
HELPING FIRST-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES DEVELOP SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Self-management is defined as the ability to manage one's own behaviors by effectively planning, observing, and adapting our actions based on our goals. These skills can enable students to use their time and energy to achieve academic success, yet faculty typically do not explicitly teach effective self-management skills. This can mean that students already adept at managing their time and workload would see forward momentum in their academic work, while underprepared students would fall further behind. This disparity can affect students' ability to transition effectively between high school and college environments. As such, an intervention designed to explicitly teach self-management skills to first-semester college freshmen would foster greater student success. Self-management skills were particularly important during Fall 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic caused students and faculty to engage in an unfamiliar online learning environment. The health restrictions in place prevented students from being able to rely on typical social learning support systems like group study sessions and library visits. Building students' capacity to think metacognitively about their habits and goals, however, could aid all students in finding new mechanisms to be successful in the virtual classroom. As such, the goal of this activity was to empower students to reflect on their practices and adjust their habits to meet their goals. Though originally designed for an online course, this approach can be incorporated into in-person and hybrid courses effectively as well.

SELF-MANAGEMENT SURVEY AND CLASS DISCUSSION

As a first step for this activity, students complete a four-part pre-assessment survey designed to help them reflect on their current self-management practices (see complete survey in Appendix 1). The survey is shared at the end of the first or second week of the semester, after students have had a chance to experience college courses but before they are beginning to feel significant stress from coursework. I created the survey based in part on self-management advice shared in the Trinity College Dublin Student Learning Development website (*Self-Management Skills*, 2019). The survey starts by defining self-management and asking students to name four things they think would be important to include in a self-management plan. The next section tasks students with reflecting on their first weeks of college and how well they took care of their academic, social, and personal health needs through a series of statements. Students have to rate their agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). This section helps bring focus to best practices for self-management so students can evaluate how well they are meeting their goals before we discuss the topic in class. Priming students to consider the importance of these strategies in their college career can make them more receptive to the information covered in the class discussion. The third section of the survey is designed to help students think about their coping strategies when things go awry. This section also consists of a series of statements and students have to rate their agreement with each statement

on a five-point Likert scale. I wrote these statements after reflecting on ways students in previous semesters have struggled in their transition from high school to college and how these students perceived their own ability to learn and grow. For the final section, students must once again name four things that they would think would be important to include in a self-management plan. This repetition gives students a chance to engage in further reflection about their views on self-management after they have read several statements describing effective management strategies.

During the next course meeting, I ask students to use one word to describe how completing the self-management survey made them feel via *PollEverywhere* (<https://www.poll everywhere.com/>). The answers from students in my first year seminar course during Fall 2020 are presented in Figure 1. The responses show that students were engaged in reflection in a meaningful way. About half the students reported a positive feeling like confident, hopeful, or confident. Five of the students chose "aware" as the word that best described their experience with the survey. Six students chose negative words like anxious, inadequate, and stressed.



Figure 1: Students' responses to the question "In one word describe how completing the self-management survey made you feel." Word cloud created using WordArt (<https://wordart.com/>)

To help unpack their reactions and support students who feel stressed, I share their responses to the survey as summary graphs. This allows students to see that they are not alone if they are struggling, which might make them more likely to reach out for help since they know others would be doing so too. After going through their responses, I introduce students to the six dimensions of wellness model including emotional, social, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and occupational wellness (*Six Dimensions of Wellness*, n.d.) and to SMART goal setting (Boogaard, 2020). For the remaining class time, students work in small groups to brainstorm what categories and subcategories they would need to include in a comprehensive self-management plan based on a template I created, as shared below.

BRAINSTORM SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGY: SYNCHRONOUS GROUP ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Use this space to brainstorm what you would need to include in a comprehensive self-management plan.

WHY?

Studies have shown that having a clear plan can significantly increase the likelihood of us achieving our goals, so my hope is that in creating this plan, you will take one step forward to being successful in your first semester!

AND THEN?

I will look through your submissions and create a self-management strategy template for you to use to build your final plans.

