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# Eliminating The Stigma Around Asking For Help

By: Priya Thomas (<https://blog.joinknack.com/author/priya-thomas>) on Feb 11, 2020 12:02:23 PM

TUTORING PROGRAMS ([HTTPS://BLOG.JOINKNACK.COM/TOPIC/TUTORING-PROGRAMS](https://blog.joinknack.com/topic/tutoring-programs))



In getting students the help they need, it's not always about creating new programs and services. Sometimes, what's most important is helping students feel comfortable enough to seek them out.

Students might know where services are located and how they work, but still not utilize them – even when they are struggling. Consequently, program administrators are challenged with how to get more students to utilize their services, which can be very frustrating.

Some students feel like they don't need help, underestimating their true level of need and only asking for help once they realize it. Oftentimes, however, the biggest barrier that limits students from getting help is the actual act of asking for it. This is because asking for help can invoke feelings of nervousness, overwhelm, anxiety, stress, and uncertainty. Basically, it's "super awkward."

With that in mind, there are ways that you can make it easier for students to ask for help in an effort to make services more accessible and empower students to maximize their college experience. Let's take a quick look at a few ways you can reduce the stigma around asking for help, and start to normalize help-seeking behavior instead.

## What Faculty Can Do

Faculty can lead the charge to normalize asking for academic help, in particular. To start, faculty members can change how office hours are presented. As discussed in a previous post (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/10/28/serving-historically-underrepresented-student-populations/>) about serving historically underrepresented students, it's important to not only state when/where office hours take place but also emphasize what they are for and how students can use them.

Wording matters as well. Dr. Laura June Davis, a professor from Southern Utah University, found that rebranding her “office hours” as “student hours” (<https://twitter.com/LauraJuneDavis/status/1167608225375694848?s=20>)” resulted in increased engagement. Similarly, an Assistant Professor at Morgan State University changed up his location for more engagement with students, finding ([https://twitter.com/CoreyMiles\\_/status/1224437568709656577](https://twitter.com/CoreyMiles_/status/1224437568709656577)) that he was more successfully connecting with students by going to the student center to answer emails and grade papers than he was by holding office hours.

Even the age-old practice of asking a classroom full of students if they have any questions can be adapted to reduce the stigma associated with asking for help and encourage students to become more ingrained in the learning experience. Dr. Shanna Katz Kattari at the University of Michigan was inspired (<https://twitter.com/DrShannaK/status/1202370883261779968>) to move away from asking “What questions *do you* have?” to instead ask “What questions *might someone* have?” and then offer a few examples. She went from receiving no questions to receiving twenty.

Trying to elicit questions is a worthwhile effort, but answering them the right way is also critical to encourage students to keep asking them. One study (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/dec16/vol58/num12/The-Ins-and-Outs-of-Academic-Help-Seeking.aspx>) of college students found that when teachers gave short answers to complex questions, students were less likely to ask for help over time.

Sometimes, students don’t know what questions they should ask, but we can anticipate what their questions might be. Turning a syllabus into an FAQ (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Turn-Your-Syllabus-Into/247248>) is a solution offered by Associate Professor Eric Loepp from the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.

If you’re looking for more ideas to encourage students to ask for help, you’ll find a treasure trove of tips offered by Social Thinking (<https://www.socialthinking.com/Articles?name=thoughts-encouraging-students-ask-for-help>) and Edutopia (<https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-students-how-ask-help>). If you’re looking for ways to reduce pressure for students in the learning process, you should consider showing them how “The Super Mario Effect” (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/06/13/super-mario-effect/>)” can help.

## **What Tutoring Services Can Do**

Tutoring services are usually available on a college campus, but students who are really struggling don’t always take advantage of them. This is rather unfortunate since peer tutors don’t suffer from the curse of knowledge (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/05/02/the-curse-of-knowledge/>) that often affects faculty members and, as such, are in an ideal position to help these students. So, how do you get them to ask for help?

