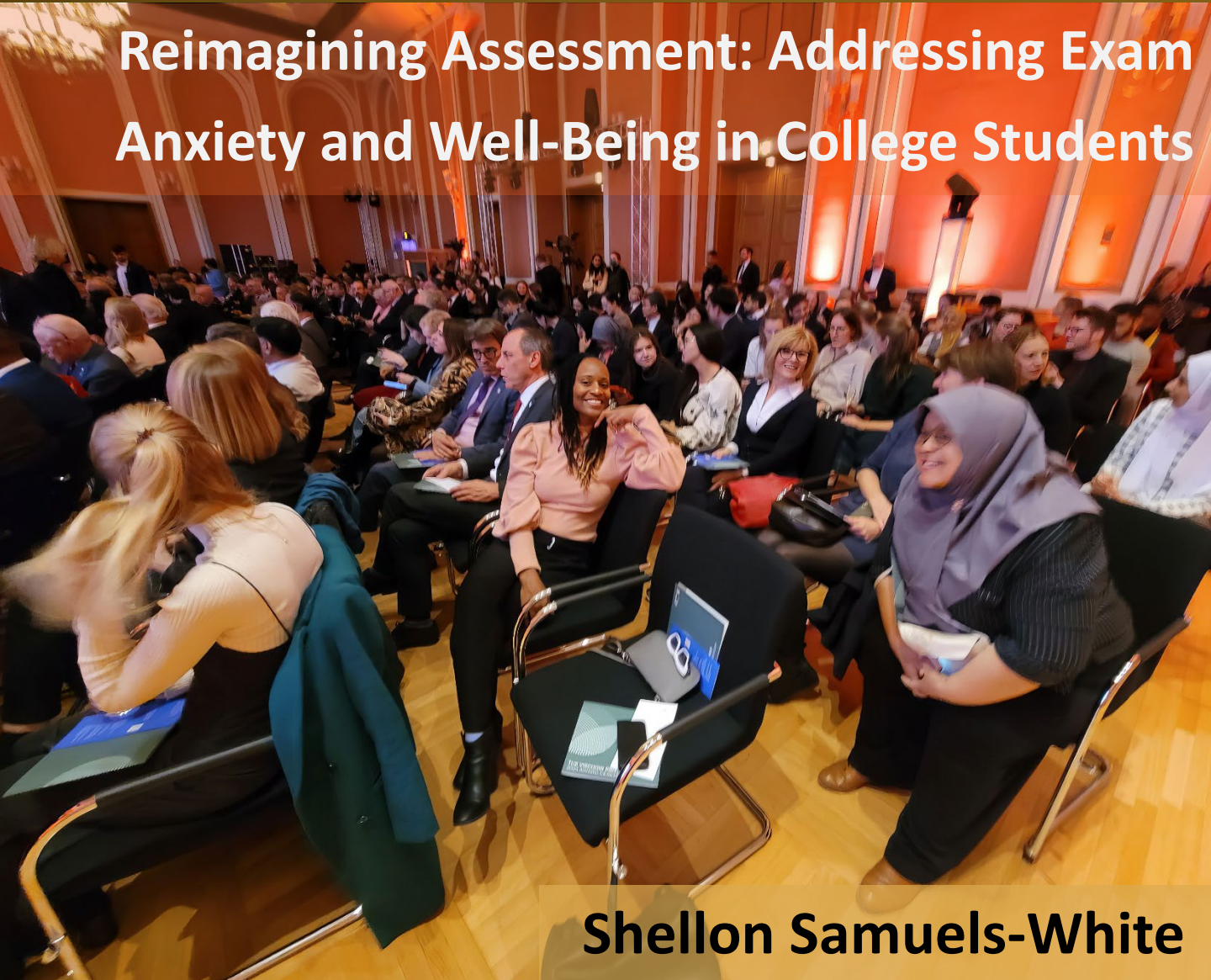


AUTUMN 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Reimagining Assessment: Addressing Exam Anxiety and Well-Being in College Students



Shellon Samuels-White



The Worthy Educator

theworthyeducator.com



Reimagining Assessment: Addressing Exam Anxiety and Well-Being in College Students

Shellon Samuels-White, Student
Assessment Officer and Learning
Facilitator, The MICO University
College, Kingston, Jamaica



