Fostering a Community of Care in Online Graduate Education:
Leveraging the Affective Filter Hypothesis

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Abstract

Online graduate students often face heightened stress due to isolation, the demands of self-directed learning, and balancing academic responsibilities with personal life. These challenges can raise the affective filter, resulting in increased anxiety and lower academic performance. When students feel supported, their affective filter lowers, allowing them to absorb content more effectively. To counter these effects, institutions can foster a community of care that incorporates strategies for offsetting the affective filter. These offsetting strategies are grounded in relationships between faculty and students, supported by the institution that addresses academic and emotional needs. The affective filter model for online graduate education can facilitate lowering stress for students through purposeful attention to how the philosophies of a community of care and the affective filter intersect. Targeted instructional strategies, acknowledging accomplishments, and flexible, caring faculty alleviate cognitive overload and contribute to students' self-efficacy and motivation, which are key components in reducing the affective filter. Within the broader implications of community care in online education, the affective filter model for online graduate education is a holistic approach to teaching and learning online, where physical distance can exacerbate feelings of isolation. By addressing students' emotional needs, online programs can create an inclusive and engaging learning environment, ultimately leading to better academic outcomes.

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A community of care is a broad term used to describe a social ecosystem in which individuals collectively prioritize the well-being and support of each other. While little research exists on the topic, grassroots calls for cultivating communities of care are emerging within a variety of contexts (e.g., Clegg & Grocer, 2022; Harrison, 2024), including higher education (Arizona State University, n.d.; Rowan University, 2024). Within publicly accessible online sources, a community of care is described as a culture that fosters a sense of belonging and trust by encouraging mutual responsibility among its members (Harrison, 2024). Grounded on the principles of empathy, compassion, and active engagement, each person in a community of care feels valued and supported (Rowan University, 2024). In such a community, members are attentive to the needs of others, offering emotional support, practical help, and encouragement (McCune et al., 2024). The emergence of a community of care might manifest in various ways, such as regularly checking in on one another, organizing support groups, or facilitating access to necessary resources. The foundation of a community of care is built on open communication, inclusivity, and the shared understanding that everyone's well-being is interconnected.

In practice, communities of care occur in diverse settings such as neighborhoods and workplaces. In neighborhoods, for example, the community of care could facilitate local networks where residents share resources, assist with childcare, or organize social events to strengthen community bonds (Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Similarly, in a workplace, a community of care might encompass regular mental health check-ins, peer mentoring programs, and initiatives that promote work-life balance (Clegg & Grocer, 2022; Harrison, 2024). In any setting, a community of care is ultimately characterized by its proactive approach to fostering a

supportive environment in which each individual's emotional, social, and physical needs are recognized and addressed collectively.

In higher education settings, communities of care can play a pivotal role in creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all stakeholders (McCune et al., 2024). They can support the diverse needs of students by fostering a sense of belonging and promoting mental well-being. Within the spirit of a community of care, universities have implemented various initiatives such as peer mentoring programs, mental health services, and inclusive support groups to ensure that students feel connected and supported. To provide personalized support, academic advisors, faculty members, and student organizations work collaboratively in situating themselves to understand and respond to students' unique challenges (Arizona State University, n.d.).

The Complexities of Student Stress

Institutional efforts to establish a community of care must address systemic and individual student needs (McCune et al., 2024), including those needs related to anxiety and stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) characterized stress as a juxtaposition of how an individual experiences factors within an environment and the availability of resources for coping. When the resources are available, the individual may experience more positive outcomes when presented with environmental stressors. Conversely, when resources are lacking, the outcome may be more problematic, resulting in an impaired ability to engage in complex cognitive tasks, such as those required for learning at the graduate level (Gallagher & Stocker, 2017).

Given that stress is one of the most important contributors to students' lack of persistence and subsequent failure to complete an academic program (Allen et al., 2021; Arbona et al., 2018; Conner, 2015), it is critically important for stakeholders to identify and acknowledge sources of

stress (Damiano et al., 2021). Nearly one-quarter of graduate students, including those in online programs, experience levels of anxiety that impede academic performance (American College Health Association, 2023), creating even higher stakes for students and the institution as a whole. However, addressing stress among students can be a challenge for stakeholders because the source of the stressors for post-secondary students varies, as it can develop due to academic or interpersonal challenges (Mishra, 2017; Van Berkel & Reeves, 2017).

