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NOW WHAT?

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For years now, we have been hearing of factors that have had a negative impact on the online academic arena. From stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and other related mental health issues to curiosity about more basic needs such as housing/environmental concerns, financial security and even lack of certainty about a healthy diet, the effects of COVID-19 continue to impede student confidence (Beyond College Access, 2020). It goes without saying that an inordinate amount of time and effort has been devoted to recognizing the challenges faced by students of all ages and grades and that a multitude of suggestions have been provided to assist in coping with those factors.

Literature revealed that students who undertake distance learning courses need to have specific skillsets and attributes. Brindley (2014) suggests maturity, time management, goal-directedness, and the ability to multi-task as key elements for successful nontraditional learning. Additionally, Rotor (2022) advocates that students need to be highly proficient writers who can work independently. Many institutions of higher education have made improvements to student support, including easy-to-use apps for scheduling individual tutoring, workshops, and "embedded tutoring" (Young, 2022, "Meeting Students Where They Are" section). Nevertheless, McMurtrie (2022b) purports that even with the revamping and additions to student support initiatives, the 2021-2022 academic year had an overwhelming number of disengaged students.

Moreover, in an asynchronous or hybrid learning environment, student engagement is critical under the best circumstances. Meyer (2017) suggests that student engagement is the foundation for a student's success in higher education. With the pandemic, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2021), doctorate-granting institutions noted a more significant decline in some forms of student engagement and instructor and student contact compared with baccalaureate-granting schools. According to Koenig (2022), nontraditional learning takes the burden away from the instructor and institution and puts the responsibility on the student.

Additionally, since the beginning of the pandemic, several approaches have been taken to engage students, reduce attrition, and improve retention. At the onset of the pandemic isolation, Dollinger et al. (2020) sought the use of a third-party provider utilizing live chat

services and writing feedback support. The study suggests that the support services may be best utilized by students who are unable to connect with the institution during regular business hours. Kelly et al. (2020) chose three initiatives; self-access learning materials, peer-to-peer support, and videoconferencing with librarians and faculty. The approaches indicated increased student interaction and the need for expanded technical flexibility and training.

Regardless of the added support, students had further needs. Mainly, according to McMurtrie (2022a), many students feel that they do not belong and are not wanted by the institution. Those attending remotely rarely feel connected, as it is much harder to develop relationships with peers, instructors, and staff. Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, researchers have explored the socio-emotional effects on students in higher education and their perceptions regarding the unprecedented rapid move from traditional to nontraditional learning. In a recent study, Handel et al. (2020) found significant differences in how students responded to forced remote learning and their perceptions of stressful emotions, including loneliness. While distance learning platforms have been used for over thirty years, not all students entered the pandemic shift with the same technical knowledge (Handel et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; OnlineSchools.org., n.d.). Acceptance and adaptation of online learning management platforms for many students were delayed. The shift accentuated the need for technical training along with the skills needed to allow students to participate fully (Granic & Marangunic, 2019).

Furthermore, several contributing factors resulted from the pandemic that caused or exacerbated students' feelings of distress. Notably, many students faced changes in their lives, including living arrangements, uncertainties about current or future jobs, social distancing requirements, financial situations, lack of exercise, and less communication with others (Chen & Lucock, 2022). Students who were disproportionally impacted were disadvantaged and marginalized (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Despite the various initiatives, and based on our educational and professional experiences, we hold the belief that an additional approach is needed. We agree that ideas such as meaningful interaction among students and faculty, inclusion of enriching educational experiences such as cultural diversity, internships, service learning, and a supportive and encouraging virtual environments are crucial to student success in a pedagogical world as we know it today (Meyer, 2014). However, in addition to the reviews that have been submitted and the suggestions that have been made, we feel that another, very important concept must be discussed – the "naturalness" of emotions that exist when faced with such a dilemma. We have spoken with many, many virtual learners who have experienced the setbacks being discussed here, and in fact, the reports we receive are often extreme. Whereas some claim that they must now cope with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, others present with debilitating emotions that interfere with their ability to remain motivated and even feelings of complete isolation as if they "are on a desolate island in the middle of nowhere." They have read the current literature and are aware of strategies that exist, ones that purport to cope with and overcome the social concerns at hand. However,

many go on to say that these techniques, while meant with good intention, are simply not enough, and the lack of self-confidence intensifies.

So, what is missing? What more can be done to effectively address and resolve (as much as possible – let's face it, this may not completely go away) the confounding factors that exist? Some issues, even with the best of intentions and interventions, simply cannot be eliminated. More often than not, feelings of anxiety, for example, cannot be completely prevented, and to maintain that all of those who experience depressive episodes will eventually and inevitably be free of such symptoms one day is a thought process that is frankly not grounded in reality. Similarly, perhaps another approach is warranted for those students who find themselves in a position where they are still floundering after all the sensible suggestions have been implemented. Therefore, we believe that to confirm, to normalize, to say "yes, this is to be expected" is to empower, to provide yet another set of tools to proactively face the "demons that be." Coming to the realization that loneliness may be present, to some degree, throughout the virtual academic experience enables students to embrace that truth and explore available options to affect positive change. Remaining aware that online students are not in a traditional classroom filled with productive peer interaction and that the need exists to reach out to other students via phone or email is perfectly acceptable, even productive. To have a clear and reasonable impression of the natural feelings that are present in the virtual learning arena is to be reminded of all the positive aspects it possesses and the skills available to meet its challenges head-on.

Today, the academic arena continues to evolve; land-based institutions still exist and thrive and undoubtedly meet the needs of students who have the opportunity to learn in that traditional environment. However, virtual learning has become an option that many students of all ages find necessary, even appealing. We both received our doctorate degrees in an online setting and are thankful that such an option exists. We understand the benefits of being able to accomplish an advanced degree while still meeting the many responsibilities of working adults. We also acknowledge that challenges were presented and adjustments were necessary for us to be successful, and the same certainly holds true for online students today. The difference is this – we did not know what to expect in a virtual learning program. We hope that the information included in this article allows virtual learners to realize that *everything* they experience in their new quest to become more educated is part of *the new normal.* Onward and upward!

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