September 28, 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 Campus

By

Mark Kardash

Undergraduate Student, University of Maryland Global Campus

September 27, 2023

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**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).

TO BE FINISHED IN THE FINAL DRAFT. ALL NINE (9) REFERENCES TO BE ADDED.

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