

## Review of ‘At-Risk’: A Simulation Training Program for College Staff

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I vividly remember the day I received email from a graduate student who had gone missing from my online class, announcing that he had “just gotten back from the loony bin.” He wrote that he had checked himself in to a mental hospital and was now back and ready to start making up late assignments (with one week left in the semester). Over the years as professors each of us comes to realize our students are enrolled in classes other than just the ones we are teaching, and beyond that they have real lives, jobs, and families. Our official job is to teach well, to inspire, and to grade fairly while juggling our own impossible to meet demands of work and life. Unofficially, the unfolding joys and concerns experienced by everyone’s whole self may enrich or undermine teaching and learning.

*At-Risk* is a simulation training program designed to address one specific, potentially lifesaving dimension of this complex milieu.



*At-Risk* was created by Kognito, in partnership with the Mental Health Association of New York City (MHA-NYC). MHA-NYC programs help raise awareness about mental health problems and encourage people to seek treatment. The *At-Risk* training simulation teaches college faculty to identify mental health problems among their students and to refer mentally distressed students to the college counseling office for assistance.

In the simulated 20 person class, 6 students have been flagged as potentially experiencing mental distress. As the instructor, your goal is to talk with each of those students and, if appropriate, refer them to the counseling center. You can review each student’s grades, behavior in the class, and appearance. You are told at the beginning that three of the six are at-risk, but you are not told which three. The training simulation lasts approximately 45 minutes. It is 2D web based and includes many lengthy narrated explanations before and after the interactivity.

*At-Risk* uses “conversation menus” organized by category to offer choices of what to say next. The animated student responds, choices of what the instructor says next are presented, and the simulation offers encouragement or criticism about the conversation choices.

I played through the free online demo of one of the six students. Wendy's problems were exaggerated and extreme. She is a 4.0 student who is so nervous she comes in to talk about every assignment. Heart palpitations caused her to go to the health clinic, causing her to skip the class presentation. As I played through the simulation, I argued with myself about whether it is reasonable for professors to call a meeting with 4.0 students who are nervous about speaking in class, even if the student is very nervous. I made a note to myself to check whether my university counseling center still exists, after the latest round of budget cuts, and what services they offer.

I also found that experiencing the simulated conversation was helpful and informative, even though I was trying to figure out what the simulation expected me to choose. It was useful to choose and hear spoken exactly how to bring up the counseling center. If sending students there has a chance of helping them cope better with life and with school, that's something I would be willing to do. And now I have a better sense of how it's done. The simulation was more useful in convincing me of the importance of identifying mental health problems and in showing me how to refer people than reading a brochure would have been.



I also naively expect socially useful serious games to be free. *At-Risk* is definitely not free. Licensing fees are way beyond what any individual faculty member would consider paying. I am not familiar with how universities prioritize nontrivial expenses like this for 45 minutes of online simulation, especially in times of deep budget cuts. The online free demo for one of the six students was informative and useful. Playing the other five conversations would not add five times more value — just playing one was enough to get the most important message: referring students is not hard to do and could help them a lot.

Serious game design needs to be accompanied by research to determine whether the serious goals have been met. Kognito has taken this important step. They are studying their own product and using the findings in marketing. And yet, product specific efficacy studies are not an expected domain for academic scientific research. The research findings offer a window onto desired and achieved impacts of the *At-Risk* simulation. I contacted the company for details about the sample size that I didn't see online. They responded that 42 colleges and universities (who were not paying customers) were invited to use a trial subscription. The first 35 individuals who completed the training at each institution were automatically invited to complete an anonymous online survey. Respondents who were full time practicing psychologists were excluded from study results which, instead, focus on faculty and staff reactions. A total of 375 respondents are represented in the results. No response rate percentage is known.

Key findings from the Kognito.com online research report:

- Over 80% reported that *At-Risk* increased their awareness that identifying and referring students is part of their job role and that *At-Risk* made them more likely to engage in identifying and referring at-risk students.
- 87% of respondents indicated they were better prepared to identify, refer, and approach at-risk students, and 82% felt better prepared to help a suicidal student.
- 99% of respondents said the simulated conversations were realistic representations of conversations they were likely to have with at-risk students.

If I had been a respondent, I would have answered the way the majority of respondents did, based only upon playing the demo.

For more information about the simulation see <http://www.kognito.com/atrisk/>