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Transformative approaches to radical wellbeing in higher education

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Abstract

Our global community collectively faces important ecological, social, public health and economic challenges. One of the major setbacks for learning and creativity that we face at our institution is high levels of stress and anxiety not only amongst our students, but our faculty as well. We believe that faculty and student wellness and success are interdependent. In order for faculty to apply caring pedagogy, to recognize the impact of stress on learning, and to help their students be well, they must be given the opportunity to examine and cultivate their own wellness. This paper outlines our institution's incorporation of wellbeing research and our shift during the COVID-19 pandemic to a series of resilience-based programming approaches for faculty.

1 Introduction

Our global community collectively faces important ecological, social, public health, and economic challenges. College students seem to be bearing the burden of these changes at a disproportionately higher rate.

> *Today's college students are the most overburdened and undersupported in American history. More than one in four have a child, almost three in four are employed, and more than half receive Pell Grants but are left far short of the funds required to pay for college.* (Stommel & Goldrick-Rab, 2018)

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) lay out an ambitious agenda and set the foci of work for future generations, while higher educational institutions rely on the strength of their communities to shift curriculum and pedagogical practices accordingly. The current health and mental health crises in higher education (Penn State's Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2019) must be addressed in order to achieve higher learning, creative problem solving, innovations for infrastructure, and other noble collective aims.

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One of the major setbacks for learning and creativity that we face at our institution is high levels of stress and anxiety, not only amongst our students but also our faculty. Research shows that stress causes lack of attention, reduces levels of learning and can ultimately lead to more serious mental health issues, depression, physical illnesses and suicide (Barsky et al., 2020).

In his book on positive psychology (2006), Peterson suggests exercises in positive experiences and mindfulness to increase wellness. These individual practices, along with strengthening belonging and community (Boroski, 2019), translate into wellbeing pedagogies in the classroom, helping students learn course content and means of coping, resilience, emotional intelligence, and stress reduction to lead happier and healthier lives.

2 The Compose *curriculum*

Our original project included an onsite campus program, *Compose*, which was a facilitated faculty discussion series for infusing wellbeing practices throughout the curriculum and preparing students to set meaningful goals and persevere through adversity. After an extreme pivot because of the global pandemic of COVID-19, we left campus in March 2020, so our programs had the change to grow and double-down on the incentive of prioritizing wellbeing and resilience in a fully online learning environment. Through the *Compose* project, informal *Virtual Coffee Chats*, and our new program, *Resilient Teaching Online*, we work to approach faculty development programming through the lens of radical wellbeing for a future-oriented higher education.

We believe that faculty and student wellness and success are interdependent. In order for faculty to apply caring pedagogy, recognize the impact of stress on learning, and help their students be well, they must be given the opportunity to examine and cultivate their own wellness. *Compose* was a small faculty wellbeing project at Pratt Institute with a focus on promoting contemplative practices and exercises from positive psychology. The goal for *Compose* was to establish a personal practice framed around the concepts of learned optimism, resilience, and meaning-making while generating well-being pedagogies for classroom and studio teaching, contributing to a radical improvement in student flourishing.

The *Compose* curriculum was primarily adapted from the MOOC Foundations of Positive Psychology specialization series (Seligman, n.d.) for a small face-to-face community and infused with contemplative practices. Our weekly 2.5-hour meetings began with a group meditation practice, followed by discussions and exercises around the selected topic, and concluded with deeper reflective practice. Between sessions, participants were given homework assignments and recorded meditations. The 8-week project addressed the following topics and themes: flourishing, emotional intelligence, character strengths, resilience, and the role of relationships (*Compose*, n.d.).

3 Results

The preliminary results for improving participant wellbeing in the *Compose* project were promising. We collected both qualitative and quantitative survey data throughout the program and although it was a small group (n=9), we found that faculty in this project collectively improved on all positive affect indicators. Using the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2015) pre and post tests (Table 1), the group increased their overall positive emotions, engagement, meaning-making, and relationships and decreased the negative effect. The group also concluded with a collective score of 51.2 on the Diener Flourishing Scale (Diener et al. 2010), (Table 1), compared to the 41.4 Pratt Institute student average score from the previous year. The daily meditation practice was also well received and, based on the survey, reduced the participants' levels of stress, anxiety and loneliness and increased their self-compassion and self-regulation (Table 3).

n=9	PRE (baseline) average per group	POST average per group	Change
Positive emotion	7.82	8.15	0.33
Engagement	7.89	8.33	0.44
Relationships	8.04	8.59	0.55
Meaning	8.19	8.81	0.62
Accomplishment	7.63	8.18	0.55
Negative effect	4.0	3.26	0.74
Health	6.81	7.44	0.63
Loneliness	2.22	0.78	1.44
Happiness	8.22	8.44	0.22

Table 1: Compose *Fall 2019 – PERMA PRE and POST results*[3]

> *Having a practice and study centered around mood and mental well-being has provided a base for contemplating and directing stresses and positive feelings alike. It has been both intellectually activating and allowed me to find a bit more self-compassion, which I have found to be very regulating.* (*Compose* participant)

These individual practices within a community of supportive colleagues translate into wellbeing pedagogies in the classroom, helping students learn course content, as well as ways of coping, resilience, emotional intelligence, and stress reduction to lead happier and healthier lives in the future. The *Compose* community spent a lot of time discussing teaching methodologies by infusing wellbeing practices throughout the curriculum and preparing students to set meaningful goals and persevere through adversity.