Assessment is a core feature of academic life, yet for many students, it remains a significant source of anxiety. A 2024 institutional survey conducted at a Jamaican teacher training college revealed that of the 178 participants, 30% reported low levels of exam anxiety (levels 1–2), 49% reported moderate levels (levels 3–4), and 21% experienced severe anxiety (level 5). Using a 5-point Likert scale, the survey identified key contributors to anxiety, including poor study habits, limited preparation time, perceived misalignment between course content and exam questions, and overlapping assignment deadlines. Students recommended interventions such as stress management workshops, better coordination of assessment scheduling across courses, and clearer study guides. These findings are consistent with research by Khoshhal et al. (2017), who noted that exam anxiety affects 20–35% of university students, particularly younger populations, and often manifests as excessive worry, nervousness, and even depression related to assessment outcomes. Such anxiety is frequently amplified by stressful academic environments.

For teacher trainees, many of whom are first-generation college students, the pressure is compounded. They are required to manage their own mental well-being while simultaneously preparing to support the emotional and academic needs of future learners. Supporting aspiring teachers through assessment reform is therefore both a pedagogical necessity and a moral imperative. This article presents an integrated response: the A.S.S.E.S.S. model - a suite of student-centered strategies designed to reduce exam anxiety and foster assessment practices that promote both learning and wellness. These strategies are grounded in institutional survey findings and informed by qualitative research on how school leaders support students' mental health, making them highly relevant for tertiary teacher education contexts.



The A.S.S.E.S.S. Model: A Student-Centered Response to Exam Anxiety

Increased exam anxiety among tertiary students calls for responsive and compassionate assessment reform. The A.S.S.E.S.S. Model offers a practical, student-centered framework designed to address the emotional and systemic challenges associated with high-stakes assessment. Grounded in institutional research and educational best practices, the model outlines six key strategies: *Acknowledge Anxiety, Structure Support Around Assessment, Stagger and Synchronize Workloads, Embed Emotional Wellness, Shift Toward Balanced Assessment Practices, and Sustain Systemic Support*. Together, these strategies promote more equitable, wellness-oriented assessment environments that enable students to thrive both academically and emotionally.

A: Acknowledge Anxiety



Anxiety thrives in silence. In the survey 70% of students experience moderate to severe levels of exam anxiety. Findings suggest that this anxiety was often linked to fear of failure, unclear assessment expectations, and low academic self-confidence. When such emotions are left unacknowledged, they can silently undermine students' ability to focus, retain information, and perform. However, neuroscience shows us that emotions are not distractions from learning, they are

fundamental to it. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue that cognition and emotion are intertwined, and that processes central to education such as memory, attention, and decision-making, are subsumed within the processes of emotion. In fact learning depends on students' emotional states and their ability to interpret and respond to emotionally significant situations, like exams.

Therefore, facilitators can start courses or exam periods with brief, intentional conversations about stress and coping. Emotional check-ins such as simply asking, "*How are you feeling about the upcoming exam?*", help normalize these experiences and activate *emotional thought*, allowing students to process their anxiety constructively. According to Immordino-Yang and Damasio, when students feel emotionally safe and acknowledged, they are better able to access and apply their cognitive abilities in meaningful ways. This is not just about being kind; it is about supporting the emotional-cognitive processes that underlie true learning. When students feel seen and supported, their anxiety is less likely to derail their focus, and their trust in the learning environment increases. This emotional validation is a critical first step in promoting resilience, engagement, and academic success.

S: Structure Support Around Assessment



The survey data revealed important insights into the types of support students find most helpful. Students consistently emphasized the need for both practical and emotional resources to manage the pressures associated with assessments. Key strategies they identified include access to counselling and stress management services, participation in test-taking strategy workshops, and better management of assignment deadlines through staggering due dates across courses. Additionally, students expressed a strong desire for more study time, clearer alignment between course content and exam expectations, and the provision of study guides to help focus their preparation. These findings highlight that exam anxiety is a multifaceted challenge that can significantly impact student success.

Interestingly, the survey also revealed that higher study hours do not necessarily equate to lower anxiety; in fact, students who reported longer, intense study periods often experienced greater exam anxiety. This apparent paradox can be better understood through the lens of Cognitive Load Theory, as recently synthesized by Ouwehand et al. (2025). CLT integrates cognitive psychology and instructional design principles to optimize learning, particularly emphasizing the limits of working memory capacity and information processing. In today's information-rich learning environments, learners face increasing cognitive demands and a continuous influx of stimuli, which can overwhelm

working memory and lead to cognitive overload. This overload not only impairs learning efficiency but also exacerbates stress and anxiety (Ouwehand et al., 2025). In addition, long study marathons may unintentionally contribute to this overload by bombarding students with excessive information. Such study habits can increase mental fatigue and reduce the ability to filter and focus on relevant material, reinforcing the anxiety that students seek to reduce.

