

The Stanford Daily

Sink, swim or paddle like a duck?

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By [Courtney Weaver](#)

With the onset of spring quarter-like weather this past weekend, many students abandoned studying at Meyer and Green libraries for taking naps on Wilbur Field and running on Campus Drive.

For its warm weather and West Coast attitude, Stanford often earns the reputation of being more laid back than its peer institutions. Yet recently, some have been complaining that this attitude is simply a facade for overcommitted schedules and dangerously high levels of stress.

This problem can be summed up best by its endearingly titled nickname, “the duck syndrome.” As one student in the “2003 Fisk Guide to Colleges” explains, “[Students] look peaceful on the surface but they’re paddling like mad underneath.”

At a Frosh Council meeting last year, students brought up the issue after feeling overwhelmed from running Frosh Formal and a talent show in addition to keeping up with their school work.

A panel of four students was consequently formed with the help of Dean of Freshmen and Transfer Students Julie Lythcott-Haims and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education John Bravman to formally address the issue in front of a group of about 75 administrators.

The topic of the Jan. 20 meeting was “Addressing the Stanford Duck Syndrome: Calm on the Surface But Paddling Like Mad To Stay Afloat.” There were over 35 administrators in attendance. The program featured a panel of four upperclassmen, sharing their experiences from freshman year.

“Students have told us that Stanford’s laid-back culture makes them want to put up a facade to make it look like they can easily balance the complexities of college life and academics,” Lythcott-Haims said. “But with every student erecting a facade it appears that no one has to work hard to succeed, so a student who is working hard just to keep up feels he or she must not be as smart as the rest of the class.”

“Worse, when a student is struggling?there is little support in the student community because everyone is acting as if they are not very stressed or concerned about such things,” she added.

Lythcott-Haims does not believe that a specific solution necessarily needs to be found, however. Rather, the key action that can be taken is simply exposing the issue so that students feel more comfortable expressing their frustrations. As a result, it is hoped that they will feel less isolated.

Since the meeting, the administration has already made an effort to accomplish this with the “Celebr’08 Mid-Year Convocation for Freshmen,” which will likely become a winter quarter tradition.

“I think the administrators in attendance left the meeting with a better understanding of the stresses that face students in their first year at Stanford,” said Krista Zizzo, student affairs officer in the Office of Freshman and Transfer Students. “Hopefully, it opened the door for [students] to talk about their own experiences with others in their dorm.”

The Freshman Dean’s office also created the new Web site, <http://frosh.stanford.edu> as a resource for freshmen.

“It features ‘Words of Wisdom’ from upper class students and links to information and resources to help students get connected to the departments that are here to help them succeed at Stanford,” Zizzo said.

This goes along with Lythcott-Haims’ whole philosophy of how to address the issue of the duck syndrome in general.

“This is not as much about fixing a problem as about getting students to talk about their stressors and worries and in so doing to realize they are not alone,” Lythcott-Haims said.

Sophomore Elizabeth Heng, a member of the panel, said that competition was the underlying factor of students’ behaviors.

“You’re putting basically the top three percent of the world together and you’re competing to be like the top 0.05 percent of the world,” Heng said. “And everyone puts up this facade that everything’s okay [when it’s not]. And they don’t know what to do when there really is a problem.”

Sophomore Alok Deshpande, who was a member of Frosh Council last year, agreed.

“Students were saying ‘I’m taking 20 units, I’m in three a cappella groups and I’m doing fine,’” he said. “People felt like when they got to the end of the quarter, everything really hit, but by that point it was too late and they were already too overcommitted.”

Deshpande said he thinks that students’ overextension can be credited to the propagation of the duck syndrome and a misperception that “Everyone else is doing fine with this amount of work, so why am I not doing fine?”

“The administration wants us to be ducks,” freshman Yuron Greif said. He elaborated that the University fosters an atmosphere that promotes a relaxed environment but still pressures students to work extremely hard.

Freshman Scott McCracken, however, said he thinks that the blame falls more upon the students than upon the administration.

“I just don’t really think it’s the administration’s job to deal with it,” McCracken said. “It’s the students’ job to look out for each other.”

However, some students said that the duck phenomenon is altogether not necessarily a bad thing.

Freshman Carolyn Mansfield said, “I’d rather that everyone just not talk about [all their work] than be openly competitive.”

Freshman Jordi Handcox agreed.

“I think due to the duck phenomenon, students here are a lot happier, even if it is just a facade,” she said.

Self-proclaimed “duck” and freshman Ann Lucena also said that she sees the benefits of a duck attitude on campus.

“I don’t do it for other people, I just do it for myself,” she said. “It’s much more enjoyable to be relaxed, even if at times you’re working hard. From what I hear, it seems like people at other schools are really stressed and it will be apparent right away from talking to them. Here, a lot of people seem really calm even if they’re working hard.”

Others, such as freshman Peter Prowitt, don’t even buy into the idea of a duck phenomenon at all.

“I feel like people are either laid back or they’re stressed out,” and not somewhere in the middle, he said.

A basketball player, Prowitt said he thinks that athletes tend to be more relaxed than other students.

“Athletes in general are more laid back because they have their schedule already planned out for them, so they don’t really have time to waste and they are able to get their work done.”

Crew member and freshman Jake Pashelinsky said that some people are simply laid back.

“I think some people are laid back, but not everybody,” he said. “And there are definitely a lot of people who don’t work very hard.”

Handcox labeled these students “rubber ducks” who “just float along, enjoying college life without paddling.”

She described herself as “a duck that’s about to sink to the bottom of the pond.”