needs to become a surrogate life-coach, in an effort to educate and support students in dealing with issues that are well outside of a course curriculum.

Acting responsibly and effectively dealing with challenges takes time, thought, energy, and experience. As we work through these challenges, we learn and become more serious and prepared, that is, more mature. This is why, in our opinion, it is crucial that university instructors persuade their first-year students that completing a university degree is not a race. It is important to spend time figuring things out (including figuring out who we are!), when we are unsure of what our next step should be. A good first step is to spend time to mature and to grow up.

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