Although all students can experience stress, sources of stress manifest at higher levels for graduate students (Allen et al., 2021). Graduate students experience increased competition and expectations for high-performance levels compared to their peers in undergraduate settings (Hewitt & Stubbs, 2017; Wollast et al., 2018). Complicating the programmatic pressures, graduate students can encounter additional stressors, such as the need to publish, teach, and fulfill advisor expectations. Adding to these potential sources of stress, graduate students in online programs can also feel isolated and less connected to the academic community (Yusufov et al., 2019). Balancing these academic and professional demands with competing interpersonal obligations, including family and work, has been found to result in constant stress, feelings of unhappiness and depression, and sleeplessness for some students (Levecque et al., 2017; Mazzola et al., 2011). Therefore, a holistic approach to communities of care that addresses student well-being and includes efforts to minimize stress has the potential to enhance academic success and nurture student growth and resilience. In turn, these outcomes can enrich the higher education experience for students.

Leveraging the Affective Filter to Address Student Stress

Institutions can address academic stress through intentional, proactive, and action-oriented strategies such as caring, consistent communication, personalized support, and tangible

resources (Sosoo & Wise, 2022). These strategies often manifest in wellness models such as mindfulness-based interventions, cognitive behavioral therapy, and rational emotive behavioral therapy (Agyapong et al., 2023). Although the principles of these models may align with those of a community of care, they may be problematic because compliance lies within the student and is dependent on motivation. Adding selfcare/wellness requirements for students with the intent to alleviate stress may result in the opposite effect – that the students feel more pressured to engage with recommended services. Conversely, Krashen's (1981) affective filter hypothesis may provide a more seamless framework for managing online graduate student stress within a community of care.

Krashen's (1981) theory of second language acquisition was developed to guide instruction in second language acquisition. The theory is composed of a series of hypotheses, including the affective filter hypothesis. The affective filter refers to the negative emotional reactions to the learning environment, such as fear, embarrassment, apprehension, or self-doubt. Like online graduate education, Krashen (1981) posited that motivation and self-confidence are critical factors in successfully acquiring a second language. They further suggested that when anxiety and stress are present, they can produce negative emotions and act as a barrier in the learning process, blocking cognition and hindering the efficient processing of new information. According to Lim (2020), these barriers can result in fear of rejection, communication apprehension, low self-efficacy, and inadequate class preparation.

While the term affective filter has not been broadly used outside of language acquisition, the concepts aligned with the hypothesis can be extrapolated from the literature. For example, Chang et al. (2023) found that addressing emotional states such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence positively impacted learning outcomes. Similarly, Boaler et al. (2016) suggested that,

in STEM education, strategies such as collaborative learning and growth mindset interventions designed to reduce math anxiety may foster a positive attitude toward problem-solving. Other researchers, such as Hallam (2010), suggested that enjoyable and rewarding experiences in music education can create a safe and supportive atmosphere for some students and subsequently result in a more positive classroom environment.

The advantages associated with online learning are well known. Research has shown that online learners benefit from flexible participation and individualized learning aligned with their professional and personal goals, which can ultimately lower stress (Hewitt & Stubbs, 2017; Soffer & Cohen, 2019). However, the inherent characteristics of online learning, such as potential isolation and the cognitive demands of self-directed learning, can also result in the associated stress of a high affective filter (Yusufov et al., 2019). While students are sometimes successful at using internally developed strategies for addressing stress, other students need the support of the institution, including their faculty members, to address the effects of a negative affective filter.

In higher education, the community of care should focus on lowering the affective filter and characterize a space where student anxiety and stress can be reduced through collaboration with all stakeholders (Lim, 2020; McCune et al., 2024). Addressing stress through affective filter reduction requires the purposeful implementation of measures designed to create a more effective learning environment (Chen, 2020; Mehmood, 2018; Raju & Joshith, 2018). These strategies should focus on motivation and self-confidence through encouragement and equitable treatment by faculty members (Lim, 2020). As an element of a holistic community of care, efforts to lower the affective filter facilitate a culture where interactions encourage individual members to succeed and support belonging.

