Increasing mental health awareness and services to meet the needs of online students

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Abstract: This article discusses the need and benefits of colleges providing online students with mental health support and resources. College students who struggle with managing their mental health may also struggle academically. Numerous traditional colleges offer mental health resources to ground students. With the growing number of students pursuing college online, those same resources provided to traditional students are needed for online learners as well. The research confirms that mental health resources are necessary for online students and illustrates that colleges should consider incorporating these resources to assist their students better. This article will discuss that by assessing the mental health concerns of their students and providing the necessary tools, colleges can ensure that students have an increased chance of staying enrolled and completing their degree program. This benefits the college as well given that it can improve retention and lower the number of students that drop out due to mental health-related issues.

Keywords: mental health, online education, student services, online student needs

Introduction

The pursuit of online education is steadily growing and is in high demand because of the flexibility it gives non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are students that pursue education later in life and are typically independent adults that work and/or have children. One reason that online learning is so appealing to many adult learners is that it allows them to have their education work around other obligations such as jobs and family life. Attending college can be a stressful time for any student; however, when students have other essential responsibilities, this can lead to an impact on their mental health. This is why exploring and increasing methods and tools to ensure a student's mental health needs are met is needed.

Obtaining a higher education degree can cause or even worsen a student's mental health issues. The National Alliance on Mental Illness found that 64% of former college students dropped because of a mental health related reason (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012, p. 8). An academic goal, like maintaining a certain grade point average, can be stressful for many students and combining that with maintaining employment and raising a family; it is clear to see how these elements can put a strain on a student's mental health. Colleges can help students with this concern by providing early treatment and resources that will help improve the overall well-being of students. With the increase of students choosing to pursue online degrees, colleges should develop more online services geared towards mental health to meet the needs of students that may struggle in this area.

Online Education and Mental Health

Attending college is a life goal for many individuals, yet some that are dealing with mental health issues may not think that this is an option for them. The Higher Education Statistics Agency surveyed 2,843 students and found that the prevalence of depression and anxiety was 15.6% among undergraduate students and 13% for graduate students (Papadatou-Pastou, et al., 2019, p. 2). The mental health of students has become a growing concern for colleges over the years. Dunbar, Sontag-Padilla, Kase, Seelam, and Stein (2018) discuss in their research,

> Approximately 17% or more of college students have a mental health problem. However, nearly two-thirds of students with mental health problems do not use mental health services, even when on-campus services are available. If untreated, mental health problems can persist and lead to long-term consequences, including lower academic achievement and unemployment or underemployment (p. 597).

It is quite common for students to experience mental health issues while pursuing their degrees. Barr (2014) confirms this in her article, stating that "in 2012, the American College Health Association (ACHA) annual survey found that some of the factors students reported as impairing academic performance include anxiety (20%), depression (12%), stress (29%), and alcohol/drugs (6%)" (Abstract section, para. 3). While Barr mentions that this survey does not differentiate between online and ground learners, it illustrates the common issues faced by all types of students. The mental health concerns of college students are a current issue since more

students experience anxiety and depression now than in previous years (Chessman & Taylor, 2019).

Historically, online students are seldom offered mental health-related services like counseling because it is assumed online students need less non-academic and emotional support than traditional students (Lederman, 2019). However, online students need services like counseling just as much, if not more than, traditional students. On top of managing mental issues like anxiety or depression, they face significant stressors like parenting, working full-time, life obligations, and most online students are also in accelerated degree programs. Additionally, online students are more likely not to have access to quality mental health providers, issues with staying in communication due to different time zones, as well as their work and life commitments (Einhaus, n.d.). Online students also do not have on-campus connections or support systems like traditional students, so many may also deal with feelings of isolation.

More importantly, online students truly desire support services. Clinefelter, Aslanian, and Magda (2019) conducted a survey where 1,500 current and graduated online college students were asked "Which support services did you use, if offered, by the provider of your online program?", with the results indicating that 23% had used mental health services, 42% would use mental health services if they were offered, and only 35% reported not being interested (p. 42). Mental health support services are in demand for online students, and by providing these services, a university could potentially increase student attendance, grades, and quality of work since these are all areas negatively impacted by their mental health struggles (Barr, 2014). This is why resources and support should also be available for students attending online colleges: they have the potential to be very beneficial to improving a student's success.

Impact on Online Colleges

According to Armstrong, Burcin, Bjerke, and Early (2015), mental health is a significant factor that impacts a student's grades and academic career. Lipson, Abelson, Ceglarek, Phillips, and Eisenberg (2019) state that "the negative effects of mental health problems on student retention suggest that institutional investments in student mental health are likely to generate both increased tuition revenues for institutions and higher earnings for students who attain a college degree" (p. 4). Lipson et al. also highlight that investing in more services for students will have positive results for not only the student, but for the college as well. Furthermore, as

there has been an increase in adults turning towards online options for mental health-related information and treatment (Skierkowski, Florin, Harlow, Machan, & Ye, 2019), many online students may show great interest in online services for mental health management.

