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# Implementation of a Goal Setting and Time Management Program in Undergraduate Courses

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# Implementation of a Goal Setting and Time Management Program in Undergraduate Courses

**Abstract**
This pilot study explored undergraduate students' experiences with goal setting and time management. We embedded a series of mandatory planning and reflection assignments into two undergraduate courses. Assignments were unique to each course, but emphasized goal setting, planning and time management, and reflection. Qualitative analyses revealed that students valued the importance of academic success and well-being. They used various strategies to plan and manage their time but struggled with balancing schoolwork and well-being. Our findings highlight the need to support students in developing goal setting and time management skills, setting realistic goals, and following through on their plans.

Cette étude pilote a exploré les expériences des étudiants et des étudiantes de premier cycle en matière de fixation d'objectifs et de gestion du temps. Nous avons intégré une série de devoirs obligatoires de planification et de réflexion dans deux cours de premier cycle. Les devoirs étaient propres à chaque cours, mais mettaient l'accent sur la définition d'objectifs, la planification et la gestion du temps, et la réflexion. Les analyses qualitatives ont révélé que les étudiants et les étudiantes accordaient de l'importance à la réussite scolaire et au bien-être. Ils ont utilisé diverses stratégies pour planifier et gérer leur temps, mais ont eu du mal à concilier travail scolaire et bien-être. Nos résultats soulignent la nécessité d'aider les étudiants et les étudiantes à développer des compétences en matière de fixation d'objectifs et de gestion du temps, à fixer des objectifs réalistes et à suivre leurs plans.

**Keywords**
goal setting, time management, student mental health; fixation d'objectifs, gestion du temps, santé mentale des étudiants et des étudiantes

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University students face varied responsibilities. To succeed academically, they must effectively allocate their time to various tasks. Goal-setting theory suggests that setting goals can broadly improve performance, as goals can direct attention to relevant steps in a larger process and foster motivation and persistence (see Locke & Latham, 2013; Morisano et al., 2010). Accordingly, students who set goals and work toward them can experience enhanced academic success (Hao, Branch, & Jensen, 2016; Kim & Ra, 2015; Morisano et al., 2010). Further, setting goals may support engagement: students who have set goals report feeling greater levels of hope, optimism, and satisfaction in their personal and professional lives (Kibby, 2015; McKenna et al., 2018).

This pilot project aimed to bring goal setting and time management strategies directly to students by embedding a series of planning and reflection assignments within two university courses. Here, we briefly describe student reflections with the aim to guide future implementation of these strategies in future university courses.

## Method

### Context

Our study was implemented at a large, research-intensive university in urban southern Ontario over the Fall 2022 academic term in a second-year Psychology course (300 students), which served as a mandatory requirement for most students while fulfilling an elective requirement for others; and a third-year elective Health Sciences course (30 students).

### Assignments

Students in both courses completed a series of course assignments for marks; these were required and unique to each course, but consistently emphasized the types of exercises listed in Table 1. Students in the Health Sciences program must regularly engage in reflective and self-directed learning, making them accustomed to writing reflections as part of their routine course work. In contrast, Psychology students might be encountering these methods for the first time. As such, we tailored the assignments to have direct instructions for the Psychology students, while providing more flexible prompts for the Health Sciences students. Although the Psychology course was much larger, students were organized into tutorial sections of about 30 students to facilitate discussions about their assignments, thus allowing for some parallels across the two courses. Despite these variations, the two courses followed a similar framework of reflecting on one's time management and goal setting over the semester.

**Table 1**

*Assignment Descriptions in Each Course Grouped by Type of Exercise*

| Type of Exercise | Psychology | Health Sciences |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Goal Setting | Students began the course by creating goals relating to their academic, personal, and professional aims using the ***SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound)*** criteria (Lawlor & Hornyak, 2012). | Using a modified version of the Growth and Goals Modules (see O'Connor et al., 2023) students began the course by creating goals relating to scientific inquiry skills, growth mindset, and time management. |
| 2. Planning and Time Management | Students were instructed to plan each upcoming week using their SMART goals. We used an instructional video from the Growth and Goals Module (Flynn, 2017) to teach students how to effectively schedule activities into their weekly calendar.<br><br>At the time of a weeklong mid-semester break, which our university presents as a period of rest and recovery, students updated their schedule accordingly.<br><br>Subsequently, students used their reflection responses from the START-STOP-CONTINUE activity (see *Reflection* below) to plan the remainder of their term.<br><br>At the end of the term, students completed a final assignment to schedule the last week of the semester with a focus on activities that prepared them for the upcoming final examination period. | Students were instructed to generate a plan for approximately each month of the semester. This plan was to focus on their academic, personal/mental health, and professional goals.<br><br>Based on their plan and at the beginning of each month, students created a weekly schedule to allow them to effectively meet their goals. |

