Let Me Help You, Help Me
The Student Point of View

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Students face daily obstacles outside of the classroom that ultimately impacts their academic performance. Many of these struggles may present themselves as educational yet are personal circumstances. COVID-19 has amplified the struggles traditional classrooms face. These circumstances include difficult home situations, lacking technology at home, employment difficulties, financial difficulties, and maintaining personal relationships. These circumstances are difficult for students and instructors who lack relevant knowledge to assist students who need help. According to the American Psychological Association, the percentage of students with a lifetime diagnosis of mental health issues has almost doubled since 2007. Eight percent of this increase occurred during COVID-19. This essay describes five ways instructors can increase student success in the current circumstances without overwhelming themselves.

Adopt a Holistic Approach

When helping students navigate their circumstances, it is essential to adapt a person first, student second mentality (Luedke, 2017). View the student holistically rather than simply focusing on their academic experiences. Students are more likely to seek help from instructors who recognize the students' backgrounds and cultural capital (Luedke, 2017). When you listen and understand the student's situation and react to

them as human beings rather than a number, it will help them fully disclose their situation to you to support the student in facing it head-on. Recognize that being a student represents only one piece of their identity.

Empower Students to Establish a Support System

Remember, even if a student turns to you first for help, you cannot be the only person in the support system; an effective support system encompasses more than an interpersonal relationship with a student.

Nsamba and Makoe (2017) identify the necessary components of a support system, which fall into six dimensions. These dimensions cover study centers, counseling centers, tutoring, feedback, study groups, administration staff, instructors, and support groups. Let the student know that they are not facing these circumstances alone and help them make connections with the services offered by the institution. Keep a list of referral contacts readily available as students may not be familiar with these services or be afraid to reach out independently. Communicating your support and the available resources is easy to do and especially important for students not physically on campus. They most likely do not realize they are accessible.

Create a Democratic Classroom Environment

The democratic classroom is "one where all students have a voice, demands equality of all members, the shared nature of a classroom space, the presence of student's voice in decision-making, and connections to the outside" (Engebretson & Weiss, 2015, p. 63). Creating a democratic classroom environment allows students to feel empowered. It creates a safe environment for them to learn during the assigned class time rather than focusing on their other challenges, also known as a site of healing (Engebretson & Weiss, 2015). To do this involves:

- Facing taboo topics head-on
- Allowing students to address oppression
- Making the content relevant to students.

Granting this agency allows students to feel more connected to the course and increases engagement in the online environment. One way to do this is to allow for open-ended exploration time during class.

Instill Hope

The installation of hope in a classroom involves a genuine wish for student success (Schreiner, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). Instructors exhibit evidence of hope, such

as respectful treatment of students and striving for positive encounters with them. Ancillary staff members who provide hope to students can also make a positive impact on student success. Working to connect and investing time in genuine attempts to help the students is yet another way to instill hope and improve student success (2011).

Adapt and be Flexible

Both adaptability and flexibility within a classroom promote success. Flexibility includes modifying content, lesson plans, or time to meet the classroom's needs better. Flexibility provides freedom to manage various situations that students may need (Gelles et al., 2020). Likewise, the ability to adapt closely aligns with flexibility. An instructor's ability to adapt to various situations allows for better instruction when environmental changes disrupt the scheduled delivery. Flexibility and adaptability become more critical during unforeseen disruptions such as pandemic and emergency remote teaching. Students view flexibility as a mark of compassion and care. The institution's flexibility includes allowing pass or fail grades or working with a student who may need an incomplete at the end of the semester are all excellent options and are appreciated by students. Adapting and being flexible also increases perceived justice in the classroom, making students more comfortable and more likely to talk to the instructor about challenges they may be facing (Gelles et al., 2020).

Summary

College is often a turning point for many students. It is worth watching for when they may be struggling and perhaps not assume that the struggle is purely academic. Remember to view students holistically, encourage them to establish a support system, create a democratic classroom environment, demonstrate behaviors that instill hope, and remain open to change. Incorporating strategies such as these can help students succeed, despite obstacles.

Discussion Questions

1. How might you add democratic elements to your courses, both in person and online? How adaptable is your course to the various needs of students?
2. What resources do you have available to you to help students? What might you do to encourage students to talk to you if they need help?
3. Of the suggestions provided here, which do you feel will be easiest for you to adapt to? For the suggestions that may be more challenging for you to adopt, where might you find assistance prior to implementing these suggestions?

References

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