



STUDENT ASSISTANCE TO UNDERGRADUATES ON SICK LEAVE: A CASE STUDY¹

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to understand how the process of student assistance to undergraduates on sick leave occurs. **Methods:** exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative case study carried out between August 2018 and May 2019 in a public university in the southeast region of Brazil. Forty-six cases opened by students were analyzed. Additionally, 15 accounts by course coordinators, professors, students, and professionals at the Office of the Pro Dean for Student Assistance and answers by 12 students to an online questionnaire were collected. Bardin's content analysis was used to treat the data. **Results:** there was delay in the processing of the cases, differences in the approaches applied to manage the cases, lack of belief in the existence of the undergraduates' health issues and of content flexibility, and little knowledge about the right to student assistance in situations of sick leave. It was patent that the existence of this right has to be more disseminated and that the procedures at the institution have to be systematized. **Final considerations:** the mentioned difficulties and presented demands explained the need for greater investments in a modality of student assistance that takes into account the several aspects of students' lives, especially health, providing them with guidance during the teaching-learning process and psychopedagogical follow-up in sick leave cases.

Keywords: Education higher. Student health. Sick leave. Case reports.

INTRODUCTION

Since the last years of the 2000s, there has been a remarkable expansion in higher education in Brazil, which led to the need to meet the demands resulting from the growth in the number of students entering higher education institutions (HEIs). Consequently, student assistance policies also scaled so undergraduates' comprehensive development was guaranteed⁽¹⁾.

Entering higher education usually concurs with the transition from adolescence to adulthood and from the study model applied in high school to that used in universities, which can be a critical moment in students' lives⁽²⁾.

In addition, the literature mentions that undergraduates tend to be vulnerable to health problems. A study in the northwest region of the

Brazilian state of Paraná evaluated risk factors for cardiovascular diseases in fourth-year college students in eight courses in a public university and identified that smoking, alcohol consumption, sedentary lifestyle, unbalanced diet, and overweight stood out in the examined population, especially considering that it is during this phase that many life habits change for worse because of a greater susceptibility to developing practices that are harmful to health⁽³⁾.

If not properly managed, health issues can cause difficulties fulfilling academic activities, social isolation, and dropping out, since health and well-being are crucial to academic adaptation and performance, and influence the ability to learn and fully experience higher education⁽⁴⁾.

In addition to individual consequences, the difficulties to carry on with university studies

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can also lead to social and economic losses, because resources intended for HEIs are underused. Therefore, it is fundamental that institutions be alert to situations that can affect undergraduates and their academic performance⁽⁵⁾.

In Brazil, governmental initiatives such as the National Student Assistance Program (PNAES, as per its acronym in Portuguese) made progress regarding support to undergraduates by means of improvement of academic performance and actions to make equality of opportunities feasible by implementing measures oriented toward preventing grade repetition and dropout. Among the proposed student assistance actions, health care and pedagogical support to undergraduates during higher education stood out⁽⁶⁾. A study that analyzed the impact of offering student assistance in public HEIs showed that it contributed to better performance by undergraduates in academic activities and permanence in higher education⁽⁷⁾.

Despite the relevance of studies that assess student assistance provided by HEIs with a focus on the service delivered to those who need follow up in sick leave situations, the number of Brazilian and international publications on the subject is low. The existing studies concentrated on identifying situations that interfere with students' staying in higher education, especially those related to their socioeconomic vulnerability, and understanding the impact of interventions that give these students an opportunity to avoid dropout, including financial support. The literature also shows accounts and evaluations about support and counseling programs for undergraduates in the scope of mental health^(8,9).

Therefore, there is a research gap as regards studies that assess the other areas mentioned in the PNAES oriented toward promoting the permanence of students in higher education and a more effective action by institutions regarding promotion and monitoring of student health⁽¹⁰⁾.

The current context originated the following question: How has student assistance to undergraduates on sick leave been carried out? The objective of the present study was to understand how the process of student assistance to undergraduates on sick leave occurs.

The relevance of the present study is

examining this aspect of student assistance in universities that has been poorly explored. The results can help institutions focus on interventions oriented toward the reality of the academic community, aiming to keep their well-being and, consequently, improve their learning performance.

