

■ Overloaded Students and Our Responsibility in Helping To Eliminate Noise

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Faculty and staff circulate concerns about the mental health of their students. Despite their efforts to promote resources, they continue to see their students struggle with their mental health and, as a result, in the classroom. Well-intentioned administrators send countless resources, trying to reach students by bundling options of support on beautifully displayed flyers that are shared on every platform. Email, Blackboard, social media platforms, and even newly dedicated web pages are sent/created to get students the help they need, and yet the rumblings among my colleagues are that fewer students are taking advantage of services and that the concerns of academic success permeate college classrooms.

Two decades ago, I read *The Paradox of Choice*, in which Barry Schwartz described the problem of having too many options: it debilitates decision-making and creates lower levels of satisfaction among people, particularly youth (Schwartz, 2004). The example I remember from the book was a story of someone reading the Cheesecake Factory menu. The individual reviewed all the options and ultimately ordered

but was left second-guessing the selection while eating the meal, resulting in dissatisfaction. Schwartz offered tangible alternatives to combat our inundation of options and pushed readers into making decisions.

Today, I expand on this concept and argue that information and choices have become so overwhelming, that students are no longer able to “read the menu.” Students are beyond paralyzed by the sheer volume of information they receive when they need to make decisions. They are bombarded not only with content but also methods of delivery, rendering them unable to process the options altogether. And I go as far as to say that we are unintentionally causing harm to their mental health by overwhelming them with more and more information.

The new reality is that information overload has reached a new peak. An adult on average receives approximately 121 emails a day (Templafy, 2020). Overwhelmed by volume, college students attempt to pick and choose wisely rather than go through each email and make decisions on all the

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information they are receiving. While faculty and staff complain that students aren't reading their emails, 85% of students report checking email every day (Straumsheim, 2016).

As part of my role running a learning center, I know that there is a steep curve of forgetting—an average of 80% of the information we receive in a day is forgotten. As a result, I make sure I reiterate the key points at the end of any lecture. This led me to think about how we get students to not only remember what we've said during their appointments with us but also process that information and act on it. I'd like to offer the following suggestions about how to limit the information we provide students to help reduce the noise they encounter because they live in a world with information overload.

In meetings:

1. Decide together which concerns(s) will be addressed at that meeting
2. Give just 1-2 resource(s) and a maximum of 3 student action steps
3. Help eliminate foreseeable barriers with the student's action steps
4. Ask the student to relay back the discussed "plan of action" at the end of the advising session
5. End with follow-up

As an example:

A student made an appointment for pre-registration advising. She's struggling in all her classes, but she hasn't attended any of the tutoring resources you suggested at the start of the semester. You notice how anxious she is. You say, "I know you've come in because you want pre-registration guidance. I'd like to schedule another meeting to do that and have this one focus on this current semester and what we can do for your current course load. How does that sound?" As a result of the meeting, you conclude that the student should withdraw from one class and focus on the rest of the classes by attending tutoring.

The actions you have her reiterate back to you are to make an appointment for tutoring (action 1 + resource), drop a course (action 2), and schedule another appointment (action 3) to discuss next semester and check in on how it's going. You can help eliminate barriers by (1) confirming she has all the correct links and (2) ensuring that she understands how to access the resource: asking her about how she plans to use the tutoring sessions, what topics she is considering seeking assistance with, and when she plans on submitting requests/forms.

In this example, a meeting is tentatively in the books, but in cases where a follow-up meeting is not a direct action, I often place the student's email address right in

my calendar when I will follow up with them. I find that accountability not only helps the student but also reiterates that I care enough to follow up.

In email:

I practice and endorse the tips shared by EAB (EAB, n.d.)

1. The subject line matters. Make it work for you
2. Get rid of jargon. Speak simply and directly to the student
3. Less is more. Reduce information to only what is necessary
4. Be clear about the action you want the student to complete

To expand on helping a student with the most pressing issues, you may consider texting them. Use this with extreme discretion, however. For example, for important messages, you can follow up an email message with a simple default text message: "Hi XXX, it's your advisor. XXX, you have an important message from me. Check your school email!" This ensures FERPA is not violated, but it also ensures that students are notified directly about important messages. I personally found this technique extremely useful for a student recently who was struggling with his mental health.

For all the time we spend learning about resources on campus, we need to spend just as much time learning how to best present the options to students. Just because students saw your email or heard you, doesn't mean they processed the information. We can help students move into action by becoming clearer in our messaging.

References

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