

Enhancing Student Social Well-Being at University Campuses

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Introduction & Need/Connection to the Literature

Student connection on campus is a leading concern of universities across the world as society makes post-COVID19 adjustments. Relationships among teachers and students are important (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Harrill et al., 2015; Willis, 2024), and first-generation and underrepresented minority students experience limited opportunities for academic and social integration (Garcia-Murillo et al., 2023; McKay & Estrella, 2008). Relationships among faculty and students can be impacted by post-pandemic effects (Farfán-Latorre et al., 2023; Lowe, 2023), artificial intelligence (Zhao et al., 2024), differences in technology proficiencies (Creighton, 2018), larger class sizes (Rusticus et al., 2023), work-life stress (Sprung & Rogers, 2021), mental health challenges (Salimi et al., 2023), and navigating the academic landscape (Gale & Parker, 2014). Students' sense of belonging, social connections, emotional and mental health, academic success, and career readiness can be further impacted by these challenges (Hall Lang et al., 2023; McFadden, 2016). Culturally responsive, learner-centered teaching and mentoring focuses on understanding students' knowledge, experiences, and funds of knowledge, which helps build and strengthen relationships among students and faculty that support student development and life-long learning (Doyle, 2023; Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018). Students are more motivated and have higher academic self-efficacy if faculty are approachable, respectful, and accessible outside of class (Komarraju et al., 2010). This abstract discusses four different approaches to supporting student connections as a way to enhance student well-being on campuses.

Implementation of Strategy

The purpose of this abstract is to share and discuss four different approaches to develop and enhance students' social well-being across three higher education institutions. Four professors described strategies used to involve students on campus and address social well-being among their students in undergraduate and graduate programs.

Connection through Professional Development: The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a reliance on virtual tools to help maintain a level of connectedness in academic settings. Online class options were exacerbated, and many hybrid-based courses were offered to emulate traditional educational settings. While this approach to education was once a necessity and a matter of safety, the reliance on this educational modality may have created a wedge in the initial goal to keep people connected. As a result, student socialization and professional development are in jeopardy. To combat this, we implemented a professional development requirement in each upper-division major course. Since professional development is essential to growing within prospective careers, students must complete a series of external opportunities that provide insight to their aspirations. These activities can include, workshops, certifications, lectures, or volunteer experience. For each activity, students must also provide a reflection. We have discovered that students are being exposed to wider aspects of our discipline and discovering interdisciplinary opportunities in other fields. Moreover, through student reflections, we find that some professional development opportunities are helping students re-chart their professional aspirations due to new exposure. Additionally, these opportunities have expanded the networks of our students and allowed them to build relationships with not only prospective employers but also other peers who have similar professional interests.

Developing Connection in the Classroom: Enhancing student well-being through classroom instruction is critical to the holistic success of learners. Three strategies for enhancing student well-being through classroom instruction are explored within this section. Importantly, each of these strategies exist on a continuum of possible implementation based on class size, class delivery system, instructor workload, and other factors. First, postsecondary instructors are encouraged to

learn about the students within their classroom, including their name, preferred pronouns, funds of knowledge, and personal interests. Second, instructors should utilize information gleaned from strategy one to personalize learning experiences to honor the identities, backgrounds, and interests of learners. Third, instructors should provide challenging group activities for students within the classroom. Preparation for these group-based activities should include brief instruction on the expected norms of working in groups as well as construction of teams informed by the first strategy (e.g., creating groups that intentionally bring together diverse personal interests). Additional strategies for increasing student well-being through classroom instruction will be identified via audience insights.

Supporting Connection through Developing Physical Spaces: Rhodes (1961) defines the four “P’s” of creativity as Product, Person, Process, and Press. Press is defined as the environment a creative person is in. If the environment is supportive, then a person can be creative, but an unsupportive environment can drain creative energy. This project used money earmarked for student support that was a remnant at the end of the fiscal year. Faculty had been discussing creating a “chill space” for students for several months, so it was easy to earmark this excess toward furnishing a space to enhance student creativity and wellbeing. Consideration was made to address each of our senses; sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. The room is kept at low light and soft light lamps were purchased to replace fluorescent lighting. A white-noise maker, throw rugs, a couch and tall bistro tables were included. Some faux plants gave the room low maintenance greenery, while throw pillows made the space homey. In addition, snacks were purchased throughout the year, and a water dispenser was placed in a corner. Students used the space every day to join class via zoom, discuss projects, or putting puzzles together. All in all, it was a space that could just be a place to connect with themselves and other students.

Restarting Connections through Student Organization Involvement: Student clubs can help students develop leadership skills, networking, social connections, professional skills, and personal growth (Astin, 1993; Foubert et al., 2006). In this example, graduate students chartered a new student organization, elected four officers, and then operationalized their new organization. The officer responsibilities were organized into four responsibilities: (1) leadership and communication; (2) professional development seminars; (3) advocacy; and, (4) social activities. Officers met with a faculty advisor on a monthly basis to plan activities that were aligned with their responsibilities. Graduate students participated in the Farm Progress Show, toured a seed corn processing facility, axe throwing, shooting targets, and monthly hybrid seminars (face-to-face and virtual). Graduate students brainstormed topics for their monthly seminars and then invited peers and faculty to do 20-minute presentations (2 topics per seminar). Students shared they had autonomy and agency, learned more about current topics and trends in agriculture, education, and communication; built social and cultural capital among each other; improved their communication and leadership skills; and were able to get to know each other professionally and personally as well as creating positive memories. These outcomes helped them navigate the challenges of being a student, especially for new students who moved to a new country, state, community, and university.

Implication and Advice

Collaboratively reflecting and co-authoring this abstract helped faculty reflect critically on their practice, consider different disciplinary perspectives, and identify strategies they could potentially use to develop and enhance student social well-being. Faculty can adapt strategies from these four examples to enhance student social well-being across various disciplines, contexts, and institutions.

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