The Affective Filter in a Community of Care

Faculty members may not always be aware of or know how to support online graduate students who experience stress. Therefore, Bedford (2023) suggested that the affective filter may serve as a framework for faculty-initiated strategies to identify and lower stress among graduate online learners. The institution can also engage in purposeful attempts to support students through an affective filter philosophy for online graduate students as they plan and implement a community of care model. According to McCune et al. (2024), the first step in developing a community of care in higher education is to engage all stakeholders in identifying student needs, followed by creating a shared understanding of successful practices through professional development, mentoring, and modeling. When considered jointly, fostering an inclusive and empathetic classroom environment within a community-of-care framework may lower the affective filter, reduce student stress, and increase academic success through a cycle of community-of-care philosophies (see Figure 1).
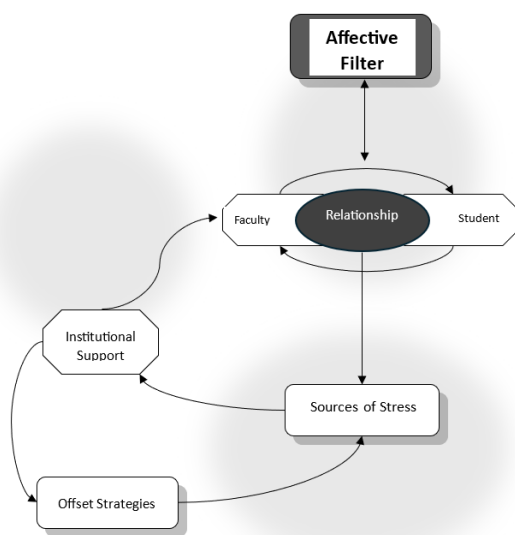
Figure 1

The Affective Filter – Community of Care Cycle
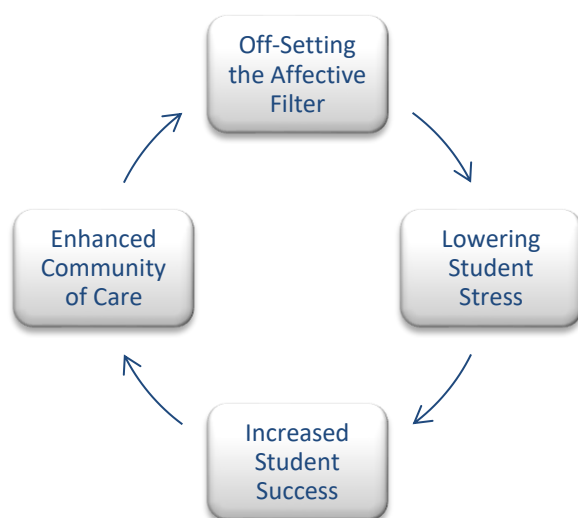
An advanced community of care model acknowledges the importance of the affective filter for online graduate students by encouraging mutually respectful relationships between faculty and students. The affective filter model for online graduate education (see Figure 2) outlines how this can be done through collaborative efforts between institutional stakeholders to address student stress while simultaneously supporting faculty (Bedford, 2023). Within the context of a mutually respectful relationship, sources of stress, whether academic or interpersonal, are more easily identified, and strategies for offsetting the resulting affective filter can be implemented. This relational approach can help mitigate stress by fostering trust and communication, which are crucial in an online learning environment where students might feel isolated (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Palacios & Wood, 2016). Institutions can further support faculty-student relationship building by providing programming and facilitating a culture that embraces communities of care principles, including those aligned with offsetting the affective filter through the affective filter model for online graduate education.

Figure 2

*Affective Filter Model for Online Graduate Education*

Offsetting Students' Affective Filter

Bedford (2023) found that online graduate faculty use a variety of strategies to offset the affective filter and meet the unique needs of online graduate students. Figure 3 summarizes these strategies, which can be initiated by either the faculty member or other stakeholders within the institution, the key being that they are complementary. This involves a comprehensive support system that embraces academic and interpersonal care, ensuring students have the necessary resources to cope with stress and fully engage in their education. In this way, applying the affective filter model for online graduate education to the online graduate learning context suggests that a holistic approach to a community of care model reduces stress and ultimately benefits all stakeholders.

