

Strategies to Enhance Student Health and Well-Being Through Learner-Centered Pedagogy

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Introduction & Need for Strategy

Higher education has increasingly recognized student well-being (SWB) beyond mental health to encompass physical, psychological, and social dimensions of human life (Calvo, 2022; Khatri et al., 2024; Wentzel, 2024). To provide lasting positive impacts for learning, institutions must provide SWB resources, especially for women and first-generation college students (Kroshus et al., 2021; Li, 2025). We leverage prioritizing SWB through a learner-centered approach to optimize learning, foster community, and achieve positive outcomes for all learners. This abstract leverages diverse faculty and student perspectives to generate evidence-based strategies focused on enhancing SWB through learner-centered pedagogy. The final output being a practical framework based on research and lived teaching experiences. We address a gap between demand for accessible services and available support, calling for action from institutional leaders.

Background and Connection to Literature

The "wellbeing turn" in learner-centered teaching represents a fundamental shift where student well-being (SWB) becomes a core objective, aiming to enhance engagement and resilience through systemic changes. This approach has several key features. It involves a holistic focus on social-emotional learning (SEL), mindfulness, and positive psychology to help students manage stress (Jelicic et al., 2020; Kiptiony, 2024; Ştefan, 2024; Turner & Thielking, 2019). It also incorporates core attributes such as student autonomy and collaboration to support both academic and personal well-being (Kloppers et al., 2022; Oyelana et al., 2021; Ştefan, 2024). Additionally, it recognizes the strong link between teacher well-being and student outcomes, which encourages more empathetic teaching practices (Alqahtani et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2019; Turner & Thielking, 2019). Effective practices to support these goals include mindfulness, self-regulation, positive teacher-student relationships, and integrating the arts into education (Burke et al., 2024; Jelicic et al., 2020; Kiptiony, 2024; Kloppers et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2019; Ştefan, 2024). However, while academic achievement remains crucial, there are significant institutional barriers to implementing these strategies, such as inadequate teacher training and unsustainable approaches (Kiptiony, 2024). Because of these challenges, there is a clear need for more research on how to apply well-being strategies effectively in diverse educational settings (Kiptiony, 2024). Our work directly addresses this gap by providing concrete, adaptable strategies and practical insights for creating supportive learning environments that nurture both academic and personal growth.

How it Works & Implementation of Strategy

Our presentation details specific, proactive learner-centered strategies to foster student well-being and enhance learning. These include:

- **Intentional Community Building:** Prioritizing psychological safety and connection, as the authors state, "To be genuinely learner-centered, consideration of student wellbeing must be a priority," and "I had to resist the urge to jump into content before community and psychological safety were established." This builds peer support and leadership for

preventive mental health safety nets. For example, the first week of class is spent building the class community. Several icebreakers, community-building exercises, and introduction activities are embedded within the class lecture.

- **Integrated Mental Health Resources:** Incorporating direct well-being discussions and sharing resources like annual "Thrive" seminars, which connect students with mental health professionals and wellness experts. This emphasizes faculty's role as first responders to student mental health issues. The Wellness Counselor also serves as a guest lecturer for specific class lectures.
- **Trauma-Informed Content:** Proactively alerting students to potentially triggering material and offering flexible participation alternatives. As one author notes, "I would also alert students that the upcoming lecture could potentially be triggering and give them opportunities to pass during discussions." This highlights integrating mental health aspects into faculty instructional design training.
- **Empathy in Course Policy Making:** Implementing flexible deadlines and assignment accommodations to reduce stress. An author states, "We also build empathy into our syllabus by giving students an opportunity to submit late assignments within an agreed-upon time frame." Course policies should also include mental health service statements, proactively indicating instructor sensitivity.
- **Instructor Vulnerability & Transparency:** Leveraging personal experiences and authentic communication to build trust. One author emphasizes this as "one of the most impactful things my teachers have done," making students feel comfortable addressing health and well-being issues, fostering an inclusive classroom. These methods were integrated into various courses, demonstrating adaptability.

Key Barriers

Adopting learner-centered pedagogy integrating well-being faces significant systemic, institutional, and cultural barriers. These include insufficient teacher training and inconsistent professional development, hindering traditional approach shifts (Kiptiony, 2024). Standardized testing and policy misalignment create pressure, undermining well-being initiatives (Kiptiony, 2024). Limited access to materials, infrastructure, and funding also restricts implementation. Resistance to change from educators and institutions, rooted in traditional norms, can impede adoption, as socio-cultural expectations may not prioritize student autonomy or well-being. Furthermore, in English Medium Instruction (EMI) settings, language barriers, inadequate English proficiency, and communication challenges complicate adoption.

Impact, Future Directions, and Advice to Others

These strategies positively impact student well-being and academic outcomes, evidenced by high university-administered course evaluations (averaging 4.0/5) and enhanced engagement in psychologically safe environments. By integrating well-being with academics, our approach fosters a culture of care, improving student retention, performance, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Future plans involve scaling these strategies and advocating for increased institutional mental health resources. Our presentation will offer practical advice on intentionality, empathy, and navigating systemic barriers, empowering attendees to cultivate supportive, learner-centered classrooms. Specifically, we will share icebreakers examples that are intentionally designed to create a classroom community. Additionally, we will provide

examples of late policies and semester check-ins used to build empathy. We will share lessons from personal experiences and discuss recommendations for integrating socio-emotional learning and data-driven strategies. Futuristically, the vision for student well-being is an integrated institution-community framework for early identification, mitigation, and intervention.

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