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Teaching and Helping College Students with Personal Problems during Tough Economic Times

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Abstract

The student population today may be facing increased need for support services, due to a wide variety of potential personal problems. Reasons for this include the increased number of students in college who have learning disabilities or other disabilities, the economic downturn of 2008 driving older students to pursue college degrees, and the number of veterans in school who are returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Faculty members and academic advisors may be approached by students who are experiencing personal problems, and may not know how to offer help. Suggestions for helping and teaching such students are offered; these include helping students to identify the nature of the problem and to find resources, as well as listening to and providing support for them while maintaining high standards of performance and academic integrity. Faculty members are cautioned against providing services for which they are not qualified, and to understand their own strengths and limitations in helping.

The number of students enrolling in college, or attempting to enroll in college has been steadily increasing in past years. In October 2009, the number of high school graduates attending colleges or universities was 70.1%, an all-time high (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). Much of this increase is due to the economic situation faced by many families today, especially after the economic downturn of 2008. As a result, many students may face significant personal problems that challenge their abilities to successfully negotiate a college degree program (Johnson, Zascavage & Gerber, 2008; Rubush, 2010).

Numerous studies support the beneficial aspects of a mentoring relationship between students and faculty or other adult for both career and personal issues (e.g., Cokley, 2000; Hickson, 2002; Jacobi, 1991; Packard, Walsh & Seidenberg, 2004). While a number of factors have led to an increased probability of students needing some sort of assistance from faculty to handle personal problems in recent years

(e.g., Johnson et al., 2008; Reiff, 1997; Rubush, 2010), many students fail to ask for help, even when they need it the most (Mier, Boone & Shropshire, 2009). The purpose of this article is to describe the factors that have led to the increased need for faculty intervention in student personal problems, discuss various types of problems faced by students, and provide strategies for faculty to help teach and assist students who may be experiencing such problems.

Reasons Students Need Assistance from Instructors/Advisors

Problems in adapting to college have always existed for new students, especially traditional-aged students, who experience freedoms and responsibilities beyond those of high school years. Having less supervision from parents and learning how to manage time more effectively, learning how to manage money, relationships, and more rigorous academics are among the many changes and challenges students face when attending college. These significant

life changes and pressures bring on stress, and with it, corresponding personal problems of a wide variety of sorts for many students (Cushman, 2007; Dysen & Rank, 2006). Such students may approach faculty advisors or instructors to request assistance in dealing with certain personal problems, but in many cases, they simply struggle and flounder (Mier et al., 2009).

Not only are there problems for traditional-age college students, but for nontraditional students, as well. The college student population is very different at present than in the past several decades, due to several factors. First, the number of nontraditional-age students pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees has risen sharply. As unemployment rates have risen, many have taken advantage of this time to finish a degree, change career focus to pursue an entirely different degree, or complete a graduate degree, an enrollment trend seen in other economic crises as well (Okpala, Hopson & Okpala, 2011). One factor affecting this increase in enrollment is the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009) which provided specific funds for student financial aid. While adult learners have historically comprised a large number of the students pursuing graduate degrees in education, and who sometimes have specific fears about returning to school (Giczkowski & Allen, 1994), many are currently facing the added burden of significant economic challenges while trying to juggle home and school. In fact, Okpala et al. (2011) found that budget cuts necessitating a four-day college work week have exacerbated difficulties in balancing work and school for many students attending community colleges.

Second, there are a large number of veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who are enrolled in school and are taking advantage of the 911 GI bill to finance their educations. There is a

projected increased enrollment of 25% more veterans returning to school in 2011. These students are often older than traditional students, many have families, and some of these students have serious mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Rubush, 2010).

Third, since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities who are attempting college (Johnson et al., 2008); this is due in part to federal regulations preventing discrimination and requiring accommodations for such students. Michael, Dickson, Ryan and Koefer (2010) cite numerous ways students today are less prepared than in preceding decades, including the increased number of students who have learning disabilities (Reiff, 1997). Despite the fact that the severity of psychological problems of college students has increased, many students fail to access student support services (Mier et al., 2009). Further, many states are experiencing budget cuts for education (Johnson et al., 2009) and such cuts often result in cutbacks and strain on existing support systems for students with personal problems (Okpala et al., 2011). Therefore, the possibility exists that an increasing number of students will seek out faculty for assistance, or they will need faculty intervention in order to be successful.

Strategies for Helping Students

Identifying Problems

One of the first things faculty should do when a student comes to them with a problem, is to determine the specific problem or problems (Rossi, 2006). Often, what starts out as a conversation on one topic, turns out really to be about another topic, as the conversation progresses, or after specific questioning. While faculty should not pry into students' personal lives,

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they can gently ask questions and more importantly, listen openly, to identify the exact nature of the problem. Student personal problems fall into a number of different categories, including academic difficulties, relationship problems (such as between roommates, loved ones, or friends in an organization), family issues, health issues, career questions/issues, financial difficulties, and problems stemming from lack of understanding of University policies, procedures, and academic life in general. The latter is more likely to be seen in first generation college students, who are often naïve about what to expect from college, and about how to find help within the institution. Such students often feel isolated, intimidated, and academically unprepared (Cushman, 2007). Careful listening can help to identify the source of the problem. Davis (2010) argued that a small investment in understanding the problems of first-generation college students and specializing in advising them, can lead to rewards for the University in terms of retention, and to an improved probability of students' academic success.

Older, nontraditional students often have complex schedules with many responsibilities and complications occurring in their lives (Wagner, 2002). Such complications may include serving as caregiver for a relative, while possibly serving as parent to young children; these complexities can produce considerable stress and unexpected situations that compromise the student's ability to complete assignments on time, to be present during class time, or to attend meetings on a class group project. Some students may find their work schedules too demanding (e.g., Okpala et al., 2011), or they may struggle financially to make ends meet. Others may miss class and fall behind due to sick family members who require attention.