METHODOLOGY

This was an exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative case study carried out in a public university in the southeast region of Brazil. The sample included male and female undergraduates, regardless of their age group, who requested student assistance because of sick leaves between January 2016 and December 2018 and were registered at the institution's Academic Management Integrated System (SIGA, as per its acronym in Portuguese); professors who had already seen how this assistance process takes place; coordinators of the languages, nursing, and arts and design courses; and professionals at the Office of the Pro Dean for Student Assistance (PROAE, as per its acronym in Portuguese). Undergraduates who had dropped out from their courses and professionals who were away from work during the data collection period were excluded.

In the HEI where the present study was conducted, assistance to undergraduates on sick leave has the objective of ensuring learning continuity and is provided for in the institution's academic regulations for undergraduate courses. To receive this assistance, students have to open a case in the coordination sector of their course, which will attach a medical certificate to the documents. Then, it is necessary to wait for the verdict of the professors of the subjects in which students are enrolled.

Data collection applied triangulation as a strategy to complement the information obtained from different sources: consulting to 46 student assistance request files; accounts by three undergraduates, seven professors, three course coordinators, and two members of PROAE; and answers provided by 12 undergraduates to a questionnaire designed by the main researcher of the present study using Google Forms. Triangulation allows researchers to capture a certain reality from different perspectives, and,

consequently, compare information, so as to minimize biases resulting from a single analysis standpoint⁽¹¹⁾.

The search for case files at the SIGAsystem was carried out from August 2018 to January 2019 to identify the number of students that requested student assistance because of sick leave. The search for these files was authorized by the HEI and made easier by the fact that the main researcher was a civil servant at the institution and had early access to student assistance requests. The content of the undergraduates' requests was evaluated after the proposal was approved by the institution's research ethics committee, and examination of the documents showed that the courses with the highest numbers of case files were nursing (18), languages (16), and arts and design (12), which were chosen as objects of the present study.

The interviews with undergraduates, course coordinators, and professors were conducted in April and May 2019 and guided by open-ended

questions about how student assistance occurred in the institution. Their average duration was 30 minutes. The accounts were obtained by the main researcher, a master's student in education, after training to carry out the qualitative interview. The meetings were held in a private room, at academic units or at PROAE (when the interviewed people were members of this sector) and had their audios recorded and transcribed so posterior analysis was possible. No participant declined the invitation to be included in the sample or was excluded from it.

The questionnaire sent to the participants had questions structured as a Likert scale that aimed to identify the level of agreement with statements about student assistance, as well as two open-ended questions for people to freely provide their opinion on the subject. Answers were obtained from 12 out of the 46 undergraduates (26%) who had opened a student assistance case. Figure 1 summarizes the steps to make up the study sample.

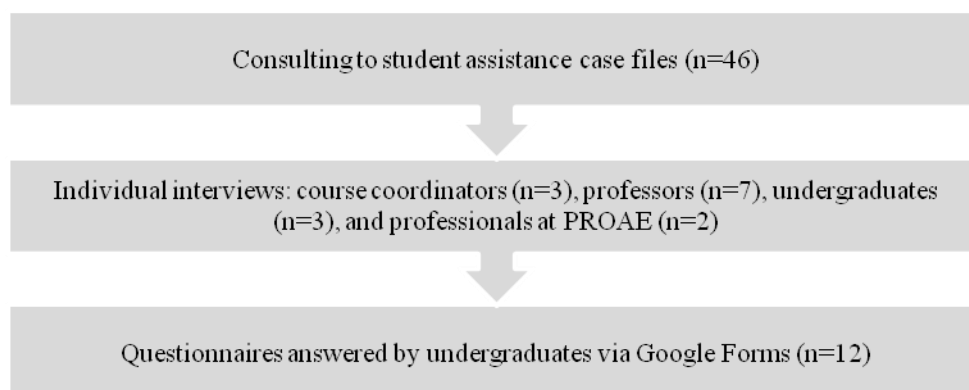


Figure 1. Study sample composition.

Source. Prepared by the authors.

Bardin's content analysis was used to organize and treat data. Pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of results followed by extraction of inferences and interpretations were the involved steps⁽¹²⁾.

After analysis of student assistance request case files, transcription of the interviews with the participants, and compilation of data obtained from the answers given by the undergraduates who filled out the questionnaire, all the gathered textual material was codified. Thematic categories were established and inferential interpretations were drawn to allow researchers to understand how student assistance

to undergraduates on sick leave occurs.