I've included an example first entry to get you started

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>SUBCATEGORY</u>	<u>SAMPLE SMART GOAL</u>	<u>MOTIVATION HACK</u>
Health	Physical Health	Take a 30 min walk, 3x per week <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● M at 12pm ● W at 3pm ● Sa at 9am 	Call x friend while on walk to catch up
		Sleep 7hr every night	Use essential oils to transition to bedtime

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

I use students' brainstorming submissions to craft the final self-management template for the course activity. My goal is to have students go beyond learning about self-management and reflecting on their strengths. I want them to commit to making a deliberate plan to better support themselves through the semester. By including them in creating the self-management template we use as a class, I aim to give students a greater voice in the process and feel more invested in the outcome. Their responses also give me an opportunity to see what students are choosing as important so I can develop more targeted support strategies to help them gain a more holistic view of their wellness. I share the final self-management template with specific instructions, as described below.

At the end of the template, I include links to campus resources that could support students with each dimension of wellness. This includes links to campus counseling services, advising, peer tutoring, writing center, career center, fitness and recreation, health and dining services, student union, and religious and spiritual student organizations on campus. I also include toolkits for emotional, physical, and social wellness from the National Institutes of Health webpage (*Your Healthiest Self: Wellness Toolkits*, n.d.). These toolkits feature evidence-based strategies for healthy living published by the Office of Communications and Public Liaison in the NIH Office of the Director. A final set of links lead students to an online time management calculator and an assignment time calculator. By placing all these links

directly in the template and sorting them by dimension of wellness, I ensure that students have easy access to a number of resources that they can use should they need support.

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGY TEMPLATE: ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Use this template to design your self-management plan for the semester. Think about the categories included and add any that are important to you. This plan will be your guide to making decisions through the semester, so you can reflect on what your goals for yourself are and how best to meet them.

Remember to make SMART goals - be specific, make them measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. Also think about motivation hacks. How can you get yourself to start building these habits? What can you do to build in accountability so if your motivation is low, you can still follow through?

These will be very personal, so take some time to figure out what you want to focus on and how you'll do it.

An important point - you may not always be in perfect balance on all parts of your life. That's to be expected! Having this plan means you'll at least think about what things you are prioritizing right now and what you plan to get back to soon.

Add rows as you need to. I've set this up with a few subcategories per category, but you can adapt it as you see fit.

Once you're done, you can submit this document on Moodle.

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>SUBCATEGORY</u>	<u>SAMPLE SMART GOAL</u>	<u>MOTIVATION HACK</u>
Physical	Nutrition		
	Sleep		
	Activity		
	Tech		
Emotional	Stress		
	Resilience		
	Balancing obligations		
	Decision making		
	Seeking Help		

Intellectual	Studying		
	Time and Energy Management		
	Hobbies		
Occupational	Organization		
	Building Skills		
Social	Family		
	Friends		
	Community		
Spiritual	Reflection		
	Connection		
	Empathy		

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGY: ASSESSMENT

To hold students accountable for creating their plans, I ask them to submit their self-management strategy to me at the end of the third week of the semester. I grade their submissions on a pass/fail basis, awarding 10 points to any student who completes the matrix with a clear list of goals and motivation hacks. I want students to claim ownership over their plans and therefore I do not judge the goals they decided to set. However, I do offer advice to students if their goals do not follow the SMART framework or if their motivation hacks are not well defined by adding written comments in the assignment feedback space in our learning management system. I offer suggestions on how to amend their submissions and alternative ways to think about motivation. Because motivation hacks are incredibly personal, it is difficult to give specific examples that would work for all students, so I make an effort to brainstorm ideas based on their specific submissions and goals. For example, one student identified stress as an element of emotional well-being they wanted to work on. They set a goal to "stay organized" and their motivation hack was written as "keep a schedule." While staying organized is a goal, it isn't a SMART goal and keeping a schedule would not necessarily work as a motivation hack without some further clarification. With this in mind, I tailored my advice to this student as follows:

"Thanks for sharing your self-management strategy! This is a good start! I would suggest revisiting your goals - can you find ways to make them more specific and measurable? Research shows that we are more likely to meet our goals if they follow the SMART model. Also consider your motivation hacks.

These should be things you can do to counteract your resistance to creating a new habit. Like for staying organized, perhaps you can think about what types of schedules work for you, how you usually organize your time, and if there's a way to make that process more fun. For example, I have a faculty friend who uses stickers to keep herself motivated to reach her writing goals! There is no right or wrong here, my hope is that I can help you build skills to reach your goals effectively and provide support along the way!"

