



Adapting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Basis for Faculty to Expand a Wellness Culture

In our current climate, many instructors have been forced to teach online. Within this pedagogy shift, instructors may find themselves juggling multiple tasks, in addition to teaching. In my capacity as an online instructor, I have provided mental health counseling, referred students to sources for federal disaster relief, and given mentoring and career guidance. In a traditional setting, these services are typically provided by numerous departments within student services. In an online environment, the instructor has a unique opportunity to address student concerns in a "one-stop shop" model.

Abraham Maslow hypothesized that everyone has a hierarchy of needs. Lower order needs must be met before focusing on higher order needs. In an academic setting, this hierarchy enables students to accurately reflect and make responsible choices. Online faculty can adapt Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a framework to help students address their needs during this difficult time and to build a culture of wellness in the online classroom.

First Level: Physiological

According to Maslow, the most fundamental human needs are physiologic: air, water, food, shelter, and rest. As a kind of "first-responder" for students, the online instructor is often called upon to help students who may lack basic needs, such as housing or income, or technological needs, such as a fully operating computer. Instructors play a vital role in building a trusting relationship with their students. The experience and judgment of the instructor coupled with how he or she responds to students' needs help build a trusting online environment.

As part of the physiological level, mental health can also be assessed. The issues of COVID-19 have affected everyone, and students should be reminded of the mental health services their college provides.

In addition, feeling insecure within the online environment can cause a sense of general insecurity. To mitigate this, I send motivational messages or mental health tips to my students. I find that these simple messages help me build connections and trust with my students.

Second Level: Safety

The online instructor plays a pivotal role in creating a safe learning environment. Ensuring that the expectations for attendance, participation, and grading are clear and concise are ways to help alleviate students' anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity. Promoting transparency in grading by clearly stating the objectives and expectations of assignments restores the security students feel in the online environment. I send multiple reminders to students about my expectations with links to the grading rubric.

Third Level: Relationships

Maslow believed that identifying with particular groups and maintaining relationships were essential human needs. By proactively working with the student services department, instructors can help encourage peer or alumni mentoring. These structured groups are essential for developing school allegiances and a sense of community.

Instructors can also help students maintain relationships by creating a collaborative online environment. Asking students to share their experiences and how they're feeling about the pandemic on a discussion board or in a breakout room creates a bonding experience for the classroom. Instructors should also participate in these discussions to model good participation and help establish their own online presence. This will help instructors become part of the learning community, not just a pedagogy interface.

Fourth Level: Self-Esteem

The fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy is self-esteem, described as the need to be respected and valued by others. Consider students in the online classroom. They may feel uncertain about the process and lack self-assuredness about their new role as an online student. This lack of confidence may manifest into students not turning on their cameras during class or submitting discussion board postings late. Teaching and modeling respect is essential when helping students build self-esteem. It is also important to monitor the class for inappropriate online behavior and follow up such behavior with timely action to ensure that students feel respected. Conversely, highlighting good discussion posts and questions helps instill a culture of positivity and respect.

Fifth Level: Self-Actualization

The realization of one's academic potential in this adapted framework is the realization of one's professional potential. Self-actualization helps students find purpose, meaning, and value in their lives. Academic flexibility is one way instructors can demonstrate awareness and acceptance of students' unique learning situations. The instructor should be an advocate for his or her learners. He or she should support individual growth and actualization by collaboratively working with students to plan educational goals and assignments. This could include additional self-directed learning or multimedia presentations to replace traditional research papers.

Conclusion

A student's experience within the learning environment can have long lasting consequences on their development. By using a hierarchy of needs and building off the successful completion of each level, students can find personal and academic success. Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between the belief of one's abilities and one's motivation and performance. By looking at learners through the framework of needs, a climate of wellness can be created.

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