October 9, 2023

Mr. Gregory Fowler

President,

University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC)

3501 University Blvd E,

Suite 105 Adelphi MD 20783

Dear Mr. Fowler:

Below you will find the report “Combatting Social Isolation Among Special Needs Students in the Online Learning Environment”, which I completed after sending you the proposal memo to conduct research a few weeks ago.

This report examines the various issues faced by disabled and special needs individuals in a virtual classroom, the toll of these difficulties on their mental health, as well as the efforts made by professors and other officials to make the virtual environment more accessible to them. In addition, the report recommends several solutions to the problem, as applicable to our institution.

Thank you in advance for your attention to my report, which I hope will help make UMGC an even more inclusive university than it already is.

Sincerely,

Mark Kardash

Undergraduate Student,

University of Maryland Global Campus

Combatting Social Isolation Among Special Needs Students in the Online Learning Environment

Submitted to Gregory Fowler

President, University of Maryland Global CampusBy

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Undergraduate Student, University of Maryland Global Campus

September 27, 2023

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Executive Summary. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 4

Introduction

Background of the Issue. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 6

Purpose of Report. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 6

Methodology Used. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 7

Research Methods. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 7

Results

Effects of Virtual Learning on Student Mental Health. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 7

Online Education and Students with Disabilities. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 9

Faculty Measures to Meet the Needs of Disabled Students. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 12

Creating a Virtual Socialization Club at UMGC. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 13

Conclusion . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .15

Recommendations . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 16

References . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 17

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Purpose and Method**

University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) is a fully online educational institution, but despite providing free time and flexibility, its asynchronous schedule may cause some students to feel isolated. Most students can counter the loneliness by engaging in activities outside of the University. However, this approach may not always be possible for students with special needs. The monotonous, work-focused nature of virtual interactions can negatively impact their mental health, consequently having an adverse effect on academic performance. Our method consists of the analysis of several sources on virtual learning and social isolation. By doing this, we hope yo fulfil this report’s purposes of:

* Understanding the effects of online learning on the mental health of special needs students.
* Determining the impact of virtual learning on academic performance.
* Finding solutions to the problem of social isolation in the online classroom.

**Research and Conclusions**

Research conducted using both scholarly and trade publications proves that the interactions in an online college are very different in nature, and much more limited, than those on a physical campus. Students do not have access to the large variety of social gatherings, events, and groups usually available on the latter. Thus, although virtual education may offer a lot of free time, its pathways for human connection and relationship building are restricted.

Another issue discovered is that the few existing communication methods are very regulated and work-focused. Students are instructed to review assignments, respond to their peers' discussion posts, and make contributions to others' works. But the main purpose of these interactions is the testing of students' knowledge, and they leave very little room for actual socialization. The only thing that comes somewhat close to such an opportunity are the one-time introductions at the beginning of each course. But even then, their specific format does not allow for a fully fleshed out, emotional conversation, making the introductions just another task for the student to complete.

**Suggestions To Improve Student Interactions**

To counter the monotonous reality of virtual learning, the following solution is suggested:

* Creating a virtual club/organization for special needs students to gather and visit in their free time. This will be a place for connection, trust building, non-academic discussions, and expression of emotions. It can also later be expanded to non-special needs students.

Respectfully,

Mark Kardash

**Introduction**

**Background of the Issue**

The University of Maryland Global Campus is an institution offering online, fully asynchronous courses to students of diverse backgrounds and origins. While this learning system certainly has its benefits, such as greater amounts of free time and a flexible schedule, its lack of face-to-face interactions can make some students feel isolated. Because of its virtual nature, learners may find themselves trapped in an endless routine of assignments, which would negatively impact both their mental health and academic performance. This is a particularly damaging prospect for students with special needs and disabilities, who may have difficulty socializing even on a physical campus. For them, the online classroom may be the only place to connect on a human level, and finding friends outside of academic life is harder than it is for a non-disabled student.

A consequence of the isolation brought by online learning is also the difficulty of some students to receive appropriate accommodations. The inability to physically meet and interact with faculty can cause some students to feel lost or overwhelmed in their search for help. The situation is worsened by the fact that not all professors are aware of the specific needs these students have. The lack of understanding from faculty can make the students feel helpless or neglected, further damaging their emotional well-being. As an institution with a goal of raising confident, healthy, educated individuals, UMGC should not let this major issue go unnoticed.

