WELLNESS IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Toolkit

By taking small actions to support students' wellbeing and personal development, faculty can have a profound impact on students' ability to learn and succeed academically. Taking the time to understand and build your skills to promote wellness will make you a more effective educator. To get you started integrating wellness into your virtual classroom we have created the following categories of actionable strategies that have been identified as promising practices to support student wellness and learning. While some of these strategies are most easily implemented in synchronous classes, many will work for asynchronous classes as well.

This Tool Kit is an adaption of the Simon Fraser University's [Well-Being in Learning Environments](#) program & Sacramento State's [Wellness in the Virtual Classroom Toolkit](#) developed by Reva Wittenberg, Associate Director of Campus Wellness. Thank you to Reva for her generosity in sharing her resources and expertise. Additional work & expertise in the development of this tool kit was provided by Karen Boyce (Director of Health Promotion & Wellness, San Francisco State), Jul Custodio (Mental Health Educator, San Francisco State), Stephanie Galia (Director of Well-Being & Health Promotion, San Diego State), Kenya Rampersant (Sr. Coordinator for Health Promotion, CalPoly Pomona), & Megan Rowe (Health Education Coordinator, Stanislaus State).

Why is Wellness so Important to the Virtual Classroom

A growing body of evidence related to worksite wellness and education (both K-12 and higher education) demonstrates the connection between creating environments that enhance wellbeing and enhanced productivity, learning, satisfaction, engagement, and retention. [Simon Fraser University, 2019. Rationale for well-being in learning environments]. At Stanislaus State, students reported Stress (35%), Anxiety (25%) and Sleep Difficulties (23%) as top three issues that negatively impacted their academics in the 2018 National College Health Assessment.

The switch to virtual instruction was a massive trauma and disruption to student's academic experience, as it was for faculty, staff and administrators. The prolonged and stressful nature of our current reality of a global pandemic, economic hardship, and an unknown future affects student's ability to learn and achieve. Integrating wellness into your virtual classroom is more important now than it has ever been. While the virtual classroom brings unique challenges, it also brings new tools and opportunities.

Actionable Strategies

I. Self-Care

Taking care of your own well-being will allow you to be more present with your students. [**Article: Why taking care of your own wellbeing benefits others**] Especially during this stressful and constantly changing environment, practicing effective self-care is essential. Sharing this skill with students will also bolster their academic success and skills in coping with the challenges of the virtual classroom.

Strategies:

- Move. Nourish. Connect. Reduce stress.
  - **Move:** Our bodies need activity, either at the gym (when and where possible), in your neighborhood or in your living room. It's not just about "staying in shape." Movement benefits our immunity and mental health. Incorporate at least 10-minute bouts of exercise or movement into your daily routine.
  - **Nourish:** Nourishment is not banning small treats that bring you joy, but rather, setting up a daily structure that fills you with nourishing, healthy foods.
  - **Connect:** We are social beings. We need to feel connected, seen, heard and understood by other humans. Even though we can't physically go to coffee or out to lunch with a friend right now, there's plenty of ways to connect to others. Reach out – call a friend or family member that you haven't spoken with in a while. They're probably craving connection, too.
  - **Reduce stress**: During the pandemic, we have been busy preparing, protecting, adjusting, coping, responding, etc. We need more time to simply BE. This is about pausing long enough to let your nervous system come back to baseline after prolonged activation. Try meditation or guided relaxation exercises.
- If struggling with negative self-talk, try a little self-compassion. With self-compassion, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we'd give to a good friend experiencing the same situation/stressor. Visit www.self-compassion.org for a variety of guided meditations and exercises.

- Attend to your own health. Don't let doctors or mental health appointments get put on the back burner. Increased opportunities for Telehealth appointments now makes taking care of your own health often easier and faster.
- Create check-in questions within your classes where you and your students share your planned self-care activity for the week and then check back the following week to see how it went.
- Visit the Greater Good Science Center's website (https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/) for more ideas on how to incorporate well-being practices into your daily life.

