Imposter Syndrome in Higher Ed: Faculty and Students

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Imposter Syndrome in Higher Ed: Faculty & Students

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Defining Imposter Syndrome

- Despite evidence, fears being exposed as not having the expertise expected in your role.
- Despite evidence, feels like a fraud.
- Attributes success to luck, masking skills, or the work of other people.
- Internalizes failure and over-focus on mistakes.
- Over-estimates abilities of others, underestimates amount of work those individuals put in.

Assumption: Despite evidence, fears being exposed as not having the expertise expected in your role.
Reality: Despite evidence, feels like a fraud.

What The Literature Says

- Experienced by 70% of people, higher in fields with peer review (1, 2).
- More prevalent in certain sub-groups (1, 2, 3):
  - high achievers/perfectionists
  - advanced degrees
  - racial, ethnic, religious minorities
- Impacts institution’s ability to retain students, faculty and staff (2).
- Faculty: Workaholic behaviors lead to burnout and lower work satisfaction (2).
- Students (2):
  - positively correlates to anxiety & depression
  - negatively correlates to self-esteem & self-efficacy

Triggers

- Faculty:
  - Rejection in “publish or perish” culture
  - Constant performance review with high growth and performance expectations
  - Aggressive competitiveness
  - Scholarly isolation and institutional silos

- Students:
  - New class or project in competitive environment
  - Constant assessment
  - Push for continued growth in content knowledge and transferable skills

Institutional Supports

- Students:
  - Mental health coaching and mentoring
  - Open discussions: name it, debunk myths, and normalize
  - Faculty as models of resilience

- Faculty:
  - Group peer mentoring
  - Mentor training in recognizing imposter syndrome
  - Identification of organizational expectations with appropriate boundaries
  - The Empress Has No Clothes or The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women

Recognizing Imposter Syndrome in yourself may allow you to recognize it in your peers and students

Recommended

Be Impeccable With Your Word
- Feelings are not facts. Mind your self-talk. You’re listening.
- Reframe failure to use it for growth and learning.

Don’t Take Anything Personally
- Learn how to accept critical feedback without internalizing failures.

Don’t Make Assumptions
- Maintain a growth mindset. Revisit successes to see yourself in context.
- “I have not failed. I’ve found 10,000 ways that won’t work” – Thomas Edison

Always Do Your Best
- Be realistic about failure potential. Set realistic expectations of yourself.

The Four Agreements

- What I think others know
- What I know
- What others know
- What I know