**To:** Gregory W. Fowler, PhD, President of University of Maryland Global Campus

**From:** Mark Kardash, Undergraduate Student

**Date:** September 9th, 2023

**Subject:** Proposal to Create Virtual Socialization Club at the University

**Summary**

As an accredited online institution, University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) provides fully asynchronous, online-only courses to students of diverse backgrounds and origins. Despite all the valuable free time and flexibility such a system provides, students’ interactions are much more limited and work-focused than those on a physical campus. And as a person with cerebral palsy, I have realized that while online education can feel somewhat isolating for able-bodied students, the toll is twice as large on people with special needs. Being unable to physically interact with their peers can have a negative impact on their mental health, also affecting their academic performance. Because of UMGC’s online presence, this problem affects all students, rather than a specific section of the University, and cannot be left unaddressed. For this reason, I propose creating a virtual club for special needs students at our institution, which will allow them to make new connections, start discussions, and build trust, going beyond routine academic interactions. I also suggest considering expanding this concept into a general gathering hub for students, as this will help make the online college experience less routine and more human. To achieve this, I am requesting permission to conduct research on the feasibility of such an organization, the psychosocial aspects of working or learning from home, and various previously proposed solutions for the problem. I will employ UMGC Library’s OneSearch tool, and its various databases, to guide me through my research, using both scholarly and trade sources to support my idea.

**Defining the Problem and the Reasons for Investigating It**

The main issue addressed here is the limited opportunities for social connection between students at our university. Online programs such as our own certainly have many benefits and can help students feel less stressed about deadlines. However, in a setting where individuals do not actually see each other, it is difficult to connect on a purely human level. The only communication most students have with each other is through course-related learning discussions, and, sometimes, through individual introductions. This, combined with the lack of activities typically present on a physical campus (social gatherings, games, etc.), prevents students from properly socializing. This can pose several problems to both the university and its students. Firstly, the virtual routine brought on by an online-only schedule can decrease students’ motivation, negatively impacting academic performance. Because it is UMGC’s mission to prepare students for personal and professional success in life, the problem of limited socialization needs to be properly addressed.

Secondly, as stated in the summary, the effect from remote courses can have an even greater impact on people with special needs. Most able-bodied students can compensate for this by finding connections outside of academic life. But individuals whose conditions may be preventing them from properly socializing even in physical settings can find this reality doubly challenging. The increased isolation that comes with a strictly work-focused schedule can negatively affect their mental health, depriving them of opportunities to express themselves on a deeper level. As an institution that truly cares about its students and their well-being, UMGC should take this issue into account.

Because the university’s goal is to make each individual student feel welcome, seen and cared for, virtual isolation is not something that can go unnoticed by students or faculty. Granted, we may not be able to resolve it completely, but it is essential that every member of the UMGC family does their part in reducing its impact.

**Secondary Research I Will Conduct in Addressing the Problem**

My secondary research for addressing this problem will include topics like the impact of learn-from-home and work-from-home schedules on people with special needs, the relationship between remote learning and mental health, socialization problems posed by online work, survey results, and solutions proposed by others. During a quick preliminary search, I found several articles claiming that remote learning does have an impact on people with not only physical, but also learning disabilities. The authors attempt to find an optimal way of making sure such individuals get the best out of the learning experience, in an environment where finding support may be difficult. Two of the articles I intend to use are “A Nested Approach to Supporting Special Education Need and Disabled Students in Online Learning” by Lawrence Meda and Hala Albukhari (2023), and “Online Learning-Two Sided Arguments Related to Mental Health by Van et al (2022). For my research, I intend to use both scholarly and trade sources, most of which I will obtain through the UMGC Library, to ensure authenticity. In addition, I plan to research the best schedules, hours, and socialization techniques to get a clearer vision for my proposed club. By exploring many different aspects of the issue, I can obtain a better understanding of it, thus coming up with the best solution.

**Why My Research Will Benefit the University**

My research will benefit UMGC in more ways than one. If utilized correctly, the results provided will:

1. Help faculty better understand what students feel and experience in asynchronous online education.
2. Enable them to come up with the best solution for the issue.
3. Increase student motivation.
4. Improve overall academic performance, maintaining UMGC’s reputation as an innovative and inclusive university.

Several possible recommendations for tackling the problem of student isolation at UMGC would be:

1. Forming a virtual organization or club, where, as previously stated, students with special needs would be able to unwind and enjoy casual conversations.
2. Integrating more interactive group projects into course materials, to increase the feeling of togetherness and students’ status as a team.

**Conclusion**

University of Maryland Global Campus is an accredited, fully online university that provides a flexible schedule with useful courses. However, some students may face socialization problems in such an asynchronous setting. These problems can cause have a serious impact on mental health, as well as students’ academic performance. UMGC has always strived to provide the best conditions for its students, for them to succeed as individuals in a demanding society. And it always does its best to approach each student on an individual level. It is our duty as a healthy and ethical educational institution to not let these concerns go unnoticed. For this reason, I am asking your permission to conduct research aimed at the creation of a virtual social club for special needs students at the university.