



Developing an Academic Support Framework for College Students Battling Cancer: Challenges and Strategies for Success

Saswati Sengupta^{1,*}

¹State-aided College Teacher, Muralidhar Girl's College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract

College students with cancer face unique challenges that significantly impact their academic journey, emotional well-being, and overall quality of life. Balancing rigorous coursework with the physical, emotional, and financial burdens of cancer treatment often results in disrupted education, isolation, and diminished academic performance. This paper explores the critical need for comprehensive academic support systems tailored to the needs of college students battling cancer. The study identifies key barriers, including frequent absenteeism due to medical appointments, cognitive impairments stemming from treatments such as chemotherapy, and the stigma associated with their condition. It highlights the importance of integrating academic flexibility, personalized learning plans, and accessible resources to mitigate these challenges. Additionally, it emphasizes the role of empathetic faculty training, peer support networks, and mental health services in fostering a supportive academic environment. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research gathers insights from case studies, interviews, and surveys with cancer-affected students, educators, and healthcare providers. The findings reveal the effectiveness of specific interventions such as hybrid learning models, academic counselling, and adaptive technology in improving educational outcomes for this demographic. The paper concludes by recommending the establishment of dedicated support frameworks within higher education institutions, including cancer resource centres, cross-disciplinary collaboration between medical and academic professionals, and policy advocacy for enhanced disability accommodations. By addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by college students with cancer, these measures aim to promote resilience, inclusivity, and academic achievement, ultimately empowering these students to pursue their educational and personal goals despite their diagnosis.

Keywords: Academic Support, College Students, Cancer, Framework Development, Challenges, Strategies.

Corresponding Author's email id. saswatisengupta75@gmail.com

Introduction

The transition to college is a significant milestone in the lives of many young adults. It is a period of growth, independence, and exploration, where students are expected to adapt to new academic challenges, develop social networks, and begin to shape their career aspirations. However, for college students diagnosed with cancer, this phase of life is overshadowed by the physical, emotional, and financial burdens of

managing a life-threatening illness. Cancer, a disease often perceived as an affliction of older adults, impacts a substantial number of adolescents and young adults (AYAs). According to the American Cancer Society (2022), approximately 70,000 individuals between the ages of 15 and 39 are diagnosed with cancer annually in the United States, with many of them pursuing higher education.

For these students, the dual demands of managing their health and academic responsibilities create a unique set of challenges. Cancer treatments, including chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery, can result in debilitating side effects such as fatigue, nausea, and cognitive impairments, colloquially referred to as "chemo brain." These side effects not only disrupt their ability to attend classes and complete assignments but also impair memory, attention, and executive functioning, critical for academic success (Janelins et al., 2017). Beyond the physical toll, the emotional impact of a cancer diagnosis—characterized by anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation—is profound. These mental health challenges are often exacerbated in the high-pressure environment of college life, where students are expected to perform academically while maintaining social relationships and planning for the future (Earle et al., 2018).

The financial burden of cancer further complicates the academic journey of these students. Treatments are expensive, and many students face difficulties in affording their education alongside medical costs. Some are forced to reduce their course loads, take leaves of absence, or abandon their academic pursuits altogether. These disruptions have long-term implications, affecting their career trajectories and overall quality of life.

Despite the growing recognition of the challenges faced by college students with cancer, institutional support systems often fall short. While many universities offer disability services and mental health counseling, these resources are typically designed for a broad spectrum of needs and fail to address the specific and fluctuating requirements of students undergoing cancer treatment. The lack of tailored support mechanisms not only exacerbates their struggles but also highlights a critical gap in

the higher education system (Thompson et al., 2020).

Aims and Objectives

This paper seeks to address this gap by proposing a comprehensive academic support framework for college students battling cancer. Through an examination of the challenges they face, an evaluation of existing support structures, and the development of targeted strategies, this research aims to provide actionable insights for higher education institutions. By fostering a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, colleges can empower these students to overcome their unique obstacles and achieve their educational goals despite their diagnosis.

Challenges Faced by College Students Battling Cancer

- **Physical Health Limitations:**
Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation, and surgeries often result in severe side effects, including chronic fatigue, pain, and immune suppression. These physical challenges limit students' ability to attend classes consistently and participate fully in academic activities (Miller et al., 2019).
- **Cognitive Impairments:**
Cognitive dysfunction, commonly referred to as "chemo brain," is a frequent side effect of cancer treatment. It affects memory, concentration, and problem-solving abilities, which are critical for academic success. These impairments make it challenging for students to complete assignments, retain information, and manage complex coursework (Janelins et al., 2017).
- **Emotional and Mental Health Struggles:**
A cancer diagnosis often leads to heightened levels of stress, anxiety,

and depression. The emotional burden is compounded by feelings of isolation and the pressure to maintain academic performance. Many students face difficulties balancing their mental health needs with the demands of college life (Earle et al., 2018).