First things first, make an effort to be more visible and engaged on campus. Student Affairs staff are experts when it comes to student engagement, so take a page out of their book to think creatively about outreach. Meet students where they are instead of waiting for them to come to you by having peer tutors staff tabling events at campus resource fairs, orientations, or other events so students can meet tutors and learn about services. The personal rapport developed in these exchanges can go a long way to encourage students to seek academic support and destigmatize asking for help. Being present in places where students see other peer leaders not only helps to dispel common myths about

tutors (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/04/18/three-myths-about-tutors/>) but also helps students understand that peer tutors are student leaders who have been trained to help them succeed.

Next, try to be more demonstrative. Don't just share the details of the services you provide — tell the stories of the people who are involved and how they are impacted, adding a face to a name wherever possible. If you already feature peer tutor bios on your website, consider ways to share student stories (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2020/02/06/william-poulos/>) as well. Not only do these kinds of stories normalize the use of peer tutoring but they also help prospective students understand more of the benefits that come from it. Seeing how tutoring helped another student feel more confident and capable academically can be very impactful.

Also remember that students may not be sure how to use your services, but aren't sure what questions to ask. This can make it intimidating for them to come in and learn more about what you offer. Iowa State University (<https://www.asc.dso.iastate.edu/tutoring/tutoring-services-faq>) uses the FAQ approach to help students get the answers they need. This can help demonstrate to students how to use services, and maybe even how to ask further questions about these services.

Finally, consider how technology can transform the student experience of using your services. The best way to make it easier to ask for help *is to make it easier to ask for help*. The ability for students to communicate with peer tutors on an app, make appointments via their phone, meet outside of traditional office hours, and read reviews about their peer tutor is in alignment with modern student expectations ([https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/04/03/what-the-knowledge-sharing-economy-means-for-higher-ed/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=priya](https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/04/03/what-the-knowledge-sharing-economy-means-for-higher-ed/?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=priya)). If you find a way to power peer support with technology (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/04/29/powering-peer-support-services-with-technology/>), you can make your services more accessible and remove one more barrier that keeps students from asking for help.

## **What Institutions Can Do**

Institutional efforts to reduce the stigma around asking for help are incredibly impactful. DePaul University (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2020/01/27/spotlight-depaul-university/>) offers an excellent example of how peer help as an institutional value can make asking for help a normal part of the academic environment. With this, they show us how peer learning is a critical part of the modern college curriculum (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/05/17/why-peer-learning-is-essential-to-a-modern-college-curriculum/>).

The mental health world also provides an example of how to create a culture that destigmatizing asking for help. While this will always be something they continue to work towards, their work thus far has made a big difference. Efforts in mental health outreach, education, campaigns, and programming have helped people better understand symptoms of mental health distress and services available for support. More importantly, this has played a major role in the increased use of and demand for mental health services. In addition, conversations about mental health are happening more today than ever before.

Peer tutoring and academic support services can mirror these efforts to encourage students to ask for help. Talking about issues like imposter syndrome, failure, and resilience are ways to create a conversation around help-seeking behavior in the

academic realm. If you're looking for specific examples, check out these seven ways (<https://www.presence.io/blog/7-ways-that-universities-can-foster-resilience-in-students/>) that universities can foster resilience in students.

Harvard Business Review ([https://hbr.org/2019/12/real-mentorship-starts-with-company-culture-not-formal-programs?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=hbr](https://hbr.org/2019/12/real-mentorship-starts-with-company-culture-not-formal-programs?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=hbr)) also offers ideas on how to make mentorship and help-seeking an integral part of a community, arguing that it has more to do with culture than formal programs. Concepts like mentors-of-the-moment, micro-exchanges, and examples of what to say to create this culture are offered in the piece, along with recommendations on how to get started.

It's also helpful to remember that hesitation about asking for help isn't always about stigma. Consider these three reasons (<https://www.joinknack.com/blog/2019/08/08/not-getting-a-tutor-is-holding-you-back/>) why students don't get help from a tutor and look for ways to empower them to get the help they need.

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