| Type of Exercise | Psychology | Health Sciences |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Reflection | Students began the course by reflecting on their previous year by answering questions such as: What went well? What went poorly? What are they proud of? What do they regret? What helped them succeed? What barriers or events hindered them?<br><br>Following their return from the mid-semester weeklong break, students used the START-STOP-CONTINUE activity to reflect on their ongoing planning and scheduling. This requires students to write one thing that they would like to *start, stop, and continue* doing this semester.<br><br>Although we had planned to incorporate a final reflection, students indicated that they were too busy preparing for final exams, so we abandoned this idea. | Students began the course by reflecting on their current scientific inquiry skills, growth mindset, and time management skills.<br><br>At midterm, students reflected on their progress by responding to prompts relating to what worked well, what required improvement, and the extent to which self-care time was beneficial.<br><br>At the end of the course, students reflected on their progress throughout the course. Additionally, students responded to an open-ended prompt relating to what they took away from the assignments. |

## Data Collection and Analysis

At the end of the term, a research assistant (who was independent from the instructional team) invited students to provide consent for their course reflections to be included in an optional pilot study not part of the course requirement. Students could provide their informed consent by completing an online survey hosted on Qualtrics XM®. Only the research assistant had access to the survey, so that instructors were unaware of who consented. Once final marks were submitted, the research assistant accessed each course on the learning management system, downloaded the reflections of students who consented, and redacted all personal identifiers. Data were stored on a secure, cloud storage system hosted by the university. The project, including data access and storage methods, was approved by the institutional ethics board.

Our pilot study followed a descriptive case study design (Baškarada, 2014), aiming to describe a phenomenon within a specific context (i.e., undergraduate student reflections on goal setting and time management). Four members of the research team analyzed the reflections using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006); they collectively analyzed reflections from students in both courses to give a broad sense of student experience with these assignments, and did not attempt to compare experiences across the different courses. Analysis was guided by the exercises listed in Table 1, without any other preconceptions about what content might emerge in the reflections. Themes were then identified and refined individually and through discussion with other team members.

# Results

Thirteen and two students from the Psychology and Health Sciences courses, respectively, consented to use of their reflections. We identified four themes: academic success, well-being, strategies for success, and barriers to success.

## Academic Success

Students mentioned the importance of grades and/or gaining acceptance into graduate school. Students frequently set goals to achieve a specific grade in their course(s) and cited the importance of additional experiences in helping them achieve academic success. For example, one student stated that, “[Working in a lab] will strengthen my overall application for graduate school.”

## Well-being

Students recognized the importance of maintaining physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual health. They often cited ‘self-care’ as a way to improve their mental health, engaging in various activities towards this goal (e.g., time with friends/family, playing an instrument). They also recognized the connection between well-being and other aspects of life, with one student noting, “I realized that in order to truly succeed in [my academics] …I couldn’t neglect other aspects.”

## Strategies for Success

Students used different strategies such as making lists of due dates, adding tasks to their calendar, and writing notes or flashcards. They recognized the importance of receiving and/or

seeking support from professors, peers, and/or friends. One student also noted that creating schedules "helped with overall well-being greatly throughout the year."

### Barriers to Success

Many reflections revealed a tension between balancing schoolwork and well-being. For example, one student noted, "I was too stressed with the amount of work that I had, which led me to not focusing on my mental health and physical well-being." Students often justified their goals by providing examples of successful friends or family members, but some students blamed themselves when they struggled to meet these goals. One student described struggling due to their "poor ability to juggle personal events with school life."

## Discussion

Our findings highlight the importance of engaging students in goal setting and time management activities. Many students reported successfully setting goals and plans but faced barriers to completing them. We believe this indicates the necessity of supporting students in effective and realistic goal setting and time management while also maintaining focus on their mental health and well-being.

One unexpected outcome of this pilot project was that, in spite of the flexibility and brevity of our exercises, students reported that the exercises added to their workload. Through informal conversations, we observed some students questioning the usefulness of such exercises within the context of a university course and wondering how it added to their academic success. We speculate that these students might already be successful in planning and implementing their goals and may find the exercises repetitive. Indeed, a different subset of students shared that the exercises were valuable. Classroom discussions indicated that students appreciated detailed and thoughtful feedback from the course instructor.

### Suggestions for Implementation

While recognizing that our sample is limited, we recommend that others implementing a similar program use a minimal number of prompts and consider the relative demands of the exercises in the context of the overall course workload. Instructors should also consider the relative experience of their students with reflection exercises, and tailor the prompts accordingly. Further, instructors may wish to provide feedback to students on students' reflections, as this may serve as a scaffold for students who lack experience with reflecting and may also encourage areas of further reflection.

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