To ensure the participants' anonymity, they were identified by the letters P, C, M, and U, corresponding to the initials of the words professor, coordinator, member (at PROAE), and undergraduate, respectively, followed by a number indicating their position in the order that the interviews took place (P1 to P7; C1 to C3; M1 and M2; U1 to U3). The same labeling was applied to the answered questionnaires, identified by the initial Q followed by a number indicating their position in the order in which they were received (Q1 to Q12). The agreement to participate in the study was expressed by

signing free and informed consent forms. The proposal was approved by the institution's research ethics committee as per report no. 3,231,882 and Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Evaluation no. 07884919.8.0000.5147, of March 29, 2019. It must be emphasized that the present study followed the steps recommended by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)⁽¹³⁾.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characterization

In over one third of the 46 analyzed case files, it was not possible to find the reason for requesting the assistance, since information was incomplete or the cases were not filed for reference. Around one third of the files were related to maternity leaves. Health alterations found in the student assistance requests included surgeries, traumas or osteoarticular changes, diseases of the eye and adnexa, breast and womb diseases, exogenous intoxication by medications, mental and behavioral disorders, and nervous system diseases.

The coordinators included in the sample had been in their positions for over a year. Most professors were women and had been teaching at the university for 8 to 37 years. The PROAE members had been working as educators and social workers for over ten years. The interviewed undergraduates were 27 years old or older and were at the specific training cycle.

Of the 12 undergraduates who answered the questionnaire, six were students at the language course, four at the nursing course, and two at the arts and design course. They were over 22 years old, and 41.7% were taking subjects in the basic cycle.

By grouping the information extracted from participants' answers and the student assistance case files opened as a result of sick leave, the study corpus was built. The following categories emerged: "weaknesses identified in the practice of student assistance" and "suggestions to improve student assistance".

Weaknesses identified in the practice of student assistance

Although student assistance in cases of sick leave is a students' right, getting it was often a reason of attrition for the potential beneficiaries. Some undergraduates mentioned that students ignore the existence of this right, which was confirmed by the accounts of the three coordinators, most professors, and the three undergraduates during the interviews:

[...] the students do not know the Academic Regulations for Undergraduate Courses [...]. (C3)

I think they roughly know their right. (U2)

[...] sometimes, even knowing it, maybe they have no idea of what situations are characterized as exceptional treatment cases [student sick leave]. (C1)

These findings were corroborated by a study in the United States involving 822 students in which over half the interviewed sample was little aware of the university support available to undergraduates and 18.7% completely ignored the existence of the service. Only one third (31.1%) had enough knowledge of the availability of this support⁽¹⁴⁾.

Regarding supply of information to undergraduates by coordinators about the processing of student assistance cases, there was a lack of standardization in the conducts:

The lack of information of some coordinator hindered the process a little. (Q9)

[...] lack of information of the coordination sector; I was totally lost, because they informed me different things each time. (Q8)

Regarding information provided by the coordination sector to professors who would evaluate the demands, it was found that the orientations, with a few exceptions, were not standardized, a problem made worse by the lack of clarity of the actions established by the institution's academic regulations for undergraduate courses, which gave rise to interpretations that differed from what must be done:

[...] they send you the case file for you to be aware. It is a top-to-bottom thing. (P1)

I get nearly nothing. Just a piece of paper informing that the student filed an exceptional treatment request [student sick leave] [...]. (P6)

The Academic Regulations for Undergraduate

Courses is prescriptive. There is a difference in the way professors treat students. (P5)

The interviewed coordinators also reported that they did not receive guidance from their superiors on how this assistance should be provided according to the specificities of each case:

[...] Coosbe [medical reporting service] just ratifies it, but offers no guidance on how our conduct should be, on what the student need is. (C2)

Similar situations were identified during examination of student assistance case files, since each case was underway individually. In only one course, the files had all reports with the respective referrals. Therefore, it is necessary to standardize the procedures, since what is written in the institution's academic regulations for undergraduate courses gives rise for each course to deal with the procedures as they see fit.

These results corroborated the findings of a study with Irish students which gathered accounts informing that the undergraduate unit and support services at the university were not connected and that there was lack of information and clear procedures to guarantee that undergraduates could access these services, which hindered their use⁽¹⁵⁾.

