

Stress management can help more students succeed in college (essay)

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Brain Matters

Stress and Student Success

We in higher education now serve more students with more stress than ever before, yet we have done little to learn about the strategies to help them better manage it, argues Karen Costa.

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By

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I've spent a decade teaching college success strategies to mostly nontraditional first-year students. At times, I would stare at my course roster, hoping that an answer to the success riddle would appear. "Why do you leave?" I'd ask. "What else can I do to help you?" While I use countless teaching strategies in my courses, I've been tracking something even more fundamental: a unified field theory for student success in higher education.

An insight from John Medina's *Brain Rules* was a bread crumb on this search -- one that has led me to conclude that stress is the underlying reason for the majority of student withdrawal: "Stressed brains don't learn the same way," Medina argues. In addition to the numerous physical consequences of stress (heart attack, stroke, poor immune response, etc.), chronic stress also negatively impacts student learning. Years of anecdotal educational experiences flashed before me when I first read this rule: a parade of students' faces, at once ambitious and discouraged.

I would argue that higher education is now serving more students with more stress than at any prior point in history, yet we have done little to educate ourselves about the strategies that brain science knows can help students better manage their stress, induce relaxation and consequently improve their learning experiences. As students despair and ultimately withdraw, we are sitting, unknowingly, on a silver bullet.

What Science Knows vs. What Education Does

I recently asked a friend of mine who works with teachers for her thoughts on stress and learning. "Well, I think some stress is good for learning," she said, hesitant. She's right. Akin to Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky's [Zone of Proximal Development](#), there is a sweet spot for stress and learning. A little for a short time is actually good. Too much for too long is catastrophic. "What about the teachers you work with?" I asked. "Are they taught to understand how stress impacts learning?" She answered with only a smirk, another victim of the disconnect between what science knows and what education does.

What science knows about stress and learning is this: there is a tipping point where normal stress, an inevitable part of the human condition, transforms from ally to enemy. Medina explains that in brain science this concept is called the "allostatic load," or the point at which stress become toxic. The portions of the brain that are responsible for

memory, planning, organization and learning begin to fail. At a biological level, they cannot function -- despite anyone's best intentions. If learning is a fistfight, students who've breached their allostatic load are fighting with both hands tied behind their back. So are their professors.

What education does a great job at is championing the value of active learning strategies, things like problem-based learning, flipped learning, collaborative learning -- right-sounding terms that are met with a combination of fatigue and disdain by many war-weary professors. There's tremendous support for the value of active learning, but for many of our students, stress stands as a massive barrier in its path.

If what science knows and what education does were to meet, stress management would become part of the fundamental fabric of our learning institutions, allowing active learning to meet its intended targets.

Becoming (Para)Sympathetic Educators

With the move from elite, to mass, to what is now arguably universal access to higher education, it's worthwhile to remember that the students we now serve are not shielded by privilege from the stresses of life. I once administered a life-change stress index to my class of first-year students, most of them first-generation college students. Their scores were off the charts: far higher than the amount of change and stress I was dealing with as a working mother. I stopped giving the assessment that term, feeling ill-equipped at the time to address its results.

Years later, after additional self-study in brain science and completion of a yoga teacher training program, I can define stress, I understand the anatomy and physiology of it, and I am able to recommend and practice strategies to manage it. But I believe I'm in the minority among educators.

Despite how chronic stress can make us feel, as if we're trapped in a permanently unpleasant solution, effective and often simple strategies can decrease stress. Stress operates as a function of the sympathetic nervous system, a topic covered in brilliant simplicity in Herbert Benson's *The Relaxation Response*. Benson, a Boston cardiologist, "discovered" what Eastern approaches have known for millennia: that nature gave us the perfect antidote to stress -- the parasympathetic nervous system. Benson found that a series of straightforward (and secular) meditation techniques could induce what he called the relaxation response, a biological answer to stress.

Stress and Success

In my former role as a director of student success at a community college, I kept one report on my desk for handy access, a retention touchstone of sorts. "[With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College](#)," a Public Agenda report for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, identified something that I was seeing on a daily basis as I worked to help students persist and graduate: a pervasive sense of overwhelm. The study concluded that, "The No. 1 reason students give for leaving school is the fact that they had to work and go to school at the same time and, despite their best efforts, the stress of trying to do both eventually took its toll."

Two recent and popular theories of student success, Angela Duckworth's grit theory and Carol Dweck's mind-set theory, further coalesce around the idea that stress sits at the core of persistence decisions. Grit theory argues that some students better manage the trials and travails of life; they're grittier by nature. Duckworth calls for us to teach students to build their grit muscles. Isn't building grit just a sound-bite-friendlier term for stress management?

One of Medina's criteria for defining stress is that it must include a sense that control over one's situation has been lost. Dweck's mind-set theory suggests that many students have a fixed mind-set, believing that their abilities and circumstances are set in stone, or out of their control. Teaching students to view their minds, abilities and, yes, their stress levels as malleable can empower students and increase success. Wouldn't providing stress-management instruction to students and teachers help to further develop this growth mind-set?

The [Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education](#) has been exploring this and other questions about

mindfulness in education since 1997. As interest in mindfulness practices in higher education grows, some recent studies are pointing to the possibility that [meditation](#) and other [contemplative practices](#) can improve student success. This thesis is confirmed by the work of stress expert and psychologist [Stuart Shanker](#). In his book *Self-Reg*, failure to manage time and the existence of other executive function challenges are not character flaws. Rather, these are symptoms of students who are caught in vicious cycle of stress. By teaching people to first self-regulate their stress, Shanker and his team have then witnessed improvements in the ability to focus, plan and delay gratification.

The Case for Care

Medina discusses the negative impact of high-stress work and home environments on learning. What about high-stress campuses and communities? In homes where parents yell and argue, children suffer. Like sponges, they absorb the stress around them, stress hormones are released in response and the brain cells that learn, remember and plan are paralyzed. It's not a stretch to wonder if campuses where tensions abound have the same effect on student learning. If so, collegiality and communication take on an additional layer of import. Is your campus community built on a culture of care, not only for our students, but for our fellow faculty and staff?

Today, we work and live in a world where if you aren't talking about racism, sexual assault, the challenges faced by returning veterans and the like, you aren't taking stress and wellness seriously. Genuine institutional engagement in social justice is not only about addressing the scourge of structural oppression, it's smart stress management and sound education.

While there are many ways an institution could broach the question of whether they exhibit a culture of care, consider the following as one helpful "care index" a campus could use to self-evaluate: compare the number of marketing professionals you employ to the number of mental-health professionals. If the first number outweighs the second, it's time for an institutional gut check.

The Tipping Point

As an industry, higher education has approached its own tipping point, a moment in time when our collective allostatic load is nearly overflowing. The question is, will we apply the solutions at our disposal before the load is breached? Stress-management strategies based in sound brain science are one of our best hopes for improving student, faculty and institutional success.

Bio

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