

## CUNY Hopes Computer Simulation Can Help Profs ID Students at Risk

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Snapshot of a Simulated Conversation included in At-Risk

Báez concedes that some faculty—particularly part-time faculty—“don’t know there’s a center.” And so this academic year, she’s trying a new strategy and enlisting the help of Professor Bill Hampton and five students enrolled in his business marketing class.

Hampton is not a real professor. He’s not, in fact, a real person. He is the avatar of At-Risk, a computer game designed by the interactive learning company Kognito, in partnership with the Mental Health Association of New York City, to train faculty to identify students who show signs and symptoms of psychological distress and refer them to the counseling center. CUNY’s Office of Student Affairs has purchased 7,000 licenses for At-Risk, which, says University Assistant Dean for Student Affairs Chris Rosa, helps faculty and staff identify students at risk without “removing them from the flow of their very busy days.” The game was released in January of this year, and Lehman College is one of six CUNY schools participating in an early pilot to use it to train faculty and staff. (Disclosure: The author works as an adjunct instructor at Lehman.)

It’s part of an attempt by Rosa and Luis Manzo, CUNY’s new director of mental health and wellness, to equip faculty to act as “gatekeepers” of campus mental health. This is happening at colleges across the country, as college administrators take notice of such studies as the one conducted in 2006 by the American College Health Association, which found that 50 percent of undergraduates reported feeling so depressed at some point during the previous 12 months that they found it difficult to function. One of every 10 said they had seriously considered suicide at some point during their college careers. And according to one widely cited 2005 study, between 80 and 90 percent of college students who committed suicide never sought help from their school counseling center.

For Lehman College Counseling Center director Dr. Anney Báez, the math is inescapable. With only two full-time counselors and four part-timers, her center cannot begin to identify which of Lehman’s 12,000 full-time and part-time students may be suffering from depression or other psychological conditions. For that, she needs the help of faculty, whose regular interaction with students puts them in a unique position to identify students at risk of dropping out of college or committing suicide.

Despite regular faculty trainings and the tall stack of pink center brochures she keeps at the ready,

CUNY does not keep data on student mental health, but Manzo speculates that the system “would fall pretty much in line with national data,” adding that other studies have shown that students of color and international students from lower-income families—two groups disproportionately represented in CUNY’s student body—are less likely to utilize counseling services. “We know there are students who are not seeking services who need services,” he says.

The initial setting for At-Risk is Hampton’s expensive-looking sloped classroom, where the player assumes the perspective of Hampton looking out onto his class of 18 students. Five students are flagged with brown diamonds floating above their heads—the five who, as Hampton explains, have sparked his concern. Clicking on a diamond calls up a three-tab portfolio that displays pertinent information on the student’s academic performance (including assignment and test grades, participation, and absences), behavior (e.g., falling asleep in class), and appearance: Rolling your cursor over small orange circles—“hot spots”—on a student’s clothing opens windows that report more information, such as “stained, dirty clothing.”

Clicking on a “talk to student” button shifts the setting to Hampton’s office, where the player chooses from various conversational topics, such as “midterm,” “presentation,” “anxiety,” and “counseling,” and dialogue options for each of these topics—for example, “Have an anxiety problem?” The object of the game is to help Professor Hampton identify three students who are most at risk, and to get them to agree to visit the counseling center.

Unlike conventional trainings, At-Risk is designed to allow faculty members to learn best practices by actually implementing them. Depending on the person controlling him, Dr. Hampton can be gentle and empathetic or laughably insensitive and abrupt. He can alienate Gwen, a tightly wound student whom he noticed sweating before a test, by asking her, “Why were you freaking out about the midterm?” and saying, “I almost gave you a bag to breathe into.” He can entangle himself in a dead-end dispute with Jared, a sloppily dressed student prone to nonsensical tangents in his papers, by challenging his conspiracy theory about the FDA. Or he can irritate Doug, a student who wears a marijuana-leaf T-shirt, by telling him, as soon as he sits down in his office, “Doug, I want to talk with you about some of the clothing you wear. I’m concerned.” If the player continues to needle a student, a screen pops up that explains they’ve made a mistake, and provides them with the option to either start the conversation over or use one of three “Undos.”

“The game allows you to pursue your stereotypes about what is dangerous behavior,” says Baruch College computer information systems professor Bill Ferns, who tested At-Risk last winter. Courtney Knowles, executive director of the Jed Foundation, a national organization focused on college mental health and suicide prevention, says that jumping right into a conversation about mental health issues with a student is a common instinct, but ill-advised. “It’s so easy to make the mistake of diving right into ‘You seem depressed,’ when sometimes it’s so much more effective to talk about behavior you’ve observed and bring up the topic gently,” he says. “The game confronts you with a lot of situations in which it would be easy to make the wrong choice or say the wrong thing, and it lets you make a mistake.”

## **Kognito Interactive**

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