

Help Me! Connecting Students to College Resources

In my eight-week courses, students are assigned a final reflection essay. In it, they are asked to respond to the following questions:

- Evaluate the choices (personal or academic) you made before this course. What were some of the consequences of those choices?
- What have you learned about yourself from the course that will change the choices you make in the future? What is one academic change you will implement in the future? What is one personal change you will implement in the future?
- How would you describe this course to someone else?
- What advice would you give to future students about what they can expect to learn in this course? In what ways can the course help them obtain the strategies necessary to be successful not only in college, but also in life?

In the Spring of 2018, in the final reflection essay, a student disclosed that he was homeless. This particular student sat in front of the class, had a jovial disposition, and his academic performance was superb. After reading the essay, I wondered, “What did I miss? How could I have not known he was homeless? What had prevented him from informing me sooner?” As I struggled to work through my own emotional response to this discovery, I regrouped and placed my attention back on the student. Although the course was over, I contacted him to inform him of a resource our campus offers called TitanLink. TitanLink provides non-academic related support for students, faculty, and staff members who need assistance with housing, food, transportation, and childcare. The student expressed gratitude for the new information and planned to contact the program coordinator for our campus.

The primary responsibility of community college instructors is to teach, and though teaching and social services are two distinct professions, both require that professionals exhibit an ethic of caring. Since the students in our courses come from a variety of backgrounds, the academic, emotional, social, and economic needs are vast. After reading this student’s essay, I reflected on the sobering reality that our students need support that extends beyond the classroom and I realized several things that all stem from one conclusion: it is of paramount importance to connect students to non-academic related resources because

they can be the difference between a student dropping out and completing their program of study. I have transformed my personal reflections on this event into lesson plans to aid in connecting students to these resources.

Developing Cultural Competence

Through media, our culture often depicts certain issues, such as homelessness, pretty one dimensionally. Unfortunately, we can allow such stereotypes to cloud our judgment or appraisal of a situation. For example, the way that my student presented himself did not signal that something was amiss with his housing situation. While various factors can determine what students are willing to disclose, the topic of homelessness is a life lesson that can be incorporated into our courses. Developing cultural competence is a transferable life skill that will aid students in their personal and professional endeavors. To develop cultural competence around homelessness delicately, design a lesson that focuses on financial literacy. During the lesson, review the importance of budgeting and saving and lead a class discussion that examines how finances impact different socioeconomic groups. The lesson should conclude with a list of various on- and off-campus resources available for students who may need financial assistance.

Identifying Campus Resources

The stress of worrying about childcare, meals, and other factors takes attention away from the academic nature of college. Non-academic campus resources are valuable tools for diminishing these anxieties and improving student performance and retention. To help acclimate students to the campus resources available to them, instructors can incorporate a scavenger hunt into course assignments. During the scavenger hunt, students are instructed to review the college website, course syllabus, and student catalog to identify the services, departments, and buildings where services can be found on campus. Then they must answer various questions about the located campus resources in the quiz portion of the assignment.

Acknowledging and Fostering Resilience

In a single semester, I have had students who were recent immigrants to the United States, students who were single parents, students undergoing chemotherapy, and students navigating a new mental health diagnosis. Despite the challenges that students face simply because of being students, many are determined to continue pursuing their academic goals regardless of what else

is going on in their lives. Students in our courses are resilient. Never underestimate how powerful acknowledgment, encouragement, and support can be in motivating students to persevere, even when they are overwhelmed by personal and academic obstacles.

Surveys for Direction

Inform students of the resources that are available to them on campus in your course syllabi, if you don't already. Instructors can incorporate information in written and visual forms to advise students where they can go for help. In addition, instructors can collect information about each student during the first class meeting. Distribute index cards or use SurveyMonkey and ask students to list their preferred name, three things that could be a challenge for them during the course (i.e., work hours, commuting, or child custody challenges), and one question they have about the course. Knowing this information can help instructors identify how to direct students towards non-academic assistance.

Compassion

Finally, the need for instructors to act when student needs are expressed is critical. We should not allow our workload or personal priorities to prevent us from demonstrating compassion and genuine concern for others. When I learned of my student's homelessness, the course was already over. I could have easily graded his final essay and proceeded on to the next one and no one would have been the wiser. My role as an instructor, however, was not complete until I contacted the student to connect him with services that could assist him. Even now I periodically contact the student to see how things are progressing. Recently he shared that he had a new place to stay and, although he still faces some obstacles, is committed to completing his degree.

Conclusion

Each semester new students enroll in our courses. This experience has helped me view each of the students in my courses through a different lens. I have a heightened awareness that there are non-academic needs that students may not disclose. By showing compassion, learning students' needs, referring students to campus resources, and expanding cultural competence, we can help students excel personally and academically. I want students in my courses to know that I see them, that they matter, and that our college is committed to helping them achieve their academic and professional goals.

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