Figure 3

Institutional and Faculty-Initiated Affective Offset Strategies for the Online Graduate Classroom
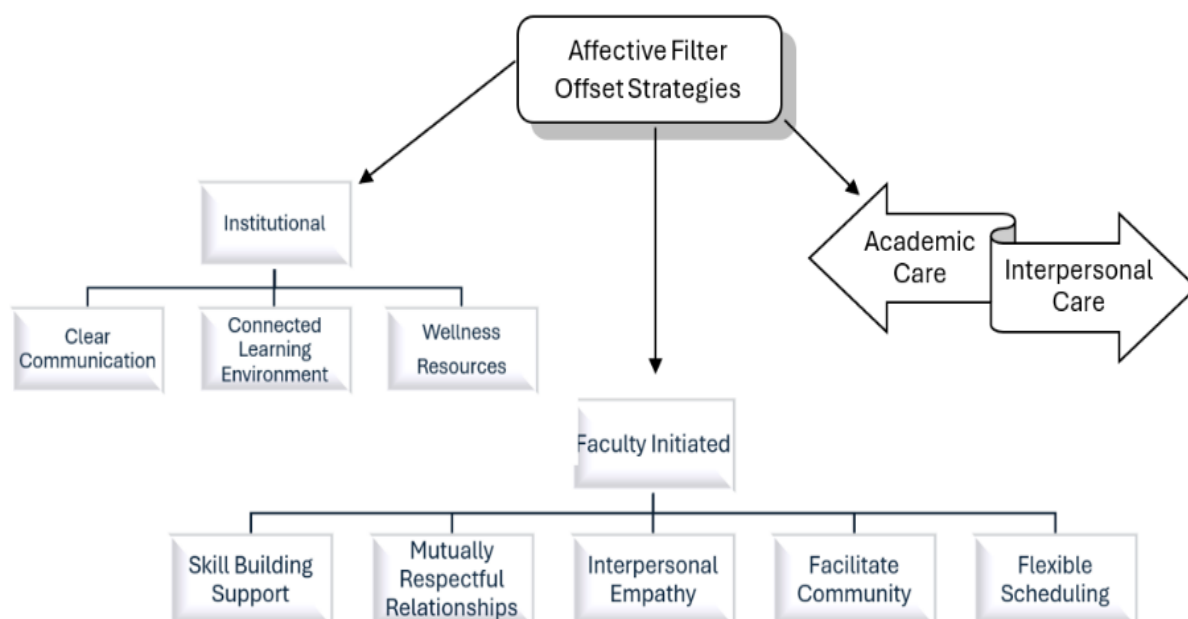
Build Student-Faculty Trust

Students who engage with faculty within a trusting relationship have better academic outcomes (Anderson et al., 2020). As trust is built through meaningful interactions (Palacios & Wood, 2016), faculty should maintain flexible availability to students to provide extended opportunities for these types of interaction. Regular, synchronous sessions such as live lectures and virtual office hours allow faculty to interact with students to provide immediate support. Conversely, students with competing personal and professional responsibilities may prefer asynchronous communication. Offering flexible scheduling can significantly enhance students' ability to balance their academic pursuits with personal and professional obligations (Kokoc, 2019). Instructors can use a variety of communication strategies to meet the student's scheduling needs, such as email and text messaging exchanges, pre-recorded lectures, and self-paced assignments, allowing students to engage with course materials at their convenience (Bedford, 2023; Richardson et al., 2016). This flexibility is particularly beneficial for graduate students who may be working professionals or have other commitments. A system of flexible availability demonstrates the faculty member's commitment to student success and can open the door for the student to reciprocate trust (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). By accommodating students' varied schedules, faculty can reduce the stress associated with rigid deadlines and enable them to manage their time more effectively, resulting in a lower affective filter.

Sharing personal experiences related to academic or professional challenges can also be a strategy to build trusting relationships with students. Such disclosure can support a mutually respectful relationship by humanizing faculty members, making them more relatable and approachable (Raza et al., 2020). Faculty members can further humanize themselves by disclosing their challenges and how they overcame them (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). This

openness can create a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable seeking guidance and sharing their struggles because the faculty member is approachable and genuinely invested in the student's success.