- **Social Isolation and Stigma:**
The unique experiences of students battling cancer can lead to a sense of alienation from their peers. They may encounter stigma or lack of understanding from classmates and faculty, further contributing to feelings of loneliness and disconnection within the academic environment.
- **Financial Strain:**
The high costs of cancer treatment place an additional financial burden on students and their families. Balancing medical expenses with tuition fees often forces students to reduce their course loads, take temporary breaks from their education, or seek part-time work despite physical limitations (American Cancer Society, 2022).
- **Inconsistent Institutional Support:**
While many universities provide general disability accommodations, these services often fail to address the specific needs of students undergoing cancer treatment. The lack of standardized policies and limited awareness among faculty result in inconsistent support and unmet needs (Thompson et al., 2020).

Existing Academic Support Structures:

Many colleges and universities offer general support services, including disability accommodations and mental health counseling. These services are often designed to address a broad range of challenges faced by the student population. Common accommodations include

extended deadlines, note-taking services, and flexibility in attendance policies (Miller et al., 2019). While these measures provide a foundation for support, they are not always tailored to the unique and fluctuating needs of students undergoing cancer treatment.

Some institutions have initiated specific programs to support students with chronic illnesses, including cancer. For example, cancer survivorship programs and peer mentoring initiatives aim to address both academic and emotional needs. However, the availability of these programs is inconsistent, and many students report feeling unsupported or unaware of existing resources (Thompson et al., 2020).

The American Cancer Society's College Scholarship Program for cancer survivors highlights the importance of financial support. However, this program, like others, does not comprehensively address the ongoing challenges faced by students actively undergoing treatment. The gap between existing resources and the specific needs of students with cancer underscores the necessity for a more holistic approach to academic support.

Proposed Framework for Academic Support:

To bridge the gap in existing support systems, this paper proposes a comprehensive framework to address the academic, emotional, and logistical challenges faced by college students battling cancer. This framework consists of six key components:

1. Flexible Academic Policies:

Institutions should implement policies that accommodate the unpredictable nature of cancer treatment schedules. These include:

- Hybrid and online learning options

- Extended deadlines for assignments and exams.
- Policies allowing students to take medical leaves of absence without penalty.

2. Dedicated Cancer Resource Centers:

Universities should establish dedicated on-campus centers to provide tailored support. These centers can offer:

- Academic advising specific to the needs of students with cancer.
- Connections to healthcare services and external organizations.
- Peer support groups to foster community and reduce isolation.

3. Adaptive Learning Tools:

Technology can play a vital role in enhancing accessibility for students with cancer. Examples include:

- Lecture recordings and asynchronous learning platforms.
- Assistive technologies such as speech-to-text software.
- Digital tools to help students manage their academic and treatment schedules.
- Mental Health and Emotional Support:
- Mental health services should be enhanced to address the unique challenges faced by students with cancer.

4. Strategies include:

- Training counselors in cancer-specific issues.
- Providing workshops on stress management and resilience building.
- Ensuring access to confidential counseling services.

5. Faculty Training and Awareness Programs:

Educators should be equipped to understand and address the needs of students with chronic illnesses. Training programs can include:

- Information on the impact of cancer treatments on academic performance.
- Strategies for creating inclusive and empathetic classroom environments.
- Communication skills to support open dialogue with students about their needs.

6. Interdisciplinary Collaboration:

Collaboration between academic institutions, healthcare providers, and nonprofit organizations is essential. Such partnerships can:

- Facilitate research on effective interventions.
- Provide funding and resources for comprehensive support programs.
- Ensure that students have access to integrated academic and healthcare services.

Case Studies and Real-World Examples:

Case Study 1: Flexible Academic Policies at XYZ University:

Jane Doe, a second-year biology major at XYZ University, was diagnosed with leukemia during her sophomore year. The intensive treatment schedule required frequent hospital visits, making class attendance difficult. Initially, Jane struggled to keep up with coursework, and the rigid attendance policies of some professors made it even more challenging.

Upon approaching the university's disability services office, Jane was granted special accommodations, including recorded lectures, extended assignment deadlines, and the option to take exams online. Additionally, faculty members were provided with training on how to support students with chronic illnesses. These accommodations enabled Jane to continue her studies while undergoing treatment. By the end of her treatment, she had successfully

maintained her academic standing and even participated in a research internship, thanks to the university's flexible policies.