**Purpose of Report**

The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of online learning on the mental health and academic performance of students, particularly those with special needs, and propose several solutions to the problem. Information gathered was aimed at the creation of a student social club, as well as accommodating learners according to their needs, potentially improving academic performance and overall well-being.

**Methodology Used**

To achieve the purposes stated above, the following research methods were used:

* Gathered and analyzed information from reputable sources on the relationship between online learning, student mental health, and academic performance.

**Research Methods**

The method for this report only included secondary research. Articles were gathered mostly through the UMGC Library, but also using the web. The articles were collected from both scholarly and trade sources, including academic journals and news articles. Results of existing studies were analyzed and compared to developed optimal solutions to the issue at hand.

**Results**

**Effects of Virtual Learning on Student Mental Health**

Zhou and Zhang (2021) expose the dark side of the online classroom in their research, stating that “the lack of in-person interaction between teacher-student and student-student may lead to loneliness, even anxiety, or depression.” (para.4). The inability to meet classmates face-to-face is also accompanied by the very work-focused nature of online learning. This combination can make the overall college experience dull and monotonous, creating the feeling of living from assignment to assignment, and thus decreasing student motivation.

Despite the disturbing possibilities above, the study performed by Zhou and Zhang found that students studying online during the COVID-19 pandemic had mostly positive experiences. Moreover, some claimed to have benefitted from the transition to virtual learning, citing advantages like easy access to materials, sufficient academic support, and even a sense of togetherness in their virtual classroom (2021). In a surprising development, the mental health of those studying from home was in a better state than those who remained on campus, which the authors attributed to higher health restrictions for the latter group (2021). On a similar note, in their article regarding people with learning disabilities, Goegan et al (2023) pointed out that advantages of online learning “included that communication tools such as chatrooms and discussion boards can facilitate learning and that online learning affords flexibility in scheduling and ease of access to information.” (Challenges with online learning for students with LD, para. 1). Thus, before labeling virtual education as harmful or ineffective, we must acknowledge that it indeed helps students in many ways.

But the benefits of online learning do not make its negative aspects any less noteworthy. CNN reports that in 2020, “Nearly 25% of parents whose children received virtual instruction or combined instruction reported worsened mental or emotional health in their children, compared to 16% of parents whose children received in-person instruction.” (Wood & Mascarenhas, 2021, para.3). Although these numbers were recorded during a time of increased social distancing and global health emergency, they are still very telling of the toll studying online has on people, especially of younger generations. It once again circles back to the possibility of isolation-induced depression and anxiety referenced by Zhou and Zhang (2021).

While the above statistics can indeed be concerning to many, it would be incorrect to label online learning as their sole cause. Van et al explain this by mentioning factors like student psychology, psychobiology, lifestyle, social aspects, literary elements, and risk factors as contributing to poor student mental health (2022). An even clearer demonstration of students’ worries while studying online can be seen in an article by Son et al (2020). The researchers surveyed a total of 195 college students about their virtual learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that 82% of students experienced “increased concerns on academic performance”, 86% of them faced “disruptions to sleeping patterns”, 89% had “difficulty in concentrating”, 91% cited “fear and worry about their own health and of their loved ones”, with 86% also mentioning “decreased social interactions due to physical distancing” (para.4). This data demonstrates that, despite offering “location flexibility, extensive availability of courses and information, instant feedback, and time flexibility” (Van et al, 2022, p.140), virtual education does bring with it significant issues, that must be addressed as soon as possible for the sake of student wellbeing.

**Online Education and Students with Disabilities**

While online learning is already a stressful reality for the average student, its toll is twice as heavy for students with special needs and disabilities. When faced with social isolation in school, able-bodied students can usually seek connections outside of academic life. But for special needs individuals, the classroom may be the only opportunity for socialization. And when that opportunity is taken away, it can lead to serious consequences. Mullins & Mitchell (2021) claim that when the needs of disabled students are not seriously considered, they “can become marginalized and alienated from the online classroom.” (para.1). This misunderstanding of needs also results in the students being unable to receive adequate academic accommodations. When professors do not understand their exact needs, the special needs students have nothing left but to personally request learning accommodations, an option some of them may find uncomfortable (2021). Such were the authors’ conclusions from their study of college students in Canada, and they point to a very unpleasant aspect of virtual education. Combined with time management struggles and technical problems, as well as a home environment full of distractions, the inability to get proper help turns the virtual learning experience into an emotional battle for many students. Once again, however, the writers argue online education can sometimes be beneficial to those with special needs or disabilities, allowing for features like quizzes, prerecorded lectures, polls, video tutorials, and a greater flexibility in completing work. Therefore, Mullins & Mitchell argue that more research needs to be done to make the online learning environment more comfortable for this student category (2021).