Given their unique role with students and the potential risks associated with stress, one of the faculty members' most salient actions may be identifying the students' sources of stress (Damiano et al., 2021). Although academic concerns that create stress for students are more straightforward, empathizing with a student's interpersonal issues around work and family that cause stress is crucial for relationship building. Empathy is defined throughout the literature in various ways, but Pianta and Hamre (2009) provided tangible strategies that faculty can use to demonstrate empathy, including moderation of tone, sensitivity to students' interpersonal and academic needs, and taking an interest in their interests. Faculty can also demonstrate empathy by being flexible with deadlines, offering extensions when necessary, and providing resources for stress management and mental health support. By acknowledging and addressing students' interpersonal challenges, faculty can create a more supportive and understanding learning environment (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

Pedagogical style and choices can also impact the formation of relationships with students. According to Mishra (2017), ineffective relationships can result from teaching methods misaligned with student preferences, unrealistic workloads, and inflexibility. Therefore, one of the primary goals of the faculty member who strives to offset the affective filter for these students is to employ pedagogical methods that address students' academic deficiencies while promoting their success. This could involve creating personalized instructional materials and activities that cater to the diverse learning needs of students (Alamri et al., 2020).

Timely and substantive feedback from faculty members is a crucial instructional strategy in reducing student stress because such feedback on academic work can clarify expectations and reinforce a sense of progress. Such focused feedback helps students better understand their strengths and areas for improvement, thereby reducing the cognitive load and emotional stress that can hinder academic success (Carless & Boud, 2018). By providing actionable insights and fostering a supportive learning environment, faculty can significantly lower students' affective filters, enabling them to engage more effectively with the material (Brookhart, 2017). This can subsequently alleviate the anxiety associated with academic performance and help students set goals. These instructional approaches can also enhance academic outcomes and promote students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Adams et al., 2019; Johannes & Haase, 2022).

Support Faculty Members

While the faculty members are key to the student experience (Budash & Shaw, 2017), the expectation for faculty to engage with personalized offset strategies for each student may be taxing for faculty and even unrealistic, given their student load. According to Bedford (2023), institutional support for faculty may be just as salient as faculty support for students within a community of care framework. Therefore, institutions must take a proactive stance in supporting faculty through policies and resources that mitigate the enhanced workload that may result from the implementation of effective filter-offsetting strategies. Institutional stakeholders can assume some student support roles that include clear communication about available resources, curriculum, and policy (Babcock et al., 2019). This approach can help students navigate academic challenges more effectively and feel more connected to their community.

In online graduate education, communication might take the form of supportive forums where people can seek advice, share experiences, and offer encouragement (Charles et al., 2022).

Institutions can offer virtual counseling services, online stress management workshops, and digital peer support networks to ensure students have access to necessary wellness resources. Furthermore, leveraging digital tools and strategies that focus on academic support should be implemented at the institutional level to create a supportive and connected learning environment despite the physical distance that characterizes online graduate education (Anderson et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Fostering a community of care in online graduate education can cultivate a learning environment centered on student success and well-being (McCune et al., 2024). Combined with this philosophy, integrating the affective filter hypothesis into online teaching practices offers a robust framework for understanding and addressing the emotional and psychological barriers students may face. Educators can lower students' affective filters by creating a supportive and inclusive environment, promoting greater engagement and academic success (Krashen, 1981).

The faculty-student relationship is key to integrating the affective filter model for online graduate education into a community of care to support online graduate learners. The faculty member, supported by the institution, can implement targeted, purposeful strategies to cultivate a trusting relationship with students that will enhance students' academic outcomes (Bedford, 2023). This is particularly important in online education, where physical separation can often lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection. The implications of integrating an affective filter strategy into a community of care are also essential for the broader success of online graduate programs. Institutions that invest in training faculty to recognize and address the affective needs of their students are likely to see improved retention rates and more positive student outcomes. As the landscape of online higher education continues to evolve, the principles outlined in the

affective filter model for online graduate education will remain vital in guiding effective educational practices.

While the affective filter hypothesis provides a valuable lens to view and enhance the online graduate education experience, additional research could further inform the practice. This avenue could include exploring the application of the affective filter hypothesis in various more nuanced online graduate contexts, including different cultural settings and disciplines. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of community care initiatives on online graduate student success and well-being. By building on the strategies previously identified to address the affective filter for online graduate students within the affective filter model for online graduate education, stakeholders can effectively lower the affective filters that hinder student success, thereby promoting a more engaging, supportive, and successful learning experience for all students within the context of a community of care.

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