In light of these insights, faculty members have a vital role in creating assessment environments that reduce anxiety and promote effective learning. One of the most effective approaches is to increase assessment literacy among students by offering workshops or sessions that clearly explain grading rubrics, criteria, and expectations. When students understand how their work will be evaluated, they experience less uncertainty, which can alleviate anxiety and empower them to engage more confidently with assessments. By adopting these recommendations, faculty can create equitable and supportive learning environments that reduce anxiety, increase academic confidence, and foster resilience. Ultimately, such efforts not only improve immediate academic outcomes but also equip students with lifelong skills for managing stress and learning effectively beyond their university experience.

S: Stagger and Synchronize Workloads



Another key finding from the student survey was that overlapping deadlines across courses significantly contributed to elevated stress and exam anxiety. Students expressed that having major assignments or exams due in the same week made it difficult to prioritize effectively and often led to last-minute cramming, sleep deprivation, and emotional exhaustion.

This feedback highlights a critical structural issue in how assessments are scheduled across the programs. To address this, faculty could collaborate within departments and across programs to synchronize assessment schedules where possible. This way students are better able to manage their time, engage more deeply with content, and reduce the cognitive and emotional overload that results from multiple simultaneous demands. When students are faced with competing tasks that require simultaneous attention, such as multiple assessments due at once, their ability to effectively process and retain information diminishes, resulting in poorer academic outcomes and greater stress. Cognitive load theory suggests that managing the timing and distribution of learning tasks is essential for avoiding overload in the working memory, which can impair learning and increase anxiety (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Ouwehand et al., 2025). Coordinated assessment planning can therefore reduce these stressors, enhancing both performance and well-being.

E: Embed Emotional Wellness



A consistent theme in the student survey was the need for more emotional support structures during the exam period. Many students identified stress and emotional fatigue as major contributor to their exam anxiety, with several specifically recommending access to counselling services and wellness strategies integrated into their academic routines. This suggests that emotional wellness should not be seen as separate from academic success, but rather as an essential foundation for it. Emotional regulation and well-being are central to effective learning. As Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue, *"We feel, therefore we learn."* Emotions are deeply interwoven with cognitive functioning, decision-making, and memory. When students are emotionally overwhelmed, their ability to process information, focus, and perform under pressure is compromised. Therefore, intentionally embedding emotional wellness practices into assessment preparation can foster healthier academic engagement and reduce the physiological symptoms associated with exam stress.

This approach is supported by findings in the literature. A meta-analysis by Zoogman et al. (2015) found that mindfulness-based interventions significantly reduced anxiety and improved psychological well-being among college students. Likewise, Bamber and Schneider (2016) reported that brief, embedded mindfulness practices in academic settings improved focus and decreased stress, particularly during high-pressure periods like exams. Integrating these strategies within academic routines not only reduces anxiety but also promotes a growth-oriented academic mindset - one in which students can see assessments not as threats, but as opportunities for reflection and progress.

The embedding of wellness practices should be proactive rather than reactive. Faculty can model and encourage these strategies during the semester by incorporating wellness check-ins during class, offering self-care reminders during exam preparation, and creating space for emotional validation around assessment periods. Ultimately, embedding emotional wellness within assessment processes is not just about reducing anxiety - it's about transforming the culture of assessment itself. By addressing the emotional dimensions of academic life, institutions can support student well-being, increase academic resilience, and create more humane and effective educational environments.



S: Shift Toward Balanced Assessment Practices



Student feedback from the survey and performance data from a 15-course audit pointed to the limitations of relying heavily on high-stakes exams. The audit showed that in most courses, there was a negative correlation between coursework and exam scores - students generally performed better on coursework than on final exams. This suggests that the current practice of incorporating more coursework and performance-based assessments within the assessment framework provides students with multiple, low-pressure opportunities to demonstrate understanding over time - an approach that can mitigate anxiety and promote deeper learning.

Formative assessments such as quizzes, in-class activities, reflective tasks, and peer reviews not only diversify evaluation but also serve as rehearsal for higher-stakes assessments. These regular, lower-pressure tasks help students build confidence, strengthen content mastery, and develop time management and test-taking skills in a supportive context. By the time students face final exams, they are better prepared - both cognitively and emotionally.