The terms “special needs” and “disabled” do not only include people with physical impairments, but also those with intellectual and learning disabilities, who have just as many difficulties with using the virtual classroom. The Learning Disabilities Association of America defines learning disability as “a disorder in one or more basic psychological processes that may manifest itself as an imperfect ability in certain areas of learning, such as reading, written expression, or mathematics.” (n.d.). Goegan et al asked a total of 283 college students about their experiences, of whom 54 had a learning disability (LD). Their study was done in the form of interviews, each with a length of 45-75 minutes, and, like some others above, revealed both positive and negative aspects of online learning (2023). An aspect of the latter category that many subjects mentioned was the sudden increase in workload, which contributed to the already great stress of transitioning to online learning due to COVID-19 (Goegan et al, 2023). But the amount of work itself was only part of the problem, as the researchers found that, for many, “attending school from their homes blurred the boundary between work and home life, resulting in students working more than they typically would.” (p. 172). This sudden collision of school, home and work routines, coupled with frequent distractions from family members, and a plethora of technical problems, created a depressing routine of never-ending assignments, resulting in students feeling overworked (2023).

The resolution of problems like the above often begins with establishing a healthy human bond between students and professors, which, for many, can itself be difficult to achieve. He et al (2022) explain the importance of connecting beyond technological means, saying that “technology cannot replace the support and facilitation of instructors.” (2.3 Lack of Training and Practice to Implement Effective Online Engagement, para.1). To give a better understanding of the impact that human interaction has in learning, the authors offer an Information Systems (IS) introductory programming course as an example. They write that “Students can lose interest if they have trouble running a program and could not get timely help for debugging their program to keep up with the rest of the class.” (2.3 Lack of Training and Practice to Implement Effective Online Engagement, para.1). Therefore, despite all the convenient features technology can offer, it often delays student progress by dragging out issues that a face-to-face interaction could resolve within minutes. The problem is made worse by the simple unwillingness of some faculty to properly respond to LD students’ needs. Among the students interviewed by Goegan et al, many expressed appreciation for the wide variety of resources and assistance available online. They also admitted that the virtual environment allowed for less anxiety when asking questions, something many LD students feel nervous about doing in person (2023). But a portion of the interviewees indicated that professors were somehow reluctant to provide certain accommodations, such as extended time on assignments, due to fear of their students cheating. The lack of sufficient time to complete their work put pressure on the students, increasing the stress they already had and, consequently, decreasing the quality of the results. To resolve such issues, Goegan et al call for better access to student accommodations, as well as improved communication between professors and their students (2023). Meda & Albukhari (2023) also stress the importance of sufficient academic assistance, by writing that “Special education need and disabled (SEND) students were among those most vulnerable to dropping their studies because of a lack of support” (p.1).

**Faculty Measures to Meet the Needs of Disabled Students**

As the sources above have demonstrated, the virtual classroom carries with it many more problems than just social isolation, all of which must be resolved for the best use of its multiple benefits. The most effective way to achieve this is a dedicated cooperation between professors, college boards, and other academic officials. As explained by Meda & Albukhari (2023), “Support staff in conjunction with faculty members must take a leading role in offering differentiated support to [special needs] students and collaborating with external organizations to cater to the diverse needs of students.” (Conclusion, para.1). Mullins and Mitchell (2021) contribute to this by reminding that the first step to meeting those needs is understanding them, as they ask faculty to “recognize that students with disabilities are struggling but appreciate they are trying;” (p.25). They continue with the very prevalent topic of academic accommodations, calling for changes like video recordings of lessons for future student review, and opportunities for accommodation-related discussions at the beginning of each semester (2021).