Most students interviewed in the present study did not agree with the statement that the activity schedule made by professors for undergraduates who requested student assistance met their needs satisfactorily:

[...] I had no condition to be at the campus, and they indicated in-person tests for me. They gave me no other option, which is why I did not complete the subject. (Q8)

In this scope, the professors showed resistance to make the contents more flexible to meet the students' demands:

I have to make the contents much more flexible [...] a lot of it is lost. (P6)

[...] there is still a certain resistance, not from all professors, but there is still resistance. (M2)

One of the professors emphasized the relevance of "going beyond regimental procedures" when providing assistance to undergraduates with health needs:

[...] I have always considered the Academic

Regulations for Undergraduate Courses as a starting point, not an end point [...] you can treat the issue very coldly, with paperwork only, or you can make the students feel embraced. (P5)

A study stressed the importance of professors and university tutors to seek the highest possible level of well-being of their students and to be enablers in the training process, so undergraduates have successful learning, taking into account that a good health condition is a determining factor in this process⁽¹⁶⁾. It must be emphasized that professors play an important mediation role, which may favor or not the construction of knowledge by students⁽¹⁷⁾ and, consequently, their well-being. Therefore, professors must be ready to create contents and tests flexible in the subjects they offer when dealing with students on sick leave.

The undergraduates cited the professors' disbelief at their real health condition, despite the existence of medical reports and the approval of these documents by the HEI's medical reporting service. The students also mentioned excessive paperwork; unpreparedness by administrative technicians, professors and coordinators; and prejudice and disregard:

[...] they do not take us seriously. Especially if it is a case involving depression, psychological or psychiatric issues, emotional problems. (U1)

[...] unpreparedness of the course coordination secretary to deal with people who have a mental disorder. (Q10)

Some excerpts of the coordinators' interviews reinforced the undergraduates' accounts regarding difficulties in the processes of receiving and dealing with the student assistance request by sick leave:

There are professors who still do not understand these chronic syndromes as something to be dealt with on an exceptional basis. (C2)

[...] I myself have some limitation when it comes to this knowledge [...] if we look at what is established in the Academic Regulations for Undergraduate Courses, we see it is very obscure, there is reference to old decrees and laws. (C1)

The undergraduates resented not having their health conditions understood, especially those involving psychological aspects, which emphasized stigmatization by the university

community. A systematic literature review showed that lack of trust in the professionals in charge, perception of depreciation, and lack of knowledge about health problems that affected students by supporters stood out among the challenges faced by undergraduates who requested assistance⁽¹⁸⁾. It should be stressed that student assistance must be grounded in quality interaction between undergraduates and professors so information can be made available and/or meaningful psychopedagogical interventions can be made feasible.

Four undergraduates disagreed that there was no delay in the processing of their cases, from request to conclusion, and the records indicated slowness in the necessary procedures, which was also stressed by the professors:

There is a huge delay in the processing of cases. [...] they have to go through analysis by the coordination. (P3)

One of the PROAE representatives emphasized the importance of a broader institutional perspective oriented toward students whoneed support:

[...] it would be really interesting to include other Pro Dean Offices in exceptional treatment [student sick leave]. [...] the university is interconnected, but the assistance is very fragmented. (M1)

These excerpts reinforce the importance of collaboration between support services and undergraduates with student assistance needs to help establish a feeling of belonging of the latter in the institution, which facilitates their active participation in the academic community⁽¹⁵⁾. Proper support by HEIs can positively impact student well-being, with consequences in academic performance and employment aspirations⁽¹⁹⁾.