In response to these insights, faculty have been encouraged to balance summative assessments with diverse, formative tasks. These assessment types allow students to showcase their learning in varied ways that align with different strengths. At the same time, support for exam preparation remains essential. Strategies such as offering study skills sessions, clarifying exam expectations, and explicitly teaching test-taking strategies help reduce uncertainty and build students' confidence before high-stakes assessments. Rather than eliminating exams altogether, this balanced model promotes preparation, resilience, and academic success without compromising students' mental wellbeing.

S - Sustain Systemic Support



For assessment reform to be meaningful and lasting, it must be embedded within institutional systems - not left to individual instructors alone. Survey responses highlighted the need for ongoing mental health support, accessible academic coaching, and more responsive institutional practices. Academic leadership plays a crucial role in driving this change. This includes embedding wellness initiatives into curriculum design, incorporating student feedback on assessment into formal quality assurance processes, and training faculty in **trauma-informed pedagogy** and **equitable grading practices**. Such training enables faculty to better recognize the emotional and cognitive impacts of

stress on learning and performance - especially among teacher trainees preparing for professional practice under high pressure.

Further, tertiary institutions can adapt strategies such as **expanded guidance counselling services, social-emotional learning (SEL) integration, and school-wide frameworks**. These serve a dual purpose: supporting current trainees and modelling best practices that these future educators can replicate in their own classrooms. Sustaining these supports across systems ensures that assessment reform is not a temporary fix but a **permanent shift toward more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments**.

Our Response: Mission Exam Possible

Informed by student survey results and course audit data, the institution's Assessment Unit launched a comprehensive campaign titled ***Mission: Exam Possible***. This semesterly initiative, rolled out the month leading up to final exams, is grounded in the **A.S.S.E.S.S. Framework**, which emphasizes structural support, emotional wellness, balanced assessment practices, and systemic alignment to improve student outcomes.

Key components of the initiative included:

Weekly Study & Mindfulness Tips (Weeks 1–4): Curated strategies were sent to both students and academic staff, promoting steady exam preparation, stress management, and wellness habits.

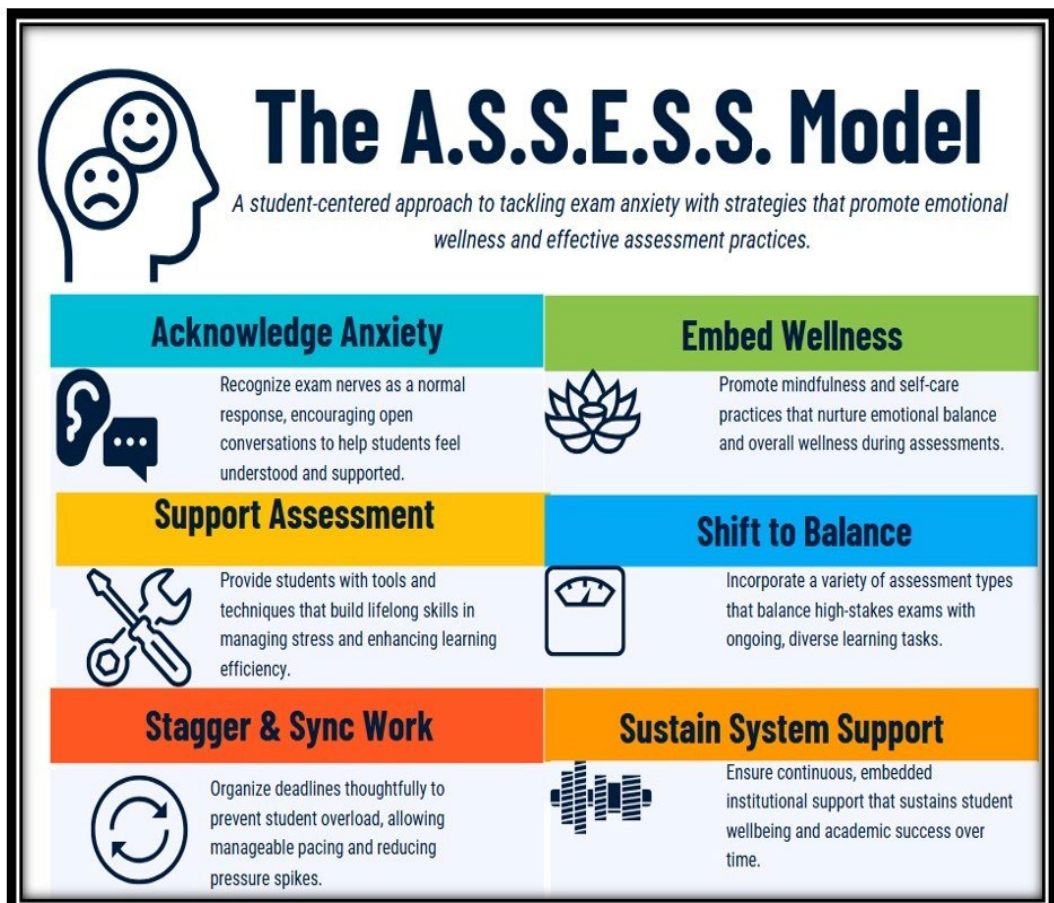
Exam Preparation Webinar – “Answer Like a Pro: Mastering Exam Questions & Busting Test Anxiety!” This interactive session equipped students with practical tools for success, including test-taking strategies, guidance on interpreting common exam verbs, and evidence-based anxiety-reduction techniques.