II. Positive Classroom Culture

A positive, welcoming classroom environment can support both student and faculty wellbeing. Inspiration, open-mindedness, and connection can help create a culture of positivity.

Strategies:

- Take time to introduce yourself during your first class and learn a little bit about your students' needs [Get to Know Your Prof]
- Develop a teaching philosophy and share it with your students [Developing a Teaching Philosophy]
- Create and keep structure in the virtual classroom by working collaboratively with students to create class guidelines. In order to create a positive learning environment, ask students what they need in order to feel safe and respected.
- Use a class check-in activity to connect with students. For example, ask students to write 1 – 2 words about how they're feeling that day in the chat box.
- Provide an inspiring or funny quote within your slides to lighten the mood [Sample inspirational slides]
- Offer breaks in class where students can take a breather, or facilitate a quick stretch break [Deskercise]
- Use active learning techniques to create an engaging and dynamic learning environment [Ohio State University] [Northwestern University]
- Encourage discussion through using small breakout groups in Zoom.
- Acknowledge that virtual instruction can be intimidating, stressful or isolating for students within your course syllabus.
- Share a bit about yourself, your career path or the setbacks you have overcome. Include information on your challenges and successes in the transition to virtual learning or sheltering-in-place.
- Allow students space to be wrong and encourage alternate viewpoints.
- Be intentional about setting a caring tone throughout the semester.

III. Personal Development & Social Emotional Learning

Creating opportunities for personal growth in course design can help increase students' skills, resilience, and career-readiness.

Strategies:

- Use journaling or other reflective activities to encourage personal growth

- Offer mindfulness or other skill building activities during class breaks or as part of the course [UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center]
- Encourage students to connect with campus departments or student organizations that are offering online connection/learning opportunities, including Psychological Counseling Services, Basic Needs Initiatives, Health Education & Promotion, Campus Recreation, ASI & SC, the Warrior Cross Cultural Center, Student Leadership & Development Office, the Learning Commons, Academic Success Center, Career & Professional Development Services, and the Library
- Find opportunities for students to explore their life and career goals. Connect these activities to course instruction when and where possible.
- Consider what skills students will need to succeed in life and in their careers and try to find ways to foster these in class (for example: teamwork, communication, problem solving, empathy, initiative).
- Encourage students to be more self-aware. If students are aware of their own emotions and the behaviors they trigger, they can begin to manage these emotions and behaviors.
  - Sample activity: Recognize emotions and name them
    - What are you feeling right now?
    - In a stressful situation, what emotions typically arise?
    - How would you like to respond to stressful situations in the future?
    - In the future, when a stressful situation arises, can you stop to pause, and reconsider your response?
- Ask students to highlight a recent positive experience. Some ideas include:
  - Next time students have a positive experience, encourage them to take the time to really enjoy it.
  - Create a "bliss list" of all things that make them happy. Encourage students to experience as many of them as possible in the near future.
  - Write down three good things that happen every day. This will help students rewire their brain to pay more attention to the good things in life.

IV. Flexibility

The ability to have some flexibility and control in their learning experiences helps students to feel empowered and supported, thus enhancing their wellbeing.

Strategies:
- Offer students the option to choose their "best two out of three" for assignments or quizzes.
- Offer students choice in assignments and opportunities to set their own deadlines or percentage of final grade for assignments [Deadline/Grade Worksheet]
- Offer course content in a variety of methods as people learn differently (lecture, web, text, audio, recordings, etc.).
- Update lectures to include more engagement with students through discussion, reflections, presentations, activities, etc.
- Seek feedback from students throughout the semester. This could be done through

Zoom polls or set up in Qualtrics. [Comment Card Example]
- Use interactive tools like Zoom polls or Kahoot to promote class input and participation.
- In your syllabus, offer a variety of ways for students to contact you with questions or concerns.
- Consider providing students with lecture notes or power point slides ahead of class, and providing lecture recordings (particularly helpful for ESL students whereby they have more opportunities to work through the rate of speech during lectures).
- Consider using free or low-cost education resources on Affordable Learning Solutions.
- Give options of timed exam, a "take home" exam or research paper.
- Allow students to retake tests.