The professors' perception regarding effectiveness of student assistance was that the complexity of some health situations makes it difficult for professors to identify the best conduct:

[...] an undergraduate sent me an e-mail with the title "important student".[...] then his mother comes to me, crying, saying that the kid attempted suicide.[...] then I made the connection and realized that "important student" was a call for help. (P6)

Most students answered that there was no follow-up by PROAE when they were on sick leave, which is justified by the fact that the academic regulations for undergraduate courses do not mention this sector. However, there were coordinators and professors that were moved by the undergraduates' problems and looked for guidance at PROAE:

[...] we try to write a notification to PROAE to establish a partnership to put the exceptional treatment [student sick leave] into practice for the student. (C2)

I have already had the opportunity to have a meeting with the PROAE psychologist and educator [...] I thought that being with them and listening to them was very good [...]. (P1)

According to the account by one of the PROAE members, it is not usual for student assistance cases related to health issues to be referred to the Pro Dean Office, let alone requesting that professionals that work there provide guidance on the best way to meet students' needs:

I have participated in two exceptional treatments [student sick leaves] since I started working here. (M1)

It is noteworthy that only two cases went through the procedure since this participant had been working at PROAE. Because the academic regulations for undergraduate courses do not establish that student assistance cases involving sick leave have to be dealt with at PROAE, only the cases in which the coordinator or the student requests the intermediation of this office are benefited with the interdisciplinary support of the team, which can impact assistance effectiveness. Student assistance must encompass comprehensive attention to undergraduates, with a special focus on questions involving health and educational development so successful training is achieved⁽²⁰⁾.

In accordance with the Okanagan Charter, HEIs must be spaces for plural dialogues oriented toward the production of the health promotion culture and for implementation of policies that target appreciation of life and sustainability. Therefore, these institutions must nurture well-being, equity, and social justice cultures that engage the whole academic community⁽²¹⁾.

Suggestions to improve student assistance

The participants' suggestions to improve student assistance included expanding actions to disseminate the right to this assistance among professors and encouraging course coordinators to properly receive and treat undergraduates:

The students' right to get this assistance has to be better clarified, and there has to be a better assistance by coordinators, with consistent information and proper attention by professors. (Q8)

Further clarification for professors[...] not all of them adjusted to my demand. I believe that the assistance matter is not fully known by all professors. (Q9)

There was a mention to the systematic and standardized assistance to undergraduates experiencing situations that require health treatment in a sector that can manage the students' requests:

It is necessary to implement a systematization of the assistance process that allows students to get their clinical condition and treatment monitored and followed up as soon as possible. Assistance regarding educational activities must be included in the process too. (Q6)

PROAE has to have the leading role in the process. [...] The academic regulations for undergraduate courses cannot be as open as to allow individual interpretations, because each course and each subject has their specificities, which have to be taken into account. (P1)

It has to be stressed that it is necessary to improve the flow of processing of cases involving sick leaves in HEIs by implementing the systematization of the processes, a change that has to be designed and discussed by pro dean offices, student representatives, professors, and administrative technicians. Computerization of the procedures involved in student assistance requests related to sick leaves will be able to speed up processing and favor quick communication between the concerned parties.

According to the participants, improving the fulfillment of the demands and expanding the dissemination of the students' right to this type of assistance require joint actions by undergraduate course coordinators, undergraduate dean's offices, and PROAE,

especially the latter. This office has professionals trained to guide students in this assistance, including psychologists, educators, and social workers, which can help undergraduates feel that their needs are properly dealt with. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to recognize the importance of the interactions between students, professors, and representatives involved in student assistance by sick leave and emphasize the need for coordination between these university sectors.

In a study with 22 Irish universities, the students reported the need for early engagement and for the development of a bond with the support service to facilitate the search for help when it is necessary⁽¹⁵⁾. It should be emphasized that a genuine interaction between the parties involved in student assistance can create a space by means of which human conducts will be regulated according to real social experiences.

The needs resulting from student assistance by sick leave also require coordination with primary health care, which can facilitate referral of more critical cases and health promotion actions. This statement is corroborated by a study that assessed the policies addressing the health of Brazilian students at technical and higher education institutions that pointed out the need for actions involving health-disease processes, disease prevention, and health promotion in the academic environment, which should be coordinated with the public health network⁽⁶⁾.

The findings of the present study contribute to progress in the knowledge about student assistance by offering a better understanding of the importance of monitoring undergraduates who have health demands, an aspect provided for by Brazilian public policies targeting HEIs, with the objective of improving academic performance and guaranteeing the right to higher education.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Analysis of the case files and perception of undergraduates, professors, course coordinators, and professionals at the student assistance service showed that there was no standardization in the processing of student assistance requests by sick leave, let alone in the actions oriented

toward this public in the HEI that was the location of the present study. Little knowledge of undergraduates and professors about the right to this assistance, lack of willingness to make contents and tests more flexible, professors' disbelief at the health conditions presented by students, and lack of engagement of the institution as a whole to support undergraduates who needed this type of assistance stood out.