The American Psychological Association (2005) conducted a study of 275 faculty members where 56% said they did not know how to work with students who had "hidden" disabilities (p. 21). This information provides an opportunity for online faculty to be trained on how to identify students at risk so that they can offer resources and support options. Lipson et al. (2019) illustrate how using a combination of data to determine a student's risk for dropping might be more beneficial to the college:

> Campus administrators often use low GPA in the previous semester to identify students at risk of dropping out. Yet low GPA alone would identify only 11% of students who would eventually drop out while using low GPA and mental health problems would identify 30 % of students who would withdraw. The results suggest that efforts to identify students who are likely to withdraw would be more effective if based on the combination of low GPA and mental health symptoms (p. 3).

Trying to balance the responsibilities that many adult learners face is challenging, and most fall short in one or more areas (parenting, working, academic work, or their health). Students may also lack a proper support system, and all of these factors tied together make it less likely that they will finish their degree program on time or in some cases at all (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Thus, the research is simple: improving a student's mental health can also increase their academic performance and graduation rates (Lipson, et al., 2019).

Mental Health Support Options

Unfortunately, some students do not know what mental health supports are available to them through their university. Another concern is that some wait until they are in a terrible place to reach out for help, as opposed to knowing what support tools are offered in the event things do go wrong (Barr, 2014). Today, there are numerous options for managing mental health issues, and individuals can even discover what will best fit them and learn about managing their needs via in-person counseling, wellness apps, and even distance counseling. Promoting the importance of being mentally healthy, in addition to online counseling services or assistance locating counseling services in their local area, would help these students. This is crucial since

online faculty do not have the benefit of interacting with a student that may be in a crisis like traditional faculty, so they would not be able to pick up on signs like emotional changes or a decrease in personal hygiene. Online faculty can check for signs of distress in changes in work quality, low or inconsistent attendance (how many times the student logs into the course), or concerning emails. Online Education (n.d.) illustrates how online colleges can begin to transition into including mental health services to students:

> Colleges have offered student personal services through on-campus health and counseling centers, but the sensitive nature of this support made it difficult to deliver online. This is changing as online learning platforms integrate even more sophisticated security features to verify students' identities and protect private information. These innovations allow colleges to safely deliver personal support services to online learners. Strategic partnerships with health and counseling organizations expand students' options. (Personal Support Services section, para. 1)

Furthermore, Barr (2014) discusses in her research several detailed ways that colleges and universities can better meet the mental health needs of online students, with most of these items currently being utilized today (Best Practices in Mental Health Resources for Online Students section, para. 3-8):

1. **Pre-enrollment services:** On the web-pages describing online programs and courses, self-assessment tools can be posted for students to evaluate their readiness for online programs. This "front-end" focus on the personality characteristics and work habits necessary for online academic success can assist in preventing problems after admissions and enrollment.

2. **Mental health education:** Provide links to articles on issues common to college students (Stress, fatigue, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse)

3. **Crisis services:** Prominently display phone numbers for crisis and suicide hotlines.

4. **Self-help services:** Provide access to tools for self-evaluation, with accompanying articles on strategies for coping with common mental health issues.

5. **Referral to disability services:** Provide a link to the institution's office for students with disabilities.

6. **Counseling services:** Provide links to the campus counseling center clearly state what services are/are not available to distance students.

If these types of resources are available for online learners, administrators could educate students on these mental health options and drive home the fact that it is crucial to familiarize oneself with the support tools before a crisis occurs. Reminding students periodically of tools that will help them be successful is essential, both ensuring that they are consistently made aware of support options and that they are notified of any updates or changes. In addition to services that may be offered by their college, students should research what is available to them in their community. Some might even find it useful to try a variety of tools and resources to see what will work best for their specific situation. This will allow students to find the best option to fit their needs since some may not realize that mental health techniques have evolved from just face-to-face counseling.

Conclusion

With the increase in the availability of online programs, administrators of online colleges and online degree programs have the opportunity to promote and educate students on mental health awareness. Research shows that when college students suffer from mental health disorders, the symptoms can increase their chances of not completing their program. These individuals will benefit from their colleges providing mental health options that will help them manage their symptoms while pursuing their degrees online. There are many options online colleges could implement to meet the mental health needs of their students. Online students face additional struggles that many traditional students do not, and when mental health issues are combined, they are more likely not to complete their degree program (balancing personal responsibilities and schoolwork is challenging in itself, so untreated mental health issues can only aggravate the situation). Increasing services to these students will benefit not only the student but the institution as well, specifically with retention. It thus is very important for online universities to provide mental health support services to online students so that they, too, have the opportunity to flourish in their academic setting like traditional students.

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