

Mental Health in the Online College Classroom

Are Distance Learners Getting the Support They Need for the Challenges They Face?

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The existing literature about distance learners points to significant struggles with anxiety, isolation, risk of attrition, and other stressors present on the degree path for this vulnerable group, but does not substantially address the possible attendant mental health risks or how to build in mental health support for this unique community of learners. Due to the

demographics of adult students who are more likely to attend online college courses, the unique challenges of coping with an online classroom, and the consistent strain of juggling multiple roles inside and outside of the classroom, learners may experience an increase in mental health challenges that can prohibit long-term success and college degree completion (Barr, 2014; Brock, 2014; Hetzel, 2012).

In the fall of 2012, more than 5 million students in the United States were enrolled in online college courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). With increasing enrollments and greater university investments in distance learning, more students all over the world will pursue their college degrees exclusively or in part from their phones, tablets, and laptops (Afsari-Mamagani, 2014). While the reach of distance education is growing, so are the kinds of students who take online courses (Kaifi, Mujtaba, & Williams, 2009). Many students who choose online coursework are first generation college students, working or stay at home parents, active military, veterans, older workers who have been out of school for decades, as well as the traditional aged students who may or may not have taken gap year(s) before pursuing or returning to a college degree path (Marcia, 2004). This diverse group of students face



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many obstacles to completing their degrees and have very high attrition rates, so they require tailored instruction and comprehensive support to keep them engaged with a successful degree path (Kaifi et al., 2009).

Online college modalities may have a wide appeal, but they require a specific skill set for success. Many students who embark on online college course work are underprepared for the demands of the classes and, often, do not have an adequate support system among family and friends who are not in college (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). The necessary strategies for online college course success include autonomously managing time and assignments without the face-to-face reminder of a brick-and-mortar classroom or physical presence of an instructor; the ability to juggle student life and expectations with professional and personal demands; and the ever-present challenge of navigating the technology—both hardware and software—issues that inevitably arise (Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2013). These stressors can create feelings of isolation, disengagement from social communities, and general anxiety, which are widely associated with negative health impacts such as depression (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). The stress, disconnection, and technical difficulties associated with the online classroom require unique accommodation and understanding from instructors, technical staff, and the college at large in which they are enrolled (Rothweiler, 2012). Yet, without a face-to-face presence, it can be extremely difficult to identify and accommodate students who may be struggling with the successful acclimation to the online classroom (Barr, 2014).

Students who access online course work are more likely to be members of minority groups and/or have low incomes, which can increase the likelihood of experiencing mental illness (Bar, 2014). "Robust, entirely online degree programs and services act as an entry point to higher education for typ-

ically at-risk students" (Brock, 2014, p. 3). These at-risk learners disproportionately include first generation students who are the first in their family to attend college (Priebe, Ross, & Low, 2008). They often have stubbornly low college completion rates (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Learners who are "first-generation, low-income college students experience both isolation and marginalization, especially during their first year of college, which impacts their long-term persistence in higher education" (Jehangir, 2009, p. 33). The experience of being the first one in a family to attend college can potentially heighten the incidence of anxiety about academic performance and the pressure to succeed. "Unless people have been through higher education, they do not understand the nuances for getting accepted and graduating from college" (Graham, 2011, p. 3). This can impact the understanding of time management, course navigation, and even how and when to ask questions (Mann, 2005).

Many students who return to or begin college and choose a distance learning degree path may be older workers or those with limited access and facility with the technology required to successfully complete assignments (Sivakumaran & Lux, 2011). They may feel uncertain about using the technology successfully (Rothweiler, 2012). Some research shows that while taking some or all of coursework online can be an aid to degree completion, the adaptation to an online learning environment is challenging for many learners (Griffin & Minter, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). An involved teacher who understands the needs and communicates readily with anxious learners can help to promote confidence and reduce feelings of insecurity (Rothweiler, 2012).

Students may experience additional difficulties due to a lack of access to regular Internet connectivity and the necessary hardware to complete assignments (Turpin, 2007). If students have used computers and technology only for work, they

may struggle with the basic navigation of any online learning platform or assignment (Turpin, 2007). The “students in lower socioeconomic communities tend to have more limited access on older equipment in their schools and libraries, and the only home access, if at all, is via cell phone” (Griffin & Minter, 2013, p. 146). While many universities are broadening access to online course work through apps that can be used on phones or tablets, these technologies are still evolving (Vázquez-Cano, 2014). Students may have access to smart phones, but at this time, using these devices may not be equivalent to the ease with which a more affluent student may complete work using a current computer with up-to-date software. Though some students readily adapt to the technology requirements, those who do not may feel stress and discomfort when interacting with the online learning platforms. “For students who feel intimidated by technology, learning both course contents and the technology in unison can be a daunting task” (Sivakumaran & Lux, 2011, p. 156). When they experience high levels of confusion by encountering seemingly incomprehensible directions for completing assignments and discussion requirements, they may be more likely to disengage from the classroom and experience stress and anxiety (Sivakumaran & Lux, 2011). Facilitators can help to ease student anxiety by clearly defining expectations and maintaining class routines (Macheski, Lowney, Burhmann, & Bush, 2008). “If older students are guided in the right direction and encouraged to recognize the value behind learning how to use a computer, then they will be more inclined to learn” (Sivakumaran & Lux, 2011, p. 159).