These findings were a warning about the need that the right to student assistance be broadly disseminated among undergraduates and professors and that proceedings be systematized in the HEI. In addition, they demonstrated the importance of properly recognizing the demands of students who request assistance by sick leave and indicated the need for interventions oriented toward their needs, so there are contributions to their health and well-being.

The main limitation of the present study was the fact that analysis of case files of student

assistance requests related to sick leave showed lack of data about the reason for the request in many cases, since information was incomplete or the files were not available for viewing. Another issue was the low number of undergraduates who answered the online questionnaire. A third point to be stressed was that the specific characteristics of the studied group, which was part of a reality that can differ from others, hinders generalization of results. Other research possibilities have to be worked out to expand the discussion of weaknesses regarding student assistance in universities.

The results indicated the need for greater investments in the implementation of student assistance institutional policies and practices that take into account different aspects of undergraduates' lives, especially health, with guidance on the teaching-learning process and psychopedagogical assistance in cases of sick leave.

ASSISTÊNCIA ESTUDANTIL A UNIVERSITÁRIOS EM LICENÇA MÉDICA: UM ESTUDO DE CASO

RESUMO

Objetivo: compreender como ocorre o processo de assistência estudantil a universitários em licença médica. **Método:** estudo de caso, exploratório, descritivo, de abordagem qualitativa, realizado entre agosto de 2018 e maio de 2019, em uma universidade pública localizada no sudeste brasileiro. Analisaram-se 46 processos abertos por estudantes; obtiveram-se 15 depoimentos de coordenadores de cursos, professores, estudantes e profissionais da Pró-Reitoria de Assistência Estudantil, além de 12 respostas a um questionário *on-line* preenchido pelos discentes. Utilizou-se da Análise de Conteúdo de Bardin para o tratamento dos dados. **Resultados:** há demora na tramitação dos processos, diferenças de conduta no gerenciamento dos casos, falta de credibilidade na condição de saúde do discente e de flexibilização do conteúdo, além de pouco conhecimento sobre o direito à assistência estudantil em situações de licença médica. Faz-se necessária maior divulgação desse direito e sistematização dos trâmites na instituição. **Considerações finais:** diante das dificuldades apontadas e das demandas apresentadas, explicita-se a necessidade de maior investimento na assistência estudantil que considere os diversos aspectos da vida dos estudantes, em especial a saúde, com orientação no processo ensino-aprendizagem e acompanhamento psicopedagógico nos casos de licença médica.

Palavras-chave: Educação superior. Saúde do estudante. Licença médica. Relatos de casos.

ASISTENCIA ESTUDIANTIL A UNIVERSITARIOS EN LICENCIA MÉDICA: UN CASO DE ESTUDIO

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comprender cómo ocurre el proceso de asistencia estudiantil a universitarios en licencia médica. **Método:** estudio de caso, exploratorio, descriptivo, de abordaje cualitativo, realizado entre agosto de 2018 y mayo de 2019, en una universidad pública ubicada en el sudeste brasileño. Se analizaron 46 procesos abiertos por estudiantes; se obtuvieron 15 relatos de coordinadores de cursos, profesores, estudiantes y profesionales de la Prorectoría de Asistencia Estudiantil, además de 12 respuestas a un cuestionario *online* rellenado por los estudiantes. Se utilizó el Análisis de Contenido de Bardin para el tratamiento de los datos. **Resultados:** hay demora en la tramitación de los procesos, diferencias de conducta en la gestión de los casos, falta de credibilidad en la condición de salud del discente y de flexibilización del contenido, además de poco conocimiento sobre el derecho a la asistencia estudiantil en situaciones de licencia médica. Se hace necesaria mayor divulgación de ese derecho y sistematización de los trámites en la institución. **Consideraciones finales:** ante las dificultades señaladas y las demandas presentadas, se explicita la necesidad de mayor inversión en la asistencia estudiantil que considere los diversos aspectos de la vida de los

estudantes, en especial la salud, con orientación en el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje y acompañamiento psicopedagógico en los casos de licencia médica.

Palabras clave: Educación superior. Salud del estudiante. Licencia médica. Informes de casos.

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