V. Social Connection

Social connection fosters student resilience. Facilitating interaction in and out of class can help create a sense of community and help students build social networks.

Strategies:
- Have students introduce themselves during the first class or use a social connectedness start-up activity [Icebreakers]
- Facilitate a check in activity that allows them to get to know each other. Use digital tools like Zoom Emoji, Live word clouds, Zoom polls.
- Do brief Zoom breakout rooms at beginning or end of class where they get to socialize based on a check in question or prompt.
- Leave the Zoom on for 5-10 minutes at the end of class to allow them to socialize, just as they would in a real classroom or hallway.
- Encourage students to study with classmates virtually or assign small study groups.
- Encourage classmates to check in with each other if they miss a study session or lecture.
- Make it clear that the quality of teamwork in group assignments is important by including marks for the group process in grading rubrics.
- Design lecture assignments that require students to collectively work on study questions and participate in small group discussions.

VI. Promote Resilience

Resilience is the ability to recover from a crisis or difficult time. It is about finding choices and skills in coming back from traumatic events. Providing strength-based activities in class is a way of building and sharing these skills.

Strategies:
- Do sharing prompts or check-ins where students name a:
  - favorite comfort food when they are stressed
  - favorite healthy activity they do when they are stressed, anxious, or sad
  - favorite song they listen to when they feel stuck or are having a hard time
- Have them reflect on a positive friend and share what they appreciate about that

person.
- Provide strength-based activities where students have to list all the things they are good at, or resources they have for support when things get tough.
- Ask students about how they have overcome a difficult situation in the past.

VII.   Celebrate Diversity & Support Inclusivity

An inclusive learning environment demonstrates an intentional consideration for all students and can enhance wellbeing.

Strategies:
- Create class guidelines as a group to respect differences and create a safe place for discussion. You can develop this by getting student feedback on what would help them to feel safe in the classroom, and/or contributing ideas such as these classroom guidelines.
- Accommodate different learning styles by providing a variety of ways students can engage and participate in the lecture and learning, such as discussion boards, written reflections, oral presentations, among others.
- Use activities and practices in class to help build your and your students' intercultural competence.
- Use inclusive language and gender neutral pronouns.
- Offer a values clarification exercise [Simon Fraser University]
- Encourage students to speak to you about any accessibility concerns they may have. Disability Resource Services can provide consultation and resources if needed.
- Make expectations clear and remind students what resources are available to them.
- Provide visual support with instruction (text and/or graphic).
- Pause and summarize or ask students to summarize in the chat to make sure they understand course content ("I want you to summarize my example and add another" or "take a minute to prepare a question about this").
- Incorporate principles of Universal Design for Learning to help accommodate diverse learners [udlcenter.org].
- Break final paper into a series of smaller assignments.

VIII.   Optimal Challenge

Being challenged and having sufficient resources to meet that challenge, creates an environment where students perform and feel their best.

Strategies:
- Consider the timing of exams and assignments to alleviate undue stress
- Provide feedback on each stage of assignments and help students progress to the next stage of larger projects.
- Avoid very heavily weighted components, such as an exam worth 50% of the final grade.
- Recognize that more tasks do not always equate to more learning. Select activities that strategically reinforce crucial content.

- Set clear course goals, and ensure assignments and expectations are clear from the start.
- Provide activities where students design mock test/study questions.
- Give specific, targeted, and timely feedback about strengths and weaknesses.
- Publish grading rubrics in advance [Grading Rubric Examples].

IX. Civic Engagement and Real-Life Learning

Having the opportunity to contribute to real-life settings through their coursework helps students build their personal skills and confidence, supporting their intellectual and emotional wellness.

