

Subtheme 2: Centering Wellness in Teaching and Learning

How can program and curricular strategies promote positive mental health in the classroom?

The breakout sessions around “Centering Wellness in Teaching and Learning” were facilitated by Dr. Carmen Arth and Andrea Chute. Dr. Carmen Arth is an assistant professor in psychology at Concordia University of Edmonton and works in private practice as a Narrative Therapist. Andrea Chute is a nurse and teaches in the Faculty of Nursing at MacEwan University. She shared about the Pets Assisting with Student Success (PAWSS) program in which dogs are allowed into the classroom to support student wellness.

Celebrating and Learning from Successes

- PAWSS is in their third year and seeks to facilitate community connections, enhance student wellbeing, reduce stress, and help students enjoy the learning environment. Students have shared that PAWSS has reduced their stress, made the classroom environment more friendly, and facilitated more meaningful learning experiences.
- Centering wellness includes inclusion and diversity, which requires recognizing the diversity of the classroom and working to create an explicitly and implicitly inclusive environment. Some strategies include explicitly acknowledging bias (e.g. this study did not consider non-binary identities), posting a statement of equity and respect at the start of class, and keeping trauma informed practices in the classroom.
- Educators were encouraged to identify their own relationship to wellness and how this may be transmitted to their students as a “hidden curriculum.” Some strategies for embedding wellness include highlighting resources and growth-oriented practices (e.g. students write about resiliency instead of pathology) and share wellness events happening on your campus with the class
- Attendees identified strategies that have helped reduce stress and facilitate learning on their campuses, including integrating students into programming to allow for peer support (e.g. mentors for students on academic probation) and hosting stress-free activity days (e.g. massages, pet therapy, oxygen therapy, coloring, etc.)

Acknowledging Challenges

- Some educators may think that wellness is outside of their content area. In this session, it was discussed that wellness can still be centered because it is about *process* (i.e. the teaching and learning environment, how they treat people) as well as wellness.
- In terms of PAWSS, bringing the dog in can extra toll on the instructor or there may be students who are uncomfortable around dogs. There may also be concerns about how dogs in the classroom might negatively impact students' focus. This is why it's important to have the research to support that it does make a difference (evaluate your program).

Emerging Opportunities and Next Steps

- For educators, consider how you're already teaching on wellness through the “hidden curriculum” (e.g. beliefs, values, and norms being transmitted). Using the examples above and/or your own ideas, look for ways to embed wellness, inclusion, and diversity.
- Harness the Healthy Campus Alberta Community of Practice/Community Hub for ongoing conversation and to leverage opportunities for cross-campus professional development opportunities
- [Explore the PAWSS program](#)