

Counseling & the Dista



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When a young man went to Harvard College in 1640, learning with other students also meant living with other students. This collegiate lifestyle continues to abound for many who live on campus and participate in a myriad of extracurricular activities while earning their higher education. The student who learns and lives on campus not only has extracurricular activities in which to engage, but also has support services, such as career advisement and mental health counseling.



But with more and more non-traditional students in the collegial atmosphere, one must wonder what is the collegiate experience for a forty-year-old single mom who works all day and attends school at night via online classes? Is there a need for her university to also provide support to enhance the quality of her learning – or is it merely enough for her to acquire her academic credentials there, while she gains her extracurricular and service support in her other world in which she lives? The University of West Alabama thinks not. As online learning grows, so grows the need for university support to the online learner.

Cyberspace is fast becoming a new normal in which we spend a major portion of our waking hours. The Internet connects computers and the people sitting at the computers around the world. Through the Internet people can learn, shop, and socialize globally 24/7. And higher education, once only available in the brick and mortar confines of a college campus, has followed that trend. As institutions of higher education continue to embrace and maintain the online learning format, online learners have a right to services afforded their on-campus counterparts. One of the most essential services continues to be mental health counseling.

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Some of the reasons for attraction to online learning also indicate potential need for counseling support through enhancement of coping and management strategies such as finances, time management and multi-tasking, communication and relationships, stress management, and career management.

When a student takes to learning online, he usually has to consistently stretch time and multi-task. The online learner is often a working professional who wants to improve professional potential and thus will learn and earn at the same time. Many find that online learning fits a need for education while also attending to a family and a household. If a person travels frequently, he can take the laptop along and be a student wherever Wi-Fi remains available. The online classroom is present twenty-four

hours a day seven days a week. With so much flexibility on personal scheduling it can be easy to overschedule or to procrastinate. Therefore time management and task management become priority needs for online students.

Students enrolled in online education program face high levels of stress as much or more than traditional students with the added



responsibilities of work and family. With the opportunities for online learning, there is also a need for colleges and universities to consider providing counseling services to students in an effort to address mental health pathology, improve quality of life, and enhance chances of students completing degrees. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2010) includes distance learning programs and course work in its principles for accreditation and in 1998, Abrahamson discussed a goal in higher education for distance learning to be an equivalent experience to that of on-campus learning.

The University of West Alabama (UWA) has included personal mental health counseling as a service to students enrolled in their online programs. Online students were asked to complete a Needs Assessment and from this a distance based counseling service was developed in response to online student needs to address stress, depression, and anxiety that interfered with the students' academic performance and retention. The services include access to a licensed professional counselor who provides counseling via a distance format of email exchanges, telephonic session, and use of the Blackboard Learn platform for private, interactive chats, and use

of educational materials and information to enhance coping and academic skills.

The Blackboard Learn platform allows for confidential, interactive chats and video collaboration as well as the opportunity for telephonic and email exchanges. In addition, this platform provides access for students to learn about mental health issues, treatment options, signs and symptoms of certain pathologies, and opportunities to have input in discussion forums, support groups, blogs, webinars, and podcasts.

As with face-to-face counseling, students who receive services from the licensed professional

counselor complete an intake and informed consent form. The counselor also offers a Life History Questionnaire for students to complete that provides better understanding of the student background. Power Point presentations, fact sheets, and links are provided with psychoeducational support for students in the areas of mental health most noted per periodic student needs assessment. As many mental health issues are strongly connected with academic concerns, UWA's distance counseling support also offers general information to help with academic support and includes academic issues as a focus of counseling when needed. This includes general study tips, tutorial pod casts, and links



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to additional resources on issues such as test anxiety and test taking tips. Finally, distance counseling for the students includes support for students who are at a point of crisis. As students initially acquire distance counseling support, the counselor and student agree on a plan for crisis support if the need arises for the student. The student is also given information on various crisis hot line numbers and of course reminded to always call 911 as needed.

Distance learning is fast becoming a new normal in higher education. These online students have life needs that impact on their academic pursuit and may not have the right local resources to attain needed therapeutic support as they learn. All students in an institution of higher learning should have access to equal support services. Higher education has provided mental health counseling services to

traditional students and the time has come to also provide these services to online learners through distance counseling. As counselors embrace the opportunity to provide therapy through technology, the growing world of distance learning offers a rich opportunity to use distance learning resources such as Blackboard as a medium to support therapy through technology for that growing number of people who are learning and earning at the same time as online students.

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