Some of the sources emphasize the importance of keeping the “human” element even in the online classroom. Meda & Albukhari (2023) invite faculty and students to stay connected, explaining that “the aspect of implementing a collaborative working relationship [is] an indispensable way of enhancing [special needs] students’ access and success in online learning.” (Conclusion, para.1). This notion of togetherness is reinforced by Goegan et al (2023), whose study proved that “Online courses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, seemed to change the in-class dynamic and the interactions between students, which could lead to challenges with socialization and collaboration.” (The Importance of Staying Connected, para.1). This discovery led the authors to conclude that ““supporting students’ need to enhance their connections with others may be an important component to ensuring a positive experience with online learning.” (The Importance of Staying Connected, para.2).

As a last recommendation, all the above articles seem to agree that research on virtual learning for special needs students should continue. Son et al (2021) advise that “further study is needed to determine the effects of the pandemic on students’ mental health and well-being in its later phases beyond the peak period” (Limitations and Future Work, para.1). Mullins & Mitchell suggest directing future studies at the concerns that students have regarding their mental health and developing strategies to combat these issues (2021). In their own words, “Research should identify academic accommodations that facilitate online learning and what additional services and supports are essential for [special needs students]” (p.25). Thus, the education system could always benefit from new discoveries about student needs.

**Creating a Virtual Socialization Club at UMGC**

The information collected and analyzed above is part of a proposal to create a virtual social space for UMGC students. This will be a place for learners, whether special needs, disabled, or able-bodied, to gather after a long, exhausting day, and escape the academic routine. The club can be included as a feature among the student resources on the university’s official website. Students would be able to access it by clicking on a Zoom link, or a link to a similar platform. Such a hub would allow students to:

* Make friendships and connections by participating in discussions unrelated to academic life.
* Express any concerns they feel comfortable with sharing.
* Share their academic experiences with each other.
* Answer questions about various topics.
* Participate in social activities such as playing games, holding contests, celebrating events, and perhaps even having film screenings.
* Building trust by getting to know their classmates better.

Access to this proposed club would be open to everyone, although the standard rules about respectful behavior and integrity would, of course, apply. Announcements about any planned activities in the club would be posted on the website, with notifications sent to all students. Possible (optional) ideas for planned activities include:

* Holding planned celebrations (Ex. Any significant dates for the university, Christmas parties, etc.)
* Organizing sports watching sessions.
* Having TV show marathons.

While some of the activities suggested may be quite expensive, creating this club can help bring the UMGC community closer. By being an oasis of relief in an often-stressful environment, it can contribute to the fight against social isolation, allowing for people with common interests, traditions or beliefs to come together.

**Conclusion**

Disabled and special needs students experience many struggles while studying online. In addition to the crippling social isolation and monotonous academic routine, they may encounter a lack of support, technical issues, and a lack of understanding, or even willingness to help, from faculty members. This can have severe consequences for their mental health, motivation, and quality of academic work. Because of the frequent struggle of disabled individuals to find real human connections, these issues have an even greater impact on them than on the average able-bodied student. Despite the negatives, the research indicates that virtual education has some aspects that are greatly helpful to those with special needs. Some aspects identified include flexibility in assignments, feeling in control of the learning environment, and having access to unique digital resources. For students with learning disabilities, the virtual classroom was often a safe space, in which they could ask questions without the anxiety they often feel in a physical environment. The biggest problem counteracting these advantages remains the lack of regard and understanding of disabled students’ needs by some professors. To combat this issue, and achieve more inclusivity in the classroom, research suggests tight cooperation between academic officials and bodies. Together, they can regulate student workload, strive to connect with students on a human level, and make accommodations more accessible for those in need. As for UMGC, the creation of a virtual socialization club would allow for a more tightly knit community, decreasing social isolation.

**Recommendations**

Although the articles analyzed in this report already recommended many ways to address problems in the online classroom, a few more things can be added. Since many of the sources mentioned the importance of understanding student needs, organized training sessions may be very beneficial to institutions like UMGC. These can be a series of lectures, held prior to the beginning of a semester, educating faculty on how to properly cater to the needs of disabled students, what requests to consider reasonable, and what accommodations to provide. Becoming more aware of these things can alleviate professors’ fears of cheating and allow for stronger bonds with their students.

A second recommendation would be to popularize virtual clubs, like the one proposed for UMGC. Such a feature can make asynchronous colleges more inclusive, increasing student motivation by strengthening their sense of belonging to a caring community.

Finally, just like many articles within it, this report recommends that research into its topic of focus continues. By discovering new facts about the virtual classroom and social isolation, researchers and faculty will be able to help students struggling with online education in new and innovative ways. Thus, they will ensure the development of healthy and productive individuals.

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