As mentioned, individuals of any age may suffer from learning disabilities, may not be aware of the learning disabilities, or may be reluctant to inform the instructor of their situations. Students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability or other disability often are eligible for specific accommodations in the college classroom, such as being given longer time for taking tests and completing assignments. It is important to provide such accommodations if the student has documented evidence of such a disability, as such accommodations are required by the Americans with Disability Act and may mean the difference between the student succeeding or failing. If the student has not been diagnosed but seems to show signs of a learning disability, it is appropriate to have a discussion with that student about his or her performance, and, if warranted, provide the student with information about the college's office of disability services.

Students with psychological difficulties also need to be identified to help them succeed and to get the help they need. Students with depression may miss numerous class days and fall behind in their coursework, but they may not have the motivation to contact the professor to address the problem. A recent study by Guthman, Iocin and Konstas (2010) found nearly a 10% increase in the past decade of the percentage of students in college with moderate to severe depression. If a student seems to be having psychological difficulties that are affecting his or her academic performance, it is appropriate to discuss these concerns with the student. However, this should always be done within the context of trying to help the student achieve and should not involve prying into confidential information.

Making Referrals to Appropriate Resources

In all cases, students should be directed to appropriate resources that are available to assist with personal problems. Many freshmen or first-generation college students receive benefit from special instruction from a student support office or student affairs office on campus. They may need additional advice from a professor regarding how the institution is organized, and what functions different branches of the school serve. Such students, including those who are struggling academically, and those who have learning disabilities, may need help with study skills, or other issues to help them be prepared academically and socially for college life (Michael et al., 2010). Some may need advice on how to approach their professors to get additional tutoring from formal tutoring services, or informal services from advanced students or graduate students. In some cases, it may be helpful to contact a department on behalf of the student to request tutoring assistance from an advanced student, an honor society, or a club in the discipline. Reiff (1997) presented a program of academic advising support for at-risk students based upon learning disabilities research; this program was based upon knowledge that those same deficits associated with learning in the classroom may affect a student's ability to manage their time effectively and set effective goals. He also noted that students with disabilities often have difficulty in serving as their own advocates.

If a faculty member serves as a student academic advisor or finds themselves regularly being approached by students wishing to share personal problems or seeking assistance, the faculty member may find it helpful to become aware of resources both within the University and in the surrounding community. The Student Affairs Office, Dean's Office, and

Counseling Center, as well as the local phone book and Chamber of Commerce can be excellent resources for becoming familiar with local support services both on and off campus.

Students who are facing psychological difficulties and are clearly distressed should be referred to the campus Counseling Center, local psychologists, or the local hospital, especially if the student appears to be a danger to him or herself or to others. While it is appropriate to talk to students and listen to their concerns and problems, it is not appropriate to try to provide advice about issues for which one is not qualified. One should be careful to make needed referrals and, if necessary, offer to make a phone call for the student who may be afraid to do so (Rossi, 2006). Mier et al. (2009) discussed a program of intervention for faculty who are in contact with students who are experiencing personal problems and are not accessing counseling services. That program, however, involves specific training for faculty and involves more systematic large-scale efforts at helping students with psychological difficulties. If no such program exists at an institution, then faculty may be reluctant to approach students on their own with concerns about emotional or mental health issues. In less serious cases, however, often what is needed is simply a good listener who helps the student feel there is someone who cares and can provide some needed support.

Setting High Expectations, Reasonable Policies, and Flexibility

While student personal problems may tempt faculty to relax standards, faculty should not compromise standards of academic quality and integrity. Faculty should, however, be mindful of their primary responsibility to teach students and help them succeed. By setting reasonable policies and building in appropriate

flexibility when needed, faculty can ensure that they are fulfilling obligations to their students. As an example, many faculty members have high expectations for students to submit assignments in a timely manner. High standards, however, are not equivalent to inflexibility. As noted previously, times have significantly changed, and there may be legitimate reasons students submit assignments late or miss class. Adopting a reasonable but fair policy on late assignments can help to ensure that students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge while still following important rules and guidelines and being held accountable. For example, one may wish to provide some penalty for those late assignments that do not warrant an official excuse, but still allow the student to submit the assignment within a reasonable timeframe. Those faculty members who have experience with a wide variety of students might consider this a fair option. Numerous research studies attest to the importance of a caring and fair attitude in students' perceptions of effective teachers (e.g., Omoregie, 2007; Teven, 2001.)

As another example, recognizing that students may have difficulty managing complex schedules and, thus, giving assignments well in advance of deadlines, helps to ensure that students will have a reasonable chance at being able to complete the assignment. This is particularly the case when group projects are assigned. Landrum, Hood, & McAdams (2001) found more positive ratings and greater appreciation by nontraditional students for their professor's care and concern in interactions than did traditional students. Thus, nontraditional students may particularly benefit from mentoring or understanding about their personal circumstances.

Conclusion

As a professor, one may find dealing with student personal problems and making allowances for different circumstances of students to be daunting. If so, confidentially seeking out advice from other colleagues on how to handle situations can prove helpful. Faculty members should be aware of and follow their institution's policies and regulations regarding making various accommodations for students and helping students, especially in serious, potentially life-threatening situations. Faculty should also be aware of their own personal limits for working with students. For example, not every faculty member is comfortable with talking about personal issues; others find that handling numerous late assignments or excused absences to be too time-consuming. If faculty are not comfortable with discussing personal problems, they should acknowledge this and make necessary referrals. Finally, faculty should set policies that are flexible and fair and take into account the different demands placed on students and themselves. Following these guidelines will help to protect both the faculty and the students' best interests during these difficult times.

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