

## **Fighting Crisis with Communication Centers**

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Ever since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, chaos and confusion have become norms within our society. While everyone has been hit hard, I would like to focus on the struggles that undergraduate students are now facing in the wake of the pandemic surge. College students, especially freshmen and sophomores, came into their college experiences underprepared for not only the rigor of college academics but also the social dynamics they need to navigate in order to be successful. These struggles have hit a crisis point due to lapses in instruction while schools were shut down, which led to lower quality instruction and fewer social interactions for students. This crisis is reflected in both the academic and mental health realms. According to an analysis done by Dorn et al. (2021), “the impact of the pandemic on K–12 student learning was significant, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year...but also the broader health and well-being of students, with more than 35 percent of parents very or extremely concerned about their children’s mental health” (para. 2). This essay will explore these struggles and suggest how the communication center staff can aid these students and their professors with success in and out of the classroom during these unprecedented times.

Some of the most glaring problems I have witnessed as a consultant in the communication center are that students have lost (or never learned) proper communication skills. These skills include having successful social interactions, communicating effectively with their professors, and communicating with peers in an academic or professional setting. As mentioned, not only are students struggling to connect with me as a consultant, but they are also struggling to connect and communicate with their peers and their professors. I have had many consultations with students who come to the communication center unaware of the details of their given assignment. When I have asked students if they have reached out to their professors, the answers often have been along the lines of “No,” or, “I’m not sure how.” These encounters have made me realize that a significant part of these students’ problems is not their lack of ability to do the assignments, but their lack of interpersonal communication skills.

Quattrochi (2021) touches on this subject when discussing responses to the impacts of COVID-19 from leadership in higher education. Quattrochi cites Shana Payne, director of Delaware’s Higher Education Office, who says, “These students didn’t have the opportunity to visit campuses and have the opportunity to have those conversations with admissions officers. And so they were... lacking confidence about their decision and their next steps” (para. 5). Incoming students lack confidence and are unsure about their decisions from the very beginning. They have been stuck in online learning and have not had the chance to have face-to-face interactions with their prospective universities. Lack of interaction is just the tip of the iceberg.

We see a trickle-down effect as students continue to struggle to take confident steps and make decisions throughout their time in college.

As a consultant at the communication center, I have seen how a good interaction between a peer consultant and student can be a confidence booster. The communication center can be a place where students can ask questions, and build bonds with peers and their university before making that bigger leap to talking to faculty. Many educators are beginning to see, just as our communication center has, that we need to address the root of the problem with these students, which is communication anxiety. Quottrochi (2021) also cites Yolanda Watson Spiva, president of Complete College America, who explained, “We’re moving beyond merely focusing on course content and thinking about students in a more asset-based perspective that supports student learning” (para. 22). A shift in focus like this shows that educators have recognized the need to focus on helping students build communicative assets to support their success in academia.

For students to build these communication skills, they first need to have confidence-boosting experiences and learn to self-advocate. If they have these positive experiences, which communication centers can offer, then naturally their communication skills will grow, which is the asset these students need for academic success. The communication center is the perfect place for these skills to be worked on and perfected. Our communication center offers many different types of consultations, but the one type I believe that would be the most valuable to new students is “general consultations.” These consultations provide any student the opportunity to come and ask any questions that will aid them with the myriad of communication issues that they are dealing with.

Not only do general consultations provide a safe and open space to ask questions, but they are also conducted with a peer consultant. Talking to a peer is generally easier for most students, and they feel more comfortable opening up about their struggles or asking for help or advice. I recently had a general consultation where a student came in and was looking for resources for an upcoming project and wanted advice on where to go and who could best help. I could tell the student was overwhelmed and did not know where else to go for help or resources. I was able to ease their anxiety and give specific information on where to go on campus to get help building a web page (the project). I educated the student on how we as a communication center can help with the speech component of the project, and I also sent the student to our digital studio as a resource for the web page aspect. The student also expressed concern and confusion over the assignment and I was able to help them craft an email to their professor that was professional and with which they felt comfortable.

What universities need more than ever right now are these kinds of interactions. Our communication centers are equipped with well-trained consultants who are well-versed in communication skills and are ready to teach and help fellow students. As communication directors and consultants, we need to encourage students and faculty to utilize our services. We are here to help students find their footing and their voice. In conclusion, students will benefit from the services we have to offer. Communication centers can be first-line responders with

these anxieties that students are facing. It is the job of directors and consultants to be equipped with the knowledge of our students' needs and spread awareness. As a consultant, it is incredibly rewarding to see a student leave a consultation with more confidence and armed with more information than when they first arrived. If educators and students recognize what we offer and come to us for help, we are ready and more than willing to ease the burdens that students are dealing with.

### References

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