

Offering Grace: Supporting Distance Learning Students Affected by Hurricane Helene

Dana M. Wise Ed.D. and Chastity English Ph.D.

North Carolina A&T State University

College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences

Carver Hall, 251-A

Greensboro, NC 27411

704-222-1113

dmwise@ncat.edu

cwenglish@ncat.edu

Offering Grace: Supporting Distance Learning Students Affected by Hurricane Helene

Introduction: The Need for Innovation

Hurricane Helene caused severe devastation in Western North Carolina in September 2024, significantly impacting distance learning students enrolled in asynchronous agricultural education courses. Many students faced power outages, loss of internet access, and even displacement, making it difficult to stay engaged in their coursework. Recognizing these challenges, an innovative academic approach was needed to provide flexibility and support. Grounded in humanistic learning theory, the concept of "offering grace" was implemented to prioritize student well-being. This approach emphasized academic flexibility by suspending assignments temporarily, extending deadlines, and allowing students the time needed to recover academically without penalty. Research suggests that offering grace in higher education fosters student motivation and reduces stress and anxiety, ultimately enhancing engagement and persistence (Else-Quest et al., 2022). Furthermore, grace-based approaches align with principles of a growth mindset, reinforcing resilience and long-term academic success (French, 2022). The necessity of this approach became evident as reports emerged from students struggling with disaster recovery while simultaneously navigating their academic responsibilities.

Methodology: Assessing Student Needs and Implementing Support

To assess the impact of the hurricane and determine student needs, a Google Form survey was distributed through Blackboard Messages to students enrolled in four asynchronous agricultural education courses. The survey included three key questions: whether students were personally affected by the hurricane, whether their family or close friends had been impacted, and an open-ended section for additional comments. The results revealed that 17.6% of students were directly affected, while 70.6% had family or close connections who experienced significant hardship. Many students expressed concerns about their ability to complete coursework due to infrastructural damage, displacement, and a lack of internet connectivity. Given these findings, immediate modifications were made to coursework expectations to ensure students could continue their education without undue stress. Research indicates that when students perceive institutional support and flexibility, their intrinsic motivation and overall well-being improve, creating a more positive learning environment (Ryan, 2017). Offering grace in times of crisis not only supports academic persistence but also promotes emotional stability, allowing students to focus on both their recovery and education.

Results: Student Impact and Response

The real-life impact of the hurricane on students further underscored the need for flexibility. Among those who responded, several students shared their personal struggles. One student, who lived in a rural area near Boone, reported that their neighborhood had been devastated, leaving roads impassable and utilities unavailable. Another student, a member of a volunteer fire department, had been actively engaged in disaster response, making it impossible to prioritize coursework. Others described working in food security and emergency relief efforts, assisting in distributing supplies to those in remote areas who could not access formal aid centers. In response to these challenges, the concept of "offering grace" was applied by temporarily suspending assignments, extending deadlines, and providing students with ample time to recover. Students were encouraged to communicate their individual needs, ensuring that

SUPPORTING DISTANCE LEARNERS

no one was left behind due to circumstances beyond their control. This approach aligns with the principles of humanistic education, which emphasize student well-being and intrinsic motivation as central to the learning process (Sharp, 2012; Casteline, 2024).

Implications: Academic Performance and Course Completion

The results of this initiative were overwhelmingly positive. Students who initially feared falling behind due to disaster-related disruptions were able to regain their academic footing without undue stress. Many expressed gratitude for the instructor's flexibility, noting that without these accommodations, they would have struggled to complete the semester successfully. Importantly, despite the hardships faced by many students, all enrolled students in the affected courses ultimately completed their coursework by the end of the semester. This outcome reinforces the idea that academic leniency during times of crisis does not diminish educational quality but instead fosters a more resilient and engaged student body. As previous research has demonstrated, students who feel supported by their institution are more likely to persist in their studies, even when faced with significant challenges (French, 2022).

Future Plans: Recommendations for Academic Institutions

Moving forward, institutions should consider formalizing policies that allow for academic grace in response to crises. While many instructors may be inclined to provide flexibility on a case-by-case basis, a structured institutional approach would ensure that all students receive the necessary support. Key recommendations include developing proactive academic grace policies, implementing improved communication strategies to reach students with limited internet access, and involving students in decisions regarding their learning needs. Additionally, striking a balance between academic flexibility and maintaining learning objectives is essential. Clear guidelines on how and when to implement course modifications can help maintain academic integrity while ensuring students are not unfairly disadvantaged.

Conclusion: Humanistic Learning and Student Resilience

This case study demonstrates the value of integrating humanistic learning principles into higher education, particularly during times of crisis. By prioritizing student well-being and offering academic flexibility, institutions can foster resilience, motivation, and long-term success. The success of this initiative highlights the need for continued discussions on the role of empathy and adaptability in education. Instructors and administrators should view student support not as a lowering of academic standards but as an essential component of student-centered learning. Future research could explore the long-term effects of grace-based approaches on student success and retention rates, further solidifying their role in crisis response planning. As natural disasters and other unforeseen crises continue to impact students worldwide, institutions must be prepared to respond with compassion, flexibility, and a commitment to student success.

References

- Casteline, K. (2024, July 14). *What is humanistic learning theory and how can it apply to healthcare education?* Gathered.com. <https://gathered.com/2024/05/03/humanistic-learning-theory-healthcare-education/>
- Else-Quest, N., Sathy, V., & Hogan, K. (2022, January 18). *How to give our students the grace we all need: Six ways that faculty members can better support students without exhausting ourselves in the effort.* The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-give-our-students-the-grace-we-all-need>
- French, B. (2022, December 2). *Kids do better when we give them grace.* Teach Better. <https://teachbetter.com/blog/kids-do-better-when-we-give-them-grace/>
- Ryan, J. (2017, May 25). *Lead with grace.* Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/news/17/05/lead-grace>
- Sharp, A. (2012). Humanistic approaches to learning. *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, 1469-1471. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_530