Five ways to celebrate our students’ success: to motivate and inspire students to engage with opportunities while at university, build resilience, continue in their studies, and reach their full potential.

As a University, we are rightly keen to celebrate student success, e.g. the annual Academic Excellence award. However, research shows that attempts to celebrate success can have the unintended consequence of demotivating students. This summary suggests ways to inspire students, which are informed by research (see references below).

Why might the success of other students be demotivating to some of their peers?
The way success is celebrated can demotivate rather than motivate some students. If recognition of success, explicitly or implicitly, implies that success is based on innate talent, rather than hard work and effort, then success may not seem achievable. For instance, if I don’t hear about another student’s journey to achieve the result being celebrated, I may not believe it’s possible for me to achieve. If I don’t know that effort was required and already believe that innate talent is what is needed to achieve such results, then I am likely to attribute their success to innate talent and so rule out the possibility of me attaining such results.

Moreover, achieving similar success can seem impossible if an individual cannot identify with the successful student. Indeed, if I explain success in terms of innate talent, I am more likely to avoid challenges and procrastinate in case someone finds me out! This can often be fuelled by a fear of failure. Also, if I don’t know that ‘successful’ people have faced setbacks, then when I face challenges I may not believe that my experience is normal. As a result, I might be more likely to give up believing that my difficulties are insurmountable.

Positive ways of celebrating success
Celebrating student success by praising the process that they have undertaken encourages others to consider that talent and ability can be developed and enhanced. Showing how they have succeeded can motivate peers to put time and effort into their studies at university (in and outside of the classroom) and so to persist to achieve their goals.

5 recommended ways of celebrating student success

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<tr>
<th>Celebrate success!</th>
<th>How</th>
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<td>1. Praise effort (i.e. process) not ability (i.e. person)</td>
<td>Celebrate hard work rather than talent or being clever/smart or their worth; say ‘you’ve worked hard’; avoid saying ‘you’re great’, ‘you’re so talented/smart’</td>
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<td>2. Normalise difficulty and hard work</td>
<td>Show students the range of challenges others students have faced and how they have overcome those challenges. This also models appropriate help-seeking behaviour and building resilience</td>
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<td>3. Provide examples of overcoming challenges</td>
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<td>4. Show that student success is possible for all students accepted onto courses at Essex.</td>
<td>Interview successful students and alumni from a range of backgrounds. Providing competent role models whose successes are explicit and accessible is important for raising the aspirations of those who might experience stereotype threat. Celebrating the success of students and alumni representing the diverse character of the University community increases the likelihood of more students being inspired and motivated to succeed.</td>
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<td>5. Show how students get involved.</td>
<td>Be explicit about the steps for participating in an activity (i.e. the rules of engagement should not be hidden or only evident to a privileged few who have inside knowledge). Don’t simply instruct them to ‘get involved’.</td>
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For more information contact the Student Engagement Team studentengagement@essex.ac.uk

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1 For examples, colleagues can email studentengagement@essex.ac.uk for student accounts of ‘How I bounced back from a grade I was disappointed with’.
References