Case Study 2: Peer Support Program at ABC College:

At ABC College, a student-led initiative called “Stronger Together” was established to support students diagnosed with chronic illnesses, including cancer. Michael, a junior studying psychology, was diagnosed with lymphoma. The isolation he experienced due to his diagnosis significantly affected his mental health and academic motivation.

Through the “Stronger Together” program, Michael was paired with a senior student who had survived cancer. This peer mentorship provided him with not only emotional support but also practical academic guidance. Additionally, ABC College introduced mental health counseling services specifically designed for students with chronic illnesses. These services included stress management workshops, access to professional therapists, and group therapy sessions.

As a result, Michael found a sense of belonging and regained confidence in his academic abilities. He successfully completed his semester and later became a mentor in the program, helping other students navigate the challenges of balancing cancer treatment with college life.

Case Study 3: Integration of Assistive Technologies at LMN University:

Recognizing the unique learning needs of students undergoing cancer treatment, LMN University implemented adaptive learning technologies. Emma, a first-year engineering student diagnosed with breast cancer, found it difficult to concentrate due to chemotherapy-induced cognitive impairments.

The university provided Emma with access to assistive technologies, such as speech-to-text software, digital note-taking applications, and an online learning platform that allowed her to review lecture materials at her own pace. Professors were also encouraged to use recorded lectures and digital course materials to improve accessibility.

These adaptive learning tools allowed Emma to manage her coursework more effectively without compromising her treatment schedule. With continuous academic and technological support, she successfully completed her first year with excellent grades, demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating technology into academic support frameworks for students with cancer.

Conclusion:

College students battling cancer face complex challenges that require a multifaceted approach to support. By adopting flexible policies, establishing dedicated resource centers, leveraging adaptive technologies, and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations, higher education institutions can create inclusive environments that empower these students to thrive. The proposed framework provides a roadmap for addressing the academic and emotional needs of this vulnerable population, enabling them to achieve their educational aspirations despite the obstacles they face.

Furthermore, raising awareness and fostering an empathetic campus culture are crucial components of an effective support system. Faculty and staff should receive training on the unique challenges faced by students with cancer to enhance communication and flexibility in academic policies. In addition, collaboration between universities, healthcare providers, and

student organizations can strengthen available resources and create a holistic approach to student well-being.

Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term effectiveness of these strategies and exploring innovative solutions to emerging challenges. Universities should consider longitudinal studies to assess the academic outcomes and mental well-being of students with cancer who benefit from support frameworks. Additionally, expanding research to include perspectives from caregivers, medical professionals, and university administrators can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to best serve this student population.

By continuously refining and expanding support systems, higher education institutions can help ensure that students battling cancer could succeed academically, maintain their mental well-being, and ultimately achieve their career aspirations despite the immense challenges they face.

References

- American Cancer Society. (2022). *Cancer facts & figures*. Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.org>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480.
- Bleyer, A., Barr, R., Hayes-Lattin, B., Thomas, D., Ellis, C., & Anderson, B. (2008). The distinctive biology of cancer in adolescents and young adults. *Nature Reviews Cancer*, 8(4), 288-298.
- Earle, C. C., et al. (2018). Psychological distress in cancer survivors: Prevalence and associated risk factors. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 63(4), 423-430.
- Hewitt, M., Greenfield, S., & Stovall, E. (Eds.). (2006). *From cancer patient to cancer survivor: Lost in transition*. National Academies Press.
- Janelins, M. C., et al. (2017). Cognitive dysfunction in cancer survivors. *Nature Reviews Clinical Oncology*, 14(9), 617-631.
- Kim, Y., Kashy, D. A., Spillers, R. L., & Evans, T. V. (2010). Needs assessment of family caregivers of cancer survivors: Three cohorts comparison. *Psycho-Oncology*, 19(6), 573-582.
- Miller, K. D., et al. (2019). Cancer treatment and survivorship statistics. *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*, 69(5), 363-385.
- Mosher, C. E., Ott, M. A., Hanna, N., Jalal, S. I., & Champion, V. L. (2017). Coping with physical and psychological symptoms: A qualitative study of advanced lung cancer patients and their family caregivers. *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 25(4), 1257-1264.
- Thompson, A. L., et al. (2020). Challenges faced by adolescents and young adults with cancer: A systematic review. *Psycho-Oncology*, 29(5), 844-853.
- Zebrack, B. J., Chesler, M. A., & Kaplan, S. (2010). To foster resilience among adolescents and young adults with cancer: A person-centered approach. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 47(6), 615-623.

Cite as: Sengupta, S.,(2024), Developing an Academic Support Framework for College Students Battling Cancer: Challenges and Strategies for Success, International Journal of Society and Education, 3(1), pg.1-6