

# Are They Thriving or Just Surviving? Moving Beyond Graduation and Grades to Measure Success in Students

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Accreditation and credentialing bodies require professional programs to report degree completion, retention rates, certification exam scores, and job attainment to evaluate program effectiveness, which may then be used as a proxy for student success (Dean, 2015; Pelton, 2017). Graduation rates and certification exam pass rates are easily measured and quantified for comparison purposes and provide a snapshot of the effectiveness of professional programs. We argue that graduation rates and pass rates give us a measure of students' "surviving" in our programs, but not their "thriving." The concept of "thriving" provides a more holistic view of student success and was used in this study to help us understand what constitutes and contributes to 'thriving' in professional programs (Schreiner, 2010). Moving beyond graduation and pass rates as a measure of student success and program effectiveness to an understanding of students' thriving may provide increased opportunities for program evaluation and thus to improve program practices. Ultimately this leads to increased thriving in our students, increased coping and resilience, reducing academic burnout, and most importantly, better preparing students for the stresses of working in healthcare.

**METHOD:** The Thriving Quotient survey was distributed electronically via email to students in a Clinical Laboratory Science program, two entry-level Master Occupational Therapy programs, and a Therapeutic Recreation program between November 2019 and June 2020. The Thriving Quotient is a 35-item instrument with seven constructs: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, Positive Perspective, Psychological Sense of Community and Institutional Integrity. Students respond to each item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Students summarized their overall level of thriving from; consistently thriving, thriving most of the time, somewhat thriving, surviving, barely surviving, not even surviving. Open ended questions added to the data by understanding students' perceptions on thriving.

**RESULTS:** This study revealed three important results: 1) students are thriving academically, 2) they have difficulty juggling the demands of school and work, 3) and they struggle to make social connections. Students rate themselves highly in the categories of academic determination and engaged learning. Structures and immersive, experiential learning activities inherent in professional programs, along with clear academic goals supports academic thriving. While many students feel they can "juggle demands," the qualitative comments reveal that they have many demands; namely heavy and difficult course loads, family obligations, and a need to work. Connectedness contributes to a sense of belonging to a community larger than one. Students struggled with social connectedness citing that multiple demands on time created a barrier to engage socially with family and friends.

**CONCLUSION:** This study responds to the Critical Care Societies Collaborative (Moss et al., 2016) call for educators to put more emphasis on coping and resilience strategies such as social connections during didactic education and increasing time spent on counseling and career preparedness. The present study highlights the critical role faculty have in supporting students' thriving. Efforts and specific strategies are needed to increase students' coping skills and interpersonal thriving.

## References

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