4 Moving online

In March 2020, our institution pivoted quickly from fully in-person to fully online teaching. As a Center for Teaching and Learning, we felt it necessary to facilitate faculty adjusting to online teaching while also holding space for the traumas that were largely becoming a part of everyday life. Unable to continue with the face-to-face *Compose* model, a more flexible and informal model would serve our faculty best in these in-between spaces. We responded by holding regular online *Virtual Coffee Chats*.

[3] Possible total range score is 0-10, where a high score (in P, E, R, M, A, H and Ha) represents a person who is very high in this dimension, and a low score (in N and L) is a person who is very low in this dimension.

n=9	Average for group
I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.	6.33
My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.	6.44
I am engaged and interested in my daily activities.	6.56
I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.	6.56
I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.	6.44
I am a good person and live a good life.	6.56
I am optimistic about my future.	6.44
People respect me.	6.11
TOTAL	**51.44**

Table 2: Compose *Fall 2019 – Diener Flourishing Scale*[4]

Our aim for these meetings was to be responsive and supportive–something we found ourselves hard-pressed to pin down. We scheduled the *Chats* as regular, hour-long sessions three times weekly to hold a space for addressing our faculty's needs. With no agenda, these open meetings created opportunities for faculty to freely share their traumas, stresses, and fears as well as discussing failing systemic structures in higher education, as all of our realities and futures were (and still are) in flux. The *Chats* further stayed true to the initial goals of the wellbeing project to combat faculty burnout and help faculty become caring teachers. While the aim of the *Virtual Coffee Chats* was primarily to support colleagues in an informal way, we noticed the impact of our efforts by reviewing the data. *Chat* attendance accounted for almost a third (27.4%) of our entire Spring programming, with a majority of participants (67%) being part time (our most vulnerable faculty population).

[4] Possible total range score is 8-56, where a high score represents a person with many psychological resources and strengths.

n=9	**Average per group**	**Comments**
As a result of practicing meditation, I am happier.	4.11	78% strongly agree or agree
As a result of practicing meditation, I have better focus and awareness.	4.67	100% strongly agree or agree
As a result of practicing meditation, I feel more in control of my life.	4	67% strongly agree or agree
Practicing meditation makes me feel less stressed.	4.67	89% strongly agree or agree

Table 3: Compose *Fall 2019 – Mindfulness results*[5]

These informal meetings over the Spring semester clarified our next action. We began building a more intentionally designed and formalized series that joined learner-centered course design, active online learning practices, and trauma-informed pedagogies. The *Resilient Teaching Online (RTO)* series was a natural transition to faculty development and support, heavily informed by the *Virtual Coffee Chats*.

The *RTO* is a faculty cohort/community that moves through 5 online modules together. Participants come away with an understanding of best practices for online course design and facilitation, a plan for access and equity, a design for online classroom communities, and meaningful feedback models that respond to complicated scenarios (due to COVID-19) with resilience. To model an interactive mix of synchronous and asynchronous elements, Zoom conversations around *RTO* topics support our faculty, inviting them to discuss the series' materials with colleagues across disciplines.

RTO is a transformative learning experience for most of our colleagues, as it frames all online teaching from the lens of radical wellbeing. Resilience, coping, caring, and kindness are themes woven through all the topics. The design of *RTO* follows a resilience-based approach, starting each module with a self-reflective exercise on our virtual community board (ex. "Post a gif that represents your mood today" or "What made you laugh this week?"). These lighthearted exercises are punctuated with more serious discussion and reflection on access, equity, and trauma in a virtual world (ex. "What are some of the impacts of trauma on learning?" or "How are you planning to promote a 'Growth Mindset' equitably in your online course?").

[5] Possible total score is 5 for each question.

5 Conclusion

The COVID-19 outbreak forced higher educational institutions to rely on the strength of their communities to rapidly shift curriculum and pedagogical practices in response to events that changed our surroundings. The world health crisis, paired with mental health crises in higher education, demands the attention of faculty and administrators to creatively address the balance of higher learning and equitable support. While at times difficult, we have found these conversations invigorating and fruitful. The collaborative nature of our Pratt community has taken these conversations as action items, many dispatching to their own departments or creating cross-departmental collaboration of their own. What started as positive results from the *Compose* project grew to *Virtual Coffee Chats*, and shifted once again to the *RTO* community. And while anything is hard to anticipate, what we do know is that remaining ready to place wellbeing and resilience as a priority will better bring into focus the contextual challenges and needs of our students as they prepare to be future-ready graduates.

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