General isolation and disengagement from the classroom and the college add to the challenges that online learners experience. “Students in distance education may experience limited contact with academic staff at the university and department which can contribute to a feeling of discon-

nectedness” (Bolliger & Inan, 2012, p. 43). They may feel unsupported when they run into the inevitable technical glitch or curriculum issue and they may experience a lack of community when interacting with classmates (Jacqueline & Haycock, 2014). While major life transitions are often accompanied by stress and anxiety, students who experience the greatest stress transitioning to college have the highest needs for quality social interaction. Beneficial social support that aid students during this time are specifically “high quality, high contact relationships that consist of participation in complex social groups” (Galatzer-Levy, Burton, & Bonanno, 2012, p. 562). This disengagement and disconnection from any sense of community can lead to absences, late work, and confusion that can prohibit student success and retention (Golden, 2011).

Complex social groups may be difficult to feel a part of if a student experiences isolation and anxiety in the learning environment and the college overall. As online instruction evolves, there are more opportunities to collaborate in an online classroom, and many courses integrate team projects and collaborative learning tools to help students become more engaged with the learning community. The successful implementation of these new technologies and learning strategies necessitates that the online learner receives targeted support from a well-trained staff in order to “not merely mirror face-to-face practices but leverage the affordances of emerging technologies” (Griffin & Minter, 2013, p. 157). While the new technologies and approaches can make learning more collaborative, students who already have a baseline anxiety with the online classroom or digital resources may not be able to overcome these challenges without significant support from the instructor and college support staff (Rothweiler, 2012).

Students entering college who already have mental health concerns such as social anxiety may experience even more chal-

lenges than the average learner. They may be unable to cope with the demands of college. "Social anxiety also negatively affects other aspects of college life, such as academic performance and persistence" (Nordstrom, Goguen, & Hiester, 2014, p. 49). The incidence of anxiety can prevent them from doing their best work or staying with a class to completion (Clair, 2015). Students with a previous diagnosis of anxiety may choose the online learning format as a seemingly safe choice, but are ultimately "at significant risk for social and emotional problems during their first semester and for institutional dropout by their 2nd year" (Nordstrom, Goguen, & Hiester, 2014). Similarly, at-risk populations such as those struggling with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury, as may be found with military or veteran student populations, may experience additional risk for difficulties in the classroom, and ultimately, attrition (Smith-Osborne, 2012). Military members who served in the Iraq/Afghanistan conflicts experienced higher levels of blast-related injuries and therefore are more at risk for symptoms of traumatic brain injury and posttraumatic stress disorder that can inhibit their ability to adjust to the requirements of the classroom (Smee, Buenrostro, Garrick, Sreenivasan, & Weinberger, 2013). Posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury symptoms can include "headache, balance problems, nausea, fatigue, sensitivity to noise, irritability, sadness, nervousness, visual problems, and difficulty concentrating and remembering," which can be particularly challenging when navigating environments such as a classroom where concentration and memory are necessary for success (Yeh et al., 2014, p. 2655).

Whether it is anxiety about returning to school after years in the workplace; juggling multiple roles as spouse, employee, parent, and student; working through previously existing mental health conditions; or just managing confusion about soft-

ware, hardware, or technological requirements of assignment directions, attending college as an adult learner can be a significant challenge. These difficulties are increased when the modality of learning is online and a student must surmount obstacles without the in-person guidance and cues from other classmates or an instructor. First generation college students, minority students, and students with low income face additional stress and challenges accessing the classroom and maintaining confidence about their academic progress. Adult learners may experience greater levels of mental health concerns such as anxiety when attempting to complete a degree in the online classroom (Sivakumaran & Lux, 2011). They may require a specialized effort from faculty and staff to identify problems and help them overcome issues and prevent disengagement (Macheski et al., 2008). These additional layers of challenge and isolation can inhibit success and prevent successful adjustment to the college that they attend. Feelings of isolation, lack of community, technological struggles, and absence of face-to-face assistance can exacerbate doubts and anxiety about the ability to complete college level course work. These pressures can lead to depression, lack of confidence, and ultimately, attrition. Faculty and staff at schools with online courses should be aware of the unique hurdles that distance learners face and be prepared to offer tailored assistance that can help the student through the obstacles so that they can complete their degree program (Barr, 2014).

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