ONLINE INDICATORS OF STUDENTS IN DIFFICULTY

Online students can struggle for many reasons. Some find it difficult to stay motivated, determined, and engaged; others find it hard to meet differing expectations across many online courses, especially when they are used to face-to-face environments. Sometimes when students encounter an obstacle, they struggle alone instead of reaching out.

RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF DIFFICULTY OR DISTRESS IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS:

Online indicators that a student may be experiencing difficulty can often appear in the **virtual classroom** / on **email** / in **online forums** / over **text** as they would similarly in the physical classroom. These may be direct (observed by you or communicated by student) or indirect (observed or communicated by others).

What is different is how you might assess and respond to the signs because the student is not right in front of you and you can't see their presentation or body language. It's true that there are only so many things you can see through a computer or phone and in-person communication is different than digital conversations. It's also true that the signs are still there and you are likely noticing them more than you might think.

Helpful guidelines for using patterns of repeated behaviors (Sharkin, 2006, as cited in Barr, 2014) to identify warning signs in students:

- Patterns of **atypical behavior**: online behavior that is "out of character for a particular student"; a change from the usual

- Patterns of **unusual behavior**: online behavior that is abnormal or bizarre, such as: paranoia, illogical or incoherent thoughts, or actions which interfere with the learning atmosphere.

- Patterns of **poor academic performance**: distressed students often fall into a cycle of emotional issues resulting in academic problems leading to worsening emotional distress and worsening academic performance.

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ASSIGNMENTS, TESTS & EXAMS

- Begins handing in assignments late
- Continued/ongoing lateness or behind on assignments or projects without academic relief or academic consideration
- Requesting multiple extensions; frequent requests for academic relief
- Not handing in work at all; not re-doing work when given an opportunity
- Content of work becomes negative/dark/incoherent/illogical/odd in tone
- Missing tests or exams

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- Quality of work that is atypical for the student; sudden change in quality of work
- Failing quality of work from beginning of course; significant decline in academic performance
- Ongoing display of anxiety about assignments
- Continuously asking the same questions or seems confused about instructions on an ongoing basis
- You are consistently taking off late penalty marks

DISCUSSION POSTS

- Lack of presence in or not replying to discussion forums
- Replying with discussion posts at the last possible moment/on the last day of the unit
- Discussion posts beyond the due date
- Disruptive, confused, disoriented, paranoid, bizarre, or inappropriate in discussion posts

PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT

- Reviewing user stats and activity levels (see Appendix 1)
- Last date of attendance (last online login)
- Stops responding to emails or other attempts to reach the student
- Difficulty communicating or distortions of reality apparent in emails
- Difficulty working with others on group work or assignments
- Constant disruptions in the background during synchronous lectures (i.e., people arguing, fire alarms, loud noises that cause concern)
- Various forms of withdrawal, such as zoning out in a synchronous lecture

Barr, B. J. (2014). Identifying and addressing the mental health needs of online students in higher education. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 17.
Sharkin, B. S. (2006). *College students in distress: A resource guide for faculty, staff, and campus community*. New York: Haworth Press.

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APPENDIX 1

REVIEWING USERS STATS AND USER ACTIVITY IN OWL COURSES:

Maintaining direct and regular interaction is vital in getting all students engaged in an online environment. Within the second and third week of a course, it is possible to identify students who are struggling. If they are not accessing class materials or showing up to meetings, it often indicates they are experiencing a problem.

It is easy to identify these students through the Statistics tool in OWL. To do this, follow these three simple steps:

1. Click on the **Statistics tool**.
2. Click on "**Members who have visited this site**."
3. Click on "**Total**" in the total column.

It will show you how many times each student has visited the site. If you want a more detailed usage, you can create a detailed report in the report section.

Pay attention to and contact the bottom 30% of students who have visited your OWL site the least. Send an email to them saying you noticed they have not been coming to the class and you're wondering if there was something you can help them with. For these students, sometimes they are just busy with other things in their lives or are having trouble with their technology. However, some of them may be dealing with more severe problems.

If you want more information about this process or the statistics tool, in general, contact Mike O'Connor, Interim Associate Director, ALT Centre, at moconn22@uwo.ca.