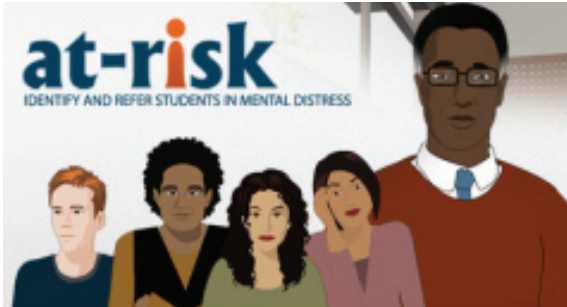




Mental Health Tool Helps Spot Students at Risk

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A newly developed training tool called *At-Risk* is helping faculty staff at the City University of New York (CUNY) better notice and intervene with students dealing with mental distress. The online simulator is meant to teach professors and other support staff some of the cues to spot in order to direct these students to counsellors before things get out of hand.

Developed by Kogito Interactive in collaboration with the Mental Health Association of New York City, the software has been in pilot testing at CUNY since its release in November of 2008. The largest urban public university in the United States with more than 450,000 students, CUNY already sees positive results. "Most of the feedback we've gotten so far has been anecdotal, but preliminarily at least, it's been encouraging," said Chris Rosa, CUNY assistant dean for student affairs.

At-Risk puts learners in the shoes of a fictional faculty member and has them analyze six students' profiles to identify those who are potentially at risk. Engaging in simulated conversations, the virtual students will exhibit behaviours associated with depression, substance abuse, aggression and suicidal thoughts. Users must determine whether and how to refer these troubled students to the campus counselling centre.

"It essentially allows you to role-play without having to feel like you're being judged and it gives you options that are relatively realistic about what kinds of things you may choose to do," said Henry Chung, associate vice president for student health and executive director of the student health center at NYU.

The 45-minute training tool is based on the simulation platform created by Kognito Interactive which allows users to practice having conversations with realistic virtual characters that possess their own memories and emotions. Trainees will also receive personalized feedback on their decisions and action making them better equipped and more confident to handle similar real-life situations.

"You're not talking about a very simple decision tree. ... The character has its own emotional state or memory so how it will respond to your question and the options you will have at that point depend on the decisions you've made before," explained Ron Goldman, CEO of Kognito Interactive. "You get feedback along the way. So if you ask inappropriate questions, you'll get feedback that way."

"We have a long history of using technology as a tool to link people to behavioural health services everyday and at times of crisis," said Giselle Stolper, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of New York City. "*At-Risk* will help to address depression and mental illness, which are highly prevalent on college campuses but far too often undetected."

According to recent statistics, nearly 80 percent of students who commit suicide are never seen by a counsellor. A demo version of *At-Risk* is available [here](#).