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Accommodating Students With Anxiety: A Personal Success Story

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Basic Course Forum

Accommodating Students with Anxiety: A Personal Success Story

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This Basic Course Forum highlights authors' responses to the following topics: What curricular programs present the best opportunity for curricular connections to the basic course? Building upon conversations from the July 2018 Basic Course Institute (hosted by University of Dayton), what administrative successes and challenges do basic course directors face?

In a recent stimulus essay in *Communication Education*, Smith and Applegate (2018) discuss the “weighty responsibility” that course directors have in reducing mental health stigmas that preclude students from access to treatment and successful retention in a quality education. In response, Simonds & Hooker (2018) discuss strategies for course administrators to take that responsibility seriously, which begins with reaching out to respective accommodation services offices, providing support for instructors, and considering course specific accommodations for students with various generalized or socialized anxiety disorders. In answering this call, we developed a training program for our instructors on accommodating students with anxiety. This essay will provide a narrative of how these efforts resulted in a personal success story. You will hear from the perspective of the administrator, trainer, teacher, and student who are the beneficiaries of these efforts.

The Administrator

As an administrator of the introductory communication course for the last 22 years, I have seen my fair share of students with communication apprehension. And yet, in the last several years, I have seen a shift in the number of students coming through our course with anxiety that transcends the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977). I have seen students in my office visibly shake and cry at the prospect of taking our course. I have seen students enroll multiple times only to drop out before the first major presentation. Through these experiences, I have wondered what we as administrators can do to create a culture of accommodation for students who struggle with mental health so that they can be successful in our course.

The Trainer

Three years ago, I began a training program for our incoming Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to provide information about the legal and procedural elements of accommodations, offer insight into the variety of accommodations our university's Accommodation Services Office (ASO) provides, and initiate a conversation with our teachers about how to create a comfortable, inclusive environment that helps enable all students to succeed. While the initial training focused on accommodations for students with speaking disabilities, this year's training focused on how to accommodate students who struggle with mental health, specifically the rising number of individuals with anxiety and depression disorders (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2018).

In this year's training, I invited two specialists to participate: a coordinator from the ASO and a staff psychologist who also serves as the Suicide Prevention Coordinator. Together, we developed an interview-style presentation where each expert would explain the stigmatization surrounding mental health, the effects of anxiety and depression, and various ways to work with these students, including how to connect them with the ASO and the possible accommodations this office could provide. GTAs were then invited to ask their own questions and address specific concerns with the specialists.

A key insight we covered in the training was the importance of accommodations. A student must be registered with the ASO to receive accommodations, and once these accommodations are made, it is the instructor's legal responsibility to provide the necessary support. One of the most valuable conclusions that came from this training was the development of new accommodations specifically created for the

basic communication course. Students now receive “Accommodations for Speeches” on their accommodations card. This allows for accommodations to be coordinated between the student, the teacher, and the ASO on a per-student basis. This has been beneficial for students with anxiety and depression who find their symptoms are exacerbated by the unique stresses in the basic communication course. Some accommodations that have been utilized at our institution have included allowing the student to present individually to the instructor for a grade before presenting to the class, allowing the student to sit down while presenting, to film him/herself presenting to a small group, and to read directly from a preparation outline instead of using speaking notes. The training emphasized the teacher’s role in helping students access resources that can assist them both within and beyond the basic communication course.

The Teacher

As a new instructor of a university general education class, I was concerned about meeting the needs of students. Questions of legality and resource accessibility became paramount; however, the training I received helped to address these concerns. Jillian’s training revealed the numerous resources offered by the university not just through direct presentation, but through conversation with members of the various accommodation and mental health offices. By opening a dialogue between the new instructors and the professionals, I better understood the significance of supporting students with certain needs and the specific ways to work collaboratively between all parties (teacher, student, and ASO) to empower students. The first step to empowering students was to include not only the required accommodation and mental health syllabus statements, but also the course specific standard syllabus policy, which reads: *If you have any concerns about your ability to meet the speech requirements, please come and see me to discuss your concerns.* Additionally, the individuals involved in the training stressed the importance of taking time to address these statements on the first day of class to convey the availability and usefulness of these resources to students.

After gaining an understanding of these steps, it was a pleasure to work with Lauryn to implement these strategies from the beginning of the semester. Right away, I initiated a face-to-face dialogue about her strengths and concerns regarding this class, and we discussed how we could work together, in response to her accommodation, to empower her to be successful. The student disclosed her previous attempts to take this course and the anxiety she had about attempting it

again. Having participated in Jillian's training, I felt capable and excited to determine the specific resources and alterations we could implement to help Lauryn thrive. This included deviation from the prescribed attendance policy, allowing written discussion responses, and an alternate testing location. Throughout the semester, I stressed the importance of continuing our open communication to ensure we were clear about expectations or potential limitations, which has proven to be the key to our success. Together, we were able to assess the current state of Lauryn's work product and address upcoming course requirements before they become an obstacle. By opening up a dialogue to understand the student's goals, needs, and strengths, instructors empower students to thrive in the classroom.

The Student

Getting through school with anxiety is not easy. Symptoms are often unnoticeable, and the stigma around mental health makes it difficult for students to ask for help. Anxiety has directly affected my ability to succeed in school. Even though I consider myself capable, my grades have suffered because of my issues with anxiety.

Until I received help from the School of Communication, I truly did not think I would be able to pass my introductory communication course required of graduation. In fact, I enrolled in the course five consecutive semesters and dropped within one week each time before I finally sought help. When I met with the course administrator, Dr. Simonds, during my senior year, I was desperate to find a solution. She and I discussed the nature of my anxiety and how it would affect my ability to succeed in the course. I felt so much relief from that conversation because I felt like she truly cared about my success rather than telling me to just follow the rules.

Dr. Simonds informed me that my instructor had recently attended a training on accommodating students and would be more than happy to discuss the accommodations that would help me succeed in this specific course. She then connected me with my course instructor, Allie, to continue the line of communication. Allie was equally as supportive, and she truly listened to my concerns. It really helped me to sit down with my instructor and say, "Here's what's going on. Here's what I need to be successful." And that's exactly what happened. Allie and I agreed to maintain open communication throughout the semester. I also agreed to stay up-to-date with turning in my discussion prompts and other assignments. The personalized guidelines that Allie and I negotiated made me feel more comfortable with the class while also keeping me accountable for my work.

Not only will I pass my communication course, but now I am considering a graduate degree in ... communication. It meant so much to me that a school administrator cared enough to go the extra mile for me, because I thought I was out of options and all alone in my struggles. Speech is a difficult subject for many, but when those students know there are resources available to help them and know that their success is the main objective—it makes a world of difference. It did for me!

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