Peer-Led Team Learning
Leader Training

Reflections on Balance: Promoting Student Social and Emotional Well-being

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Incumbent upon educators is the need to promote the social and emotional well-being of their students with as imperative an intention as academic goals are encouraged. As the educational coordinator for an educational intervention which employs aspects of the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) approach to peer learning, it has become clearer and clearer to me the need to support students’ social and emotional health while providing very important supports toward their academic achievement.

Trained as a counseling psychologist and with research interests in the areas of educational and health intervention development, implementation and evaluation, I have been particularly interested in the ways that the students participating in our program respond to the additional academic supports we have intended to provide. While the attention is much needed and long-awaited, it is also characterized by an assumption of student readiness that may not fully encapsulate student development tasks inherent in the post-secondary student population matriculating in a highly stimulating, urban education environment.

Anecdotally, this has meant a couple of things and primarily that my expertise as a psychologist has been called to the forefront of the program development and research activities I had initially envisioned as my role with the project. With my “clinical hat” I have observed student burn-out and inability to balance the multiple roles and tasks of their educational, vocational, social and familial roles. Further, in a society with an “app” for everything, students are largely programmed to expect that a “magical click” on an electronic device will activate a cosmic thrust and miraculously, they will know how to resolve household issues with their roommate (e.g., whose turn is it to do the dishes), determine whether their romantic partner is the “right” person for them, catch up on back episodes of “Gossip Girl” and, yes, allot enough time for sleep and study, prepare healthy, nutritious meals and make it to and from work in time to take their Chemistry exam at 3 pm. This is a lot.

For most overburdened adults, and technically the students we work with are adults, managing all of these tasks is overwhelming and with reflection, many would step away from some of these demands in order to resolve the conflict. However, in a world that demands more and more without providing the real-life applications for adequately managing all that students are expected to do, it is likely a sense of burn-out and resulting psycho-social symptoms will result. Burn-out is fatigue, frustration, or apathy resulting from prolonged stress, overwork, or intense activity and some of the ways we may identify it are:

- feeling depressed or anxious
- desiring to withdraw from the tasks of life
- finding no joy in the activities that were once of interest
- using drugs/alcohol to decompress/relax

• having a difficult time relaxing
• having problems in relationships—loved ones complain of the lack of quality time spent together
• getting sick

The experience of burn-out among college students is often thought of as a normal characteristic of their lives while in college and so their needs often go unmet, resulting in their experience of distress for long periods of time.

As educators and administrators facilitating PLTL programs for challenging courses of study, which are largely the foundation for highly coveted and competitive careers in medicine, the biological sciences, and other scientific and engineering fields, it is essential that we address the social and emotional lives of our students while supporting their academic pursuits. As students begin to experience burn-out, their studies suffer tremendously and often, while providing fodder for an interesting paragraph in their personal statements for graduate and professional study, it is not likely to elicit an acceptance into one of these competitive programs. Thus, providing a platform for supporting and encouraging academic and social/emotional balance is important. Furthermore, as students are transitioning into adulthood and are in the process of learning their own personal limits and boundaries, it is important to support healthy decisions that at times may run counter to their academic goals in the short-term, but may ultimately be better for them in the long term.

Some advice might include:

• Remain vigilant for student negative talk and attitudes.
• Talk with students about their personal lives; inquire about how they are balancing their requirements.
• Work with the campus counseling center or other wellness personnel to discuss stress and time management.
• Refer students for counseling.
• Encourage healthy living (e.g., nutrition, sleep, exercise, drinking water, leisure activities).
• Overall, err on the side of promoting balance and immediate self-care.

In academic life and in competitive programs of study, students often are looking to the educators in their lives for permission to rest and take care of themselves. As I stated to a student I recently worked with on some of these concerns, “If you do not take care of yourself, you will not have your health and if you do not have your health, an A in chemistry will simply not matter.”

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