

Strategies for Incorporating Executive Function Skills into College Courses

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Introduction & Need/Connection to the Literature

Students who are embarking on their college matriculation are entering with a unique combination of two specific cohort effects. Not only have they lived through the Covid-19 pandemic, shutdown, long-Covid impacts, and the related economic upheaval, but these students are also the first wave of students to enter the university having never lived without smart phones. In 2007, the first iPhone was sold by Apple. In 2025, 18 year olds are entering university for the first time. They are the first generation of students who have lived their entire lives in the midst of the rise of interactive digital media. The ramifications of these cultural shifts will continue to impact education at all levels.

Researchers who have worked with Z-Generation (Gen – Z) and Alpha Generation (Gen – Alpha) students have noted that there is an effort on the part of both of these generations to maintain a balance between the online social experience and the in-person experience (Jha, 2009; O’Farrell & Weaver, 2024). Additionally, as they have been so immersed in technology, attention spans are shorter than they were for previous generations. They are able to learn via technology without direct access to an instructor and can self-determine which learning content can be skipped to achieve considerably similar success on course assignments. Alongside those abilities to learn independently and through technology, they will need greater instruction related to social interaction and the soft skills needed to navigate the world beyond education. In general, these generations lack Executive Function Skills. Executive Function Skills are behavioral and cognitive skills that are essential to learning and self-regulation (Baggetta & Alexander, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this abstract is to discuss various strategies that can be incorporated into the instructional time spent in college classrooms that will help students develop Executive Function Skills.

Implementation of Strategy

The purpose of this abstract is to share and discuss Executive Function strategies that can be included in classroom instruction or extracurricular activities that will not only assist with gaining content and knowledge but will help students focus on skills that they will need.

Strategies for Developing Strategic Thinking: Due to the fact that Gen-Z and Gen-Alpha students have shorter attention spans than previous generations, incorporating long-term group projects into courses can assist with developing a longer attention span, as well as interpersonal skills (Jha, 2020). While projects and assignments are usually relegated to personal time, instructors should spend some class time allowing students to meet as a group and discuss a strategy. Instructors can request an outline of a plan including a timeline, resources required, any

costs involved, a breakdown of who is responsible for which tasks, and a plan for the next meeting. While this assignment could be completed outside of class, having students meet in the classroom during class time allows for observation of the interactions and direct assistance from an instructor as needed.

In addition to classroom projects, strategic thinking can be incorporated into the advising experience, or the first year experience. Instructors or advisors can work with students to submit a draft of a weekly class, study, and work schedule. Thinking through the schedule helps students realize where they are wasting time, and where they could plan study or project time.

Strategies to Develop Memory Skills: Over the past 20 years or so, there has been a shift away from using and developing memory skills toward using tools and resources to find information and solve problems. While this was well-intentioned, the result is that students are no longer developing memorization skills at the k-12 level. There are a variety of tools that instructors can use to help students develop memory skills. Flashcards for definitions and specific content, incorporating memorization of presentations or speeches for class assignments, computer games that require memorization of numbers and letters, or my personal favorite of incorporating a game night into first year experiences. A lot of older generation board games include developing strategy and memory skills in order to best succeed (Miller & Wallis, 2009).

Strategies for Developing Coping Skills: Lack of executive function also means that students are not skilled in regulating their own moods, emotions, and emotional responses to experiences. Additionally, when students are highly emotional and stressed, they do not function well in class. Their ability to learn is diminished and they are not able complete tasks. Therefore, encouraging students to developing coping skills related to stress and mood regulation will result in better functioning in the classroom. Strategies for this include meditation, or mindfulness exercises, journaling or breathing techniques. While it may seem like a waste to develop these skills during class time, the result will be a better focused class that is prepared to learn.

Implication and Advice

Z-Gen and Alpha-Gen students have lived through a combination of experiences not yet seen at the university level, the Covid-19 Pandemic and the rise of interactive digital media. This abstract offered research based strategies that can be incorporated into classroom instruction or other student meetings to help develop skills that these generations of students may not have when they arrive in college classrooms. A little bit of time taken during class time or incorporated into student meetings or events will be time well spent when students develop greater Executive Functioning Skills. The authors encourage others to take time to implement Executive Function Skills into their course designs.

References

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