Strategies:
- Lead discussions or activities that help students develop a sense of civic responsibility.
- Recognize that Universities play a role in developing the leaders of tomorrow and encourage students to explore their own values and goals.
- Utilize examples from the real world in class (news clips, career advice, guest speakers from the workforce students hope to enter, etc.).
- Bring in guest speakers or program alumni who can help relate the course material to career development, real life issues, and work skills.
- Create assignments in which the results can be utilized by a community group or campus initiative.
- Explore online experiential learning opportunities connecting to your learning outcomes whenever possible. Engage students in real world application of course topics by getting students to think about how the course material applies to issues in the news.

X. Be Supportive

Supportive Faculty are key in helping students feel connected to the University. Setting a caring tone can go a long way in helping students feel like they belong.

Strategies:
- Check in with students regularly.
- Ask students to use one word to summarize how they are feeling.
- Whenever possible, let students know you care about them and their success.
- Demystify your role by sharing an anecdote, joke, or sharing something about yourself.
- Be learner-centered: focus on the learner (student) experience.
- Encourage students to select a work station/study spot with natural light, good air circulation, comfortable furniture and exposure to natural elements (all of these have been linked to a positive mood).
- Provide constructive feedback and outline specific actions students can take to improve assignments.
- Consider the "whole student" and the pressures and challenges the students may face outside of your class.

- Provide students with multiple ways to get in touch with you.
- If possible, check in with students individually.

XI. Promote Services and Supports

The classroom provides an important venue for faculty to connect students to resources that can support their wellbeing, resilience, and effective learning.

Strategies:

- Provide health tips or health resources in class or during breaks by adding a slide into your class lecture that provides information during breaks. Possible slides include:
    - The importance of sleep
    - Stress management tips
    - Tips for healthy eating
    - The importance of taking physical activity breaks
    - Campus health resources
- Use mindfulness or relaxation recordings for a break [UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center].
- Link students to on campus resources by inviting speakers from campus wellness and success from this departments such as the Student Health Center, Psychological Counseling Services, Disability Resource Services, Basic Needs Initiatives, Campus Recreation, Health Education & Promotion, ASI & SC, the Warrior Cross Cultural Center, Student Leadership & Development Office, the Learning Commons, Academic Success Center, Career & Professional Development Services, and the Library
- Provide extra credit or make up points to students who attend a virtual health promotion, wellness, or recreation event.
- Students cannot concentrate if they're hungry, and close to half of Stan State students experience some level of food insecurity. Link students to campus resources for food, housing, and financial assistance via Basic Needs
- Familiarize yourself with the various student support services and co-curricular learning supports across campus.
- Invite guest speakers from various campus services to present on their services
- Familiarize yourself with the Red Folder for information on supporting students in distress (installed on your desktop, available online, and available for mobile devices on Google Play or App Store).
- Report red flag signs for a student in distress to StanCares
- Include information about campus support services in your syllabus that encourages help-seeking for students who are struggling. Sample language might include:

    "College students often experience a range of challenges that interfere with learning, such as stress, life events, juggling responsibilities, economic challenges, relationship concerns, alcohol misuse, or feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, or depression. Several Stan State resources are still available virtually during the pandemic, including Psychological Counseling Services and the Student Health Center."

Becoming a Wellness Advocate

The final stage of mastering a health skill is to become an advocate in your community. You can do this at Stanislaus State in many ways with a small or large commitment. If you are ready to take the next step to promote health outside of your classroom here are some ideas:

- Share this tool kit and strategies that have worked for you with your peers, department, or college
- Practice the strategies in this tool kit in your department virtual meetings.
- Create opportunities for faculty within your department to share their research or work with a health or wellness theme or application
- Do an assessment of department/college practices or policies to see how they can be improved to promote wellness or health.
- Get involved in campus groups or committees that promote health and wellness, campus sustainability, etc. or become an advisor to a virtual student-run group.

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