



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

SOFTENING STUDENT STRESS

As an in-tune community college instructor, I am familiar with the stresses associated with going to college. In fact, it was not that long ago that I sweated over student loans, essays, and the uncertainty of the job market. But given the current economic crisis and unemployment rate, I was not shocked to read a recent article in *The New York Times* that claims today's college freshmen are under more stress today than in the past 25 years. I thought I felt stress when I was a student, but it does not compare to the new stresses for today's students.

Articles about student stress have prompted questions about my own traditional and nontraditional students' emotional health, going back to school after many years away, working full-time jobs, being teen mothers and fathers, or coming in as first-generation college students. This year, Wallace State Community College is celebrating its students and highlighting their successes. We are helping more students and in new ways. But as we grow in the number of students we serve, are we also growing in terms of below-average emotional health? What should I do in the classroom to help put students more at ease, to relax and to achieve?

As a community college instructor, I am convinced that my students face severe pressures and above-average stress. What is more important, however, is how I deal with stressed students, diffuse their anxieties, and help them perform despite their stress. Stress should not get in the way of success.

Although stress in college students is not new, some of the means by which we can deal with it are. According to an article in *The New York Times* (Lewin, "Record Level of Stress Found in College Students"), Yale University Law School allows students to borrow a pet bulldog from the library for half an hour at a time. Students may play fetch, take the dog for a walk, or even cuddle as a means of relieving stress and taking a break from their studies. (When I studied Chaucer in college, two German Shepherds always accompanied the instructor and made the lectures, dare I say it, a bit more enjoyable.) The jury is still out on the bulldog's

stress level. But this new program shows that colleges are taking student stress levels and emotional well-being more seriously than they have in the past, and suggests that there are new ways to deal with emotional health that we must consider.

Recently, one of my students, a 42-year-old, divorced mother of two, stopped attending class. She cited car trouble, her children, and an expensive doctor's visit as justification for why she missed two weeks of discussion. And she may be right. I often give my students the benefit of the doubt because I feel this is what good instructors do. But I saw her reasoning as part of a bigger picture—namely, her added stress from being behind in her assignments and not having the confidence or vision to be able to pace herself and catch up with the rest of the class. So, I sat down and helped her get organized and come up with a game plan.

I have found in working with students, and from my experience as a student, that the key to overcoming stress and achieving goals is to make a list and write things down. Tackling big projects (or multiple assignments), one at a time, is a sure-fire way to get them done. It sounds almost too obvious, but sometimes it takes an instructor demonstrating this method for it to click. Written goals are more likely to be achieved. Moreover, list-making helps students prioritize and allows them to see progress. It is satisfying to cross things off a to-do list, and this brings me to another stress-reduction strategy.

Students are most effective (and efficient) when they complete one task at a time. Adhering to a list forces students not to move on to the next project until the current task is finished. We talk about this in class, and I make a habit of helping them see the value in list-making by beginning each class with a class agenda. I list the date and daily topics on the board. Not only does putting the agenda on the board help students relax and know what to expect, it helps me keep track of what I want to cover. And our class time is more efficiently managed.

Like all good instructors, I try to teach by example. I make an effort to appear calm and relaxed, regardless of the situation and my own stress. If I am relaxed, my students are relaxed. But students know my work can be stressful, too. At times, it is difficult to remain as



“chilled” as they say I am. This is one reason why I have started to think more about how to handle stress and whether my methods might work in the classroom.

I take walks and listen to music to relax, sometimes at the same time. This, in part, is why I recently began a unit on poetry by playing Bob Dylan and Kanye West songs. Each songwriter provides good topics for discussion about the elements of poetry, and listening to music in class helps students relax and enjoy the lessons more. In the same way, when my students study dramatic works, I make them act out scenes. Students need to see and hear the plays, but they also need to take some time in class to pretend and imagine they are someone else. Acting out scenes inevitably leads to laughter, and laughter in the classroom benefits everyone.

Like listening to music in class, there are other direct and indirect benefits to showing film adaptations of the plays students have read and analyzed. Many Americans unwind after a hard day with TV. Watching movies in class relieves stress and may be a nice reward to a challenging reading or writing assignment. And when watching a movie, who doesn't like a little candy? I have a strict “no food” rule in my class. But when the semester draws to a close and students begin studying for finals, and especially if we are watching a movie, I pass around candy. Sometimes, a little sugar helps soften stress, too.

Michael Salerno, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Wallace State Community College, 801 Main Street NW, Hanceville, AL 35077.
Email: michael.salerno@wallacestate.edu

Suane D. Roueche, *Editor*

January 18, 2012, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1

©The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER institutions for their own personal use.

Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, 1 University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545, Email: abstracts@nisod.org