In my feedback, I am able to reiterate the principles underlying the activity and provide some examples of motivation hacks specific to the student's concern. Another student picked a goal of exercising three times per week by taking a walk for at least half a mile, which is a specific and measurable goal, but chose their motivation hack as "tell yourself you like it." For this student, I was able to provide examples of exercise-related motivation hacks, for instance, choosing to listen to a podcast you enjoy only while you are on your walk.

SELF-MANAGEMENT REFLECTIONS

Creating a plan does not ensure that the plan is useful or likely to be followed, which makes continued reflection and adaptation a vital part of successful planning. I built these processes into the structure of this activity by including two self-management reflections over the course of the semester. For their first self-management review, students revise and resubmit their strategy after midterms during week 7-8 of the semester. This assignment requires students to revisit their original goals, reassess what parts of their plan are working well and what strategies they may need to address. The timing of this assignment encourages students to be reflective and metacognitive at a critical part of the semester. Adjustments at this stage could give students a chance to improve their performance within the current semester, reinforcing the value of effective self-management. For this revision, I amend the self-management strategy template to include reflection questions in the instructions as shown below, leaving the table and resource links within the template document.

REVISED SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGY TEMPLATE: ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Use this template to revise your self-management plan for the semester. You've been using this plan as your guide for making decisions so far this semester, so you can reflect on how things have been going and where you may need to adjust your strategy.

To start - copy and paste your self-management strategy table in place of the one below. When you're making revisions, please use a different color!

Reflection Questions:

Take a few minutes to read through your strategy and reflect on how it's working so far.

Where are you succeeding?

Where might you need to devise some new strategies?

Remember to make SMART goals - be specific, make them measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. Also think about your motivation hacks. Have they been working? How can you change them to serve you better?

Students have a second self-management review during week 12-13 of the semester so they can once again fine tune their strategies to be as successful as possible in their first college finals week. For this review, students are asked to revisit their self-management strategy ahead of the class meeting and come with any questions about what is working and what could be improved. We spend one class meeting discussing ways to plan time and coursework ahead of finals. This review could be adapted to be similar to the midterm reflection if a class meeting time cannot be reserved for it. The aim is to get students to engage in the process of assessing their plans and devising strategies that would help them change course as needed, which can be accomplished through a written reflection. I offer feedback on midterm and pre-finals self-management reflections following a similar model as the first self-management submission. I give students constructive feedback on the structure of their goals and motivation hacks and provide advice and support as needed.

CONCLUSION

Self-management skills are critical to student success and can serve students during their college careers and beyond. This activity provides a framework to engage students in thinking about their self-management, setting goals to better care for their own wellness, and reflect and revise their plans over the course of a semester. Students reported an appreciation for the self-management strategy activity as part of an informal end of term survey, describing several ways in which the activity was impactful.

Although students had been exposed to concepts regarding effective self-management, most of their previous experiences involved being given a specific list of practices to adopt without engaging in self-assessment first. Having to construct their own self-management plan gave students autonomy over the process and revealed where they needed more support. One student commented "when you actually have to write it up, you realized where the gaps are," highlighting the value of asking students to create and submit a plan. Having the physical plan also gave students a point of reference through the semester and beyond. In a short interview during the following semester, a student from this course shared that the self-management strategy continued to help them with "focusing and centering myself on what I need to do." Another student who identified the self-management plan as a useful reference point said the plan functioned as a reminder "that if you do these, you can do it, you will be successful in your endeavors" showcasing the value of setting goals with intention. In addition, several students noted that completing the self-management activity as a class and addressing these issues together helped them feel less isolated in their struggles.

As part of the survey, students identified their top five tips for success during college. Their answers showed that students understood the importance of physical and emotional wellness in effective self-management. As an example, here are one student's top tips:

1. Plan ahead.
2. Work out a daily general schedule, including sleep and mealtimes, but don't forget to be flexible.
3. Write down all of your assignments and deadlines whether in a physical or digital planner.
4. If you're at a point where you're exhausted and can't work, take a short nap or if it's closer to bedtime, get ready to go to bed. You aren't going to do your best work when you are exhausted.
5. If you are mentally exhausted - reach out to someone, whether it be a friend, family, your professor, or a trained professional. Your mental health (and physical health but that relates more to tip 4) takes priority.

