

What does it take to thrive in this place?: An exploration of students' experiences of first year university

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When students thrive at university they feel a sense of vitality and learning; they are succeeding academically and feel energised by the learning process, they are able to set and achieve significant goals, balance their study, work and social commitments, take time to relax and exercise, and are engaged in healthy relationships (Schreiner, 2010; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). However, less than 12% of our first year students report a sense of thriving and 20% describe themselves as 'just surviving' which raises concerns about how we currently measure student success in the university sector. This presentation reports on the findings of a study conducted in an Australian university investigating first year students' experiences and the factors that help them 'thrive' rather than 'just survive.' It examines their understandings of what it means to thrive, the factors they use to assess their thriving status, and the impact transitioning to university has on their overall health and well-being. Data was collected via an anonymous online survey (n=459), focus groups and individual interviews (n=13) with first year students in health and education disciplines. Using an interpretive lens the analysis combines descriptive statistics of survey data with thematic analysis of open text responses and focus group interviews. Findings indicate that students who described themselves as 'thriving' felt empowered by their university experience. They enjoyed the challenge of academic work, experienced strong positive growth and development, and felt intrinsically connected socially and academically to their new learning environment. By broadening our understandings of student success to include measures of thriving we can go beyond mere benchmarking of GPA and student completions and include those factors such as learning gains, engagement and sense of belonging that are critical to realising students full potential (Kinzie, 2012).