



The Unseen Roadblock to Academic Achievement: 5 Ways to Mitigate the Impact of Anxiety Disorders on Student Success

Insights

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College is stressful for nearly every student as they struggle simultaneously with the personal journey into adulthood and achieving student success in the classroom. Final exams bring added pressure at the end of the semester, particularly for freshmen confronting the stress and anxiety associated with exams for the first time. For many students, the normal stress of college life is exacerbated by diagnosed mental health issues, including anxiety disorders. Fortunately, there are a number of ways your institution can accommodate the needs of students who struggle with anxiety disorders and help mitigate the impact on student success. Here are five ideas to consider incorporating into your policies.

First, a Brief Background

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against otherwise qualified individuals with a disability. The law requires educational institutions to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, as long as there is no undue hardship to the institution, no direct threat of harm to the individual or others, and no fundamental alteration of the institution's programs. The goal is to create a level playing field for students with disabilities to achieve academic success. Invisible disabilities, such as anxiety disorders, must be accommodated just like physical disabilities in the educational environment.

Although schools should not make specific inquiries into a student's potential mental health-related disabilities, an incongruous lack of success in the classroom or frequent absenteeism is often an indication that the student may need an accommodation. In many cases, the student may provide the institution with documentation and/or make specific requests for an accommodation.

An important tool to address suspected anxiety-related issues is to simply ask questions of students who appear to be experiencing challenges in and out of the classroom. Understanding what challenges students are facing can better equip the institution to address mental health issues that may be interfering with academic achievement. Additionally, taking the following five steps can help facilitate student success.

1. Incorporate Technology to Assist with Learning

For students with generalized anxiety disorder, taking notes during class lectures can be particularly stressful, as their focus on capturing every word may result in missing important pieces of the lecture. Consider making class recordings available to students (in accordance with applicable laws and school policy). This can alleviate the stress of taking notes and allow students to participate more fully during class. Another option might be for faculty to post class notes online so that all students can access them.

2. Be Flexible with Exam Logistics

For many students who suffer from social and generalized anxiety disorders, the ability to take exams in a separate, quiet area can significantly reduce test anxiety. For others, merely choosing a specific seat within the classroom can mitigate anxiety. For example, sitting near an exit can provide comfort to a student who is concerned about having a panic attack during testing. Finally, requesting additional time to complete exams is nearly always acceptable for students with anxiety disorders to help ease the heightened stress.

3. Develop a Variety of Testing Formats

Some students with anxiety disorders prefer subjective essay exams over objective multiple-choice tests, where selecting the correct answer from the options presented may seem overwhelming. Others may prefer oral exams where they can focus on discussing their knowledge of the subject without the anxiety associated with written tests. Providing a variety of testing options can allow students with anxiety disorders to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter in a non-threatening way.

4. Offer Alternatives to Testing

Allowing students to perform alternate work to verify their understanding can provide another option if test taking excessively triggers anxiety. Students can be required to complete take-home essays, reports, papers, or projects as an alternative to testing. These options may actually require much more time on the part of the student, yet they alleviate the heightened anxiety associated with test taking.

5. Provide a Place for Relaxation

Providing a comfortable, safe, and quiet area for students to decompress can be extremely helpful to students who are feeling anxious and stressed, particularly in the days leading up to and during exam time. Common areas tend to be loud and chaotic social spaces, so a quiet zone can provide a much-needed respite.

Conclusion

Of course, every student's circumstances are different, and you should respect student privacy and train staff and faculty to be mindful of boundaries. Advise staff and faculty to seek help through the appropriate school contact when students disclose concerns about what they may be experiencing that can affect mental health.

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