Faculty Newsletter: Distributed to academic staff, this bulletin shared key findings from the student survey and offered actionable suggestions for reducing student stress through improved assessment design and communication.

Faculty Training Videos: A series of concise, practical videos were created to support faculty in developing equitable, inclusive, and balanced assessments -spanning both coursework and exams. These resources were aligned with best practices and directly responsive to students' expressed needs.

Together, these initiatives reflect a systemic, research-informed approach to assessment reform. By equipping both students and faculty with the tools they need, *Mission: Exam Possible* embodies our commitment to reducing exam anxiety and fostering academic success through supportive, student-centered practices.

“The A.S.S.E.S.S. model reframes academic evaluation not merely as a grading mechanism but as a critical opportunity to foster well-being. Assessment reform is not only a pedagogical improvement; it is a moral and systemic responsibility. Future educators deserve to learn in environments where assessment practices model the empathy and equity they are expected to bring to their own classrooms.”



The Mico University College Student Assessment Unit

The Mico University College Student Assessment Unit, under the leadership of Dr. Valri Morgan, (Director) and Shellon Samuels-White (Student Assessment Officer), is setting the stage for a new era of academic quality and integrity. The Unit is responsible for auditing institutional assessment systems to ensure full compliance with the Institution's quality assurance framework. From reviewing grading practices and moderating results to training faculty in effective item design, it is establishing a strong foundation for fairness and accountability in teaching and learning.

In addition, the unit systematically collects and analyzes information to improve student learning and to enable instructors to measure the effectiveness of their teaching. By ensuring that goals and student learning outcomes are clearly documented, it empowers faculty to institutionalize effective strategies while refining those that are less successful. Guided by its commitment to Validity, Reliability & Transparency, the Student Assessment Unit is driving innovation in assessment and securing a future where teaching and learning at The Mico University College continuously evolve with excellence.

References

Bamber, M. D., & Kraenzle Schneider, J. (2016). Mindfulness-based meditation to decrease stress and anxiety in college students: A narrative synthesis of the research. *Educational Research Review*, 18, 1–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.12.004>

Immordino-Yang, M. H., & Damasio, A. (2007). We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education. *Mind, Brain and Education*, 1(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-228X.2007.00004.x>

Misra, R., & Castillo, L. G. (2004). Academic stress among college students: Comparison of American and international students. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 11(2), 132–148. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1072-5245.11.2.132>

Ouwehand, K., Lespiau, F., Tricot, A., & Paas, F. (2025). Cognitive Load Theory: Emerging Trends and Innovations. *Education Sciences*, 15(4), 458. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040458>

Zoogman, S., Goldberg, S. B., Hoyt, W. T., & Miller, L. (2015). Mindfulness Interventions with Youth: A Meta-Analysis. *Mindfulness*, 6(2), 290–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-013-0260-4>



Shellon Samuels-White is a Faculty Lecturer and University College Student Assessment Officer for The MICO University College in Kingston, Jamaica. In addition, she is recognized as a Worthy Educator Leader for her strong voice on issues that are of importance to colleagues and stakeholders. She is well-published and well-respected as an author and presenter both in Jamaica and internationally.



Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworhtyeducator.com/journal.