These tips capture multiple categories and subcategories of the self-management strategy template and effectively weave the advice together into quick tips that could help any student be more successful in college. Another student similarly described a holistic approach to self-management in their tips: "sleep, take breaks when you need, eat, and do not stress yourself or things get worse." Several of the students also identified the importance of balance and seeking help, as showcased in this set of top tips:

1. Time management is key, especially having free time included in a schedule of some kind.
2. Never overexert yourself, both physically and mentally. It'll end up just hurting you in the long run for classes.
3. If you do need help with something, go seek it out. There isn't any shame in needing help for an assignment or your mental health.
4. Academic advising centers are there to help if you have problems with a specific professor, if there's just something not working and the professor refuses to listen.
5. Studying is more important than ever here. I usually didn't study but found myself doing so for a number of my classes throughout the semester and will definitely have to continue doing so.

During an end-of-semester reflection letter one student shared these words of advice regarding the self-management strategy to future students taking this course, "Actually try the strategies you list on this template. Life is so much more enjoyable when you're not overwhelmed with trying to complete your assignments." These impressions show the transformative capacity of the self-management activity.

This activity can be used as written in any first-year undergraduate course regardless of discipline and the timeline can be adjusted to fit individual courses. The activity can be adapted for courses that might not have in-class time to dedicate to these activities by creating online modules for students to work through these reflections independently, in which case I recommend offering each student specific feedback on their plans so they can see that you will be holding them accountable. This activity can also be integrated into 200 level courses and above as even students who are well versed in these strategies can benefit from creating a plan and assessing its effectiveness over the course of a semester. The additional accountability offered by turning this type of work into an assignment ensures more students undertake the planning process and check back in with their plans to remember the strategies they had hoped to use over the semester. Through this process, students can gain important skills in goal setting and time management that will help them through their college careers and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Boogaard, K. (2020, November 15). *An explanation of SMART goals and how to write them*. <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/productivity/how-to-write-smart-goals>
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APPENDIX 1

SELF-MANAGEMENT SURVEY (PRE-ASSESSMENT)

SECTION 1

Description: This survey is meant to help me get to know you better and understand what you excel at and where you may need more support. There are no wrong answers here, and this will only be graded in that you get participation points for completing this activity. Be honest with yourself as you work through this survey. It should not take you more than ~15 minutes.

Question: Self-management is described as management of or by oneself; the taking of responsibility for one's own behavior and well-being. Name 4 things that you think would be important to include in a self-management plan.

SECTION 2: REFLECTING ON WEEK 1 OF COLLEGE

Reflect on your first week in college and answer the below questions

Rate on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree)

1. In the last week, I was able to keep track of what I needed to do for my classes.
2. In the last week, I completed all the assignments I was given for my new classes.
3. In the last week, I was able to effectively balance my academic and social life.
4. In the last week, I got at least 7 hours of sleep every night.
5. In this last week, I did not miss any meals.
6. In this last week, I connected with my family and friends.
7. In this last week, I made time for exercise at least once.
8. In this last week, I took time to relax and do something I really enjoy.
9. In this last week, I used a planner or calendar to keep myself organized.
10. In this last week, I spent some time away from a screen every day.
11. In this last week, I enjoyed the work I had to do for my classes.

SECTION 3: SELF-MANAGEMENT AT A GLANCE

For this section, you don't have to focus on your first week here. Reflect on your experiences through school and answer the below as honestly as you can. Remember, there are no wrong answers!

Rate on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree)

1. If I run into academic trouble, I know where to find help.
2. I have a reliable system to make sure I don't miss any deadlines.
3. I have never had to really study before and I'm not sure I know how to do it.
4. I don't think college is that much harder than high school.
5. I'm afraid of failure and don't know how I would cope with it.
6. I can reflect on my own habits and figure out if something is not working.
7. If I'm not good at something at the start, I usually give up and don't try again.
8. If I have a hard project to complete, I can break it down into steps and make a plan for how to complete it.

9. I don't think I can go to a professor if I have questions about college life.
10. I know how to take effective notes, whether on a reading or during lectures.
11. I can recognize when my mental health is suffering.
12. I don't know where to find help with mental and emotional support.

SECTION 4: SELF-MANAGEMENT REVISITED

Description: Now that you've completed the self-management survey, answer this question again. Did anything change from your first answer? Why do you think that is?

Question: Name 4 things that you think would be important to include in a self-management plan.