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The Effects of Perfectionism on College Students

John Eddy
Longwood University

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John Eddy | Longwood University | Cormier Honors College

Introduction

- Perfectionism, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "A disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable." (Merriam-Webster)
- As defined by experts in the field, perfectionism is, "a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations." (Sandoiu)
- As the academic environment becomes more and more competitive, what effects can we expect to see on students' wellbeing, especially their mental state?

How does Perfectionism affect the average college student?

- A study, led by Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill, describes socially prescribed perfectionism as the most detrimental to mental well-being (Sandoiu).
- Specialists commonly link anxiety, depression, and a host of other mental health issues to perfectionist characteristics (Sandoiu).
- Perfectionism affects younger people particularly hard, 30 percent of undergraduate students experience symptoms of depression, with toxic perfectionism being closely related to their symptoms (Sandoiu).
- Thomas and Hill proposed that the rise of perfectionism and psychopathology is true, because "although perfectionists have an excessive need for others approval, they feel socially disconnected and such alienation renders them susceptible to profound psychological turmoil (Thomas and Hill)

Causes of Perfectionism

- In a 1991 study, psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett found that perfectionism can take three forms, "self-oriented perfectionism", "other-oriented perfectionism", and "socially prescribed perfectionism" (Hewitt and Flett).
- Studies show that college students' perfectionism test scores for self-oriented perfectionism rose by 10 percent, scores for other-oriented perfectionism rose by 16 percent, and scores for socially prescribed perfectionism rose by 33 percent between 1989 and 2016 (Rettner).
- It is believed that increases in social media use and the overly-competitive nature of both academic admissions and the job-market are major causes of this increase in perfectionism (Rettner).
- There is also reason to believe that parental practices play a part in the rise of perfectionism, as some parents will take the success of their children and use it to determine the parents' own personal success (Thomas and Hill).
- Controlling behavior from parents is also on the rise, which "encourage children to adopt extremely high standards and strive for perfection, so to avoid criticism and gain the approval of their parents (Thomas and Hill).

First-Hand Experience

- Early in the semester, I sent out a survey to my residents to learn more about their adjustment to college living. One of the questions in the survey was "Do you feel like you spend so much time studying that you are missing out on other things?" Out of 29 responses, 8 residents responded yes.
- While I do not have clear evidence to support this, I believe that these responses could potentially show that some of my residents are already beginning to have perfectionist tendencies, especially if they were content with missing out on other aspects of campus life just to make sure that their grades are as high as possible.
- As a Resident Assistant in a freshman/first-year community, this concerns me, because I feel that a student's first-year of college is the most important in terms of making social connections and finding groups and organizations on campus where they can contribute to a mission and grow as people.
- If there are an increasing number of freshmen students coming into college with these perfectionistic traits, what can we do to lessen the mental burden that they must be carrying with them?

How can we change the stigma?

- As a Resident Assistant, my primary focus is to educate the community I work in on the dangers of perfectionism.
- I would plan to do this through a series of programs, starting with a newsletter where I can explain the different "flavors" of perfectionism and what negative impacts they can have.
- Following up on that indirect program, I would also plan a more active program, where residents can all come together and talk about how they are feeling with each other in a safe, controlled environment.
- While we do have CAPS, and I would by no means force a resident to attend if they were uncomfortable, I think in this case, it would help some residents to know that they are not alone in their struggle.
- It would also be beneficial to keep an eye on residents who show perfectionist tendencies and check up on their mental wellbeing from time to time.

Acknowledgments

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