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In her Synaptic Transmission course, Kathy Maguire-Zeiss (neuroscience) examines the effect of sleep deprivation on the brain, body, and resulting functioning.

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Well-being in the Curriculum

What Faculty Can Do to Address the Mental Health of Our Students

By Laura D. Valtin,
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David Ebenbach

Today's college students are facing mental health challenges at an alarming rate. According to the American College Health Association's 2017 National College Health Assessment, over half of all college students reported feeling overwhelming anxiety in the past 12 months. Nearly 40 percent of college students reported feeling "so depressed it was difficult to function," over 60 percent reported feeling "very lonely," and 87 percent felt "overwhelmed." It's clear that our college students are struggling. What can educators do to help?

This question has particular relevance for instructors at Jesuit colleges and universi-

ties, where we strive for *cura personalis* in our interactions with students. However, the idea of translating this to the classroom – giving meaningful attention to the wide range of academic, social, physical, and mental health needs of our students – can be daunting. One way to do it is to bring college mental health and well-being topics into the classroom and make them part of the open and serious academic conversations we have with students. Another way is to design our courses so that they integrate the various strands of students' disparate lives – weaving together their social and emotional lives with their

academic and cognitive lives. And most important, we can help students to develop a sense of belonging on our campuses, foster meaningful relationships, and create connections to people within our campus community who can help them not only on their academic path but also on their life journey.

The Engelhard Project: An Experiment in Curriculum Infusion

In 2005, a group of Georgetown faculty, teaching and learning center staff, and counseling and student services professionals began to experiment with these kinds of conversations in the classroom, with the aim of destigmatizing mental health and other stressors, engaging students more deeply in their learning, and nurturing feelings of belonging and meaningful connections. Initially supported by the Bringing Theory to Practice Project, this effort is known today as the Engelhard Project for Connecting Life and Learning. The project uses a “curriculum infusion” approach, in which faculty integrate topics of mental health and well-being into their courses.

As part of the project, faculty select a specific mental health topic as the focal point of their commitment to creating space in the classroom for the “real world.” A sampling of such topics from past courses includes anxiety, depression, eating disorders, flourishing, adjusting to college, and coping with stress. The opportunities to make connections between these topics and course content are endless and can be found in unexpected places. For example, over his years of involvement with the project, Jim Sandefur (mathematics) has used math models to illustrate the effects on the human body of drug, alcohol, and substance use in his Introduction to Math Modeling course. In her Synaptic Transmission course, Kathy Maguire-Zeiss (neuroscience) examines the effect of sleep deprivation on the brain, body, and resulting functioning. These illustrations teach students about the scientific effect of human behaviors and also stimulate conversations about healthy choices and how to live a flourishing life.



The Engelhard Project: Curriculum Infusion Model

Faculty link academic course content to a selected well-being topic through the following elements:

- Readings & Discussions
- Campus Resource Professional Visit
- Student Written Reflections

After faculty determine a mental health or well-being topic for their course, they incorporate three engagement components into their teaching: relevant readings, discussion with a campus resource professional, and student written reflections.

Faculty select class readings that illustrate and support the connection between the chosen topic, the course’s academic content, and students’ own lives. Alan Mitchell (theology) teaches Introduction to Biblical Literature with a focus on friendship and health relationships and assigns relevant biblical texts from the New Testament (specifically from Luke and Acts of the Apostles) that demonstrate the richness of friendship traditions.

To enhance the discussion of the readings and to truly bring campus life, national data, and relevant college student issues into the classroom, the faculty partner with a campus resource professional for a classroom visit and discussion – for example, a staff member from Counseling & Psychiatric Services, Health Education Services, or Campus Ministry. This visit enables a conversation with a campus expert who shares anecdotes, data, and ideas on “what to do” for oneself and others. This takes some of the burden off of the faculty member and also exposes students to the available campus resources. Putting a face and a name to the people who make up campus resources – and the campus safety net for students – can make the challenging step of reaching

out for help a little bit easier. And sometimes that little bit is all that's needed for students to seek help for themselves or for friends.

The final component of the Engelhard curriculum infusion model is a written student reflection. An essential part of Ignatian pedagogy, reflection on one's observations, emotions, and experiences, helps to process learning by noting connections, giving voice to revelations, and imagining future selves. Semester after semester, students comment that their Engelhard course – and especially the required reflection – “made me stop to think” or “gave me needed space to reflect on my own well-being that I otherwise would not have had.”

Impact on Students

A common sentiment among students where faculty have employed this curriculum infusion model is that “it was refreshing to take a class where I felt like the professor cared about my well-being.” The students' descriptions of the Engelhard classroom environments are inspiring. Says one student, “walking into class, I felt like I was entering a tight-knit community with a professor who cared about me and everyone else in the class, as an individual person.” Heidi Elmendorf (biology) offers her 250-person Foundations in Biology course as an Engelhard course and assigns students a project in which they investigate mental illness. Alongside this work, and only after a sense of community has been built in the class, Elmendorf shares her own personal experiences with depression. In her words, it is “endlessly surprising how much it matters to students and how much they want to take us up on the opportunity to connect on a personal level” – connections between the ideas and students' lives and between students and professor.

These emotional connections also develop among the students themselves. Discussing his Engelhard course, a student reflected, “I am a senior, and this is the first time that a professor has encouraged so much community that I have known the name of everyone in class.”

Another vivid student reflection:

I felt the ice melting between each person in the room, and I realized that this was actually

the first and only class where I really enjoyed seeing each face that was in the classroom. I felt happy when somebody had something fun or good to share, and I felt sad and sympathetic when somebody was going through a hard time. Until I experienced it this semester, I [never] realized how difficult it actually is to have these kinds of experiences in classrooms... I feel like the Engelhard Project really allowed me to see Georgetown in a new light. People who I thought I would never share my story with, let alone simply talk to, became people who cared for me.”

Our students bring their whole selves – with their problems and their struggles – to our campuses, and they carry their full humanity into our classrooms. Our students' feelings of overwhelming anxiety, loneliness, and depression cannot be ignored. Here at Georgetown, we have seen the benefits of an intentional shift in many classrooms to acknowledge and engage the student's whole self – including areas of mental health and well-being – and to broaden the academic conversation to include the whole person. This shift creates a tremendous opportunity for students to connect their lives with their academic learning and to establish truly meaningful relationships that can support them throughout their college experience and hopefully beyond. Relationships with fellow students, campus resource professionals, and faculty members all matter to strengthening one's sense of belonging, to supporting one's learning, and to nurturing one's mental health. Students – and faculty – are hungry for the opportunity to belong, to create community, to relate. With a little focused intention, we can satisfy this hunger.

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