



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## CAN YOU HELP ME UNPACK?

**Overview:** *The 2010 American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) survey of over 99,000 college students indicates that students report stress/anxiety as the #1 factor that impacts their academic success and ability to complete college. Through situational and practical application, the authors support integration/partnership of Student Counseling Services and Faculty/Instruction into the classroom. Both partnered to create a unique academic opportunity to integrate counseling into classroom instruction.*

Baggage. We all have it, whether it is the pain from a divorce, the loss of a loved one, or challenges with a child with special needs, we all have a variety of luggage that we carry through life's journey. As educators and administrators, we are expected to check that baggage at the door and conduct our job duties in superior fashion. However, it is not as easy for our students. According to the Spring 2010 American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA), students report that the **#1 barrier to academic success is stress and anxiety**—one of the heaviest bags. In the same survey, students reported the following feelings over the past 12 months:

- 85.6% reported feeling overwhelmed by all of their responsibilities
- 80% reported severe anxiety on a regular basis
- 56% reported feelings of extreme loneliness
- 45% reported feelings of hopelessness
- 30% reported feeling so depressed it was difficult to function on a daily basis

From a two-year college perspective, we know the stories behind the data—a single dad working two jobs and going to school; an unemployed 50-plus student who is coming back to school for retraining but barely making ends meet; the first-generation college student right out of high school who has the hopes and dreams of his family on his shoulders; and the student who is working two jobs while caring for ailing parents at home. These are some of the bags that students carry into the hallways of academia. They cannot leave them at the door. In many cases the bags get too heavy, and

they decide to get off the path to their destination—of completing their degree or retraining for a new career. It is a sad, but honest reality among the populations we serve. Sometimes students are unaware or ill-equipped to balance the weight of life, and so they segment it so as not to get in the way of their academic success. Required or not, counseling is a vital component of the two-year college experience for many students. A collaborative relationship between faculty members and a campus counseling center helps to strengthen access to this critical resource on our campuses.

So the question is...how do we as educators and administrators support student success by helping students unpack their bags in the classroom through the use of counseling services? If students would not seek counseling on their own, we decided to expose them to it and its benefits in an inescapable way—bringing it into the classroom.

### Unpacking the Bags: Integrating Counseling Into the Classroom

We decided to bring counseling to an English Composition class because students are asked to create reaction papers periodically in response to literature, articles, or workplace relevant subjects. We often overhear students talking about various life issues and thought that it would be beneficial to have a member of Student Counseling Services visit the class and assign students a "reaction or response" writing based on the visit. We partnered to host a roundtable discussion with students to discuss life issues. Students sat in a circle and were assured that the roundtable was a "no judgment zone." We started the discussion by introducing Student Counseling Services as "people who help with issues not related to academics." Students were asked to share what they deemed to be their biggest barrier(s) to completing college. From there the floodgates opened, and we were able to have a poignant dialogue with students in what resembled a small-group counseling session. Here are some of the outcomes of the activity as shared in the students' response essay assignments and follow-up class discussion:



*Jesse\** reported that he was on the Dean's List the previous semester. Currently, he is barely passing his classes and on the verge of dropping out, as a result. He recently took on extra hours at work, not because he needed the money but because his boss asked him. He never thought about the connection between his work schedule and his academic performance. Since his job supported his school attendance, following the group session he decided to reduce his hours at work so he could get back on track for the semester.

*Kierra\** shared that she does not have significant time to study at home because she has to take care of her children and family. She is married, but has never talked to her spouse about her need to study. As the "woman of the house," she assumed she needed to continue these duties. In the roundtable, she was advised of the importance of communication with family and negotiating time and household duties to support her studies. Kierra discussed a plan with her spouse that would give her Sundays "off" to work on schoolwork and even arranged for her spouse to pick up their children from school on Wednesdays so she would have time to access the campus computer lab and library.

*Luis\** is a younger college student who recently completed high school. He is a single father and has to take care of his mother financially, as well. Oftentimes he feels a lot of pressure because his family is "counting on him to be successful," but he has many stresses at home. The roundtable discussion brought to light that Luis needs to prioritize his life responsibilities while he is in school. He was encouraged to visit the college's Academic and Tutoring Center to work on a time-management plan to balance his time and get extra help in writing. In addition, Luis indicated that he would like to visit counseling services on a routine basis to talk to someone about how best to handle his priorities outside of school. He was considering taking a break from school, but has already enrolled for the fall semester to continue his studies.

*All students* reported through their response papers that they were affected by the visit. Some described it as a life-changing experience. Hearing the barriers that other students faced made them feel a deeper bond with their classmates. They also reported a feeling of hope, knowing there was a real person in Student Counseling Services they could relate to and trust. Many indicated that they would refer students in other classes to counseling as a result of the roundtable discussion.

Within two-year colleges, students utilize counseling assistance to address a variety of needs which impact their academic success. Approaches to student counseling may vary from one institution to the next, as do the intended outcomes of such services. Despite this

variation, commonalities exist in the demographics of today's community and technical college students. These characteristics predispose students to certain challenges which often require counseling intervention to make academics more manageable and success more certain. If we as educators and administrators are truly focused on student success, we cannot ignore the weight of the bags our students carry or its impact on college completion. It is imperative that we take an extra step to reach across campus to partner with our colleagues, helping students unpack their bags so they remain focused on their academic destination(s).

Our partnership is just one of the many ways we have discussed to integrate support services into classroom instruction to promote academic success.

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\*Student names have been changed for anonymity purposes.