Embedding Conditions for Well-Being in Academic Settings

http://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity
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“Nurturing a healthy and supportive campus community is a key component of our vision of being Canada’s engaged university.”

SFU President Andrew Petter (August, 2013)

The examples in this casebook align with recommendations for High-Impact Practices in undergraduate education (Kuh, 2008) and support efforts to increase engagement and experiential learning at SFU.
Simon Fraser University takes exemplary leadership in developing both the coherent policy and the evidence-based practices that create and make manifest the essential purposes or aims of higher education. In this important volume, “Embedding Conditions for Well-Being in Academic Settings”, the Health Promotion team describes and documents in its vision and culture how a “Healthy Campus Community” connects those educational aims to whole student development and to the well-being of its constituencies.

Aligning learning experiences within a community of engagement and support, Simon Fraser University is putting into place opportunities and encouraging their use, the essential conditions of a campus culture, that demonstrably affect retention, student success, and the well-being of the University’s multiple members—students, faculty, and both the campus and the external community.

The realization of this “Engaged University’s Healthy Campus Community” should be a viable outcome for all of higher education—an outcome that could be adapted then adopted, one that might be achieved by alternative strategies, but certainly one to be encouraged and even emulated.

By re-aligning priorities and re-defining available resources, the Health Promotion team presents in this casebook a pathway to how a campus does not have to do more to “be more” - to assert and provide a bold re-claiming of higher education’s full purpose.

We at Bringing Theory to Practice offer congratulations and profound respect; we are honored to have had a modest role in encouraging Simon Fraser University’s health promoting vision and its realization.

Donald W. Harward
President Emeritus, Bates College
Director, Bringing Theory to Practice, Washington DC
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INTRODUCTION

This casebook highlights how conditions for well-being can be embedded within academic units. Conditions for well-being are defined, along with opportunities for action and examples from SFU Faculties and Departments. The examples included are not a comprehensive list but are intended to celebrate successes and inspire further action.
A Vision for a Healthy Campus Community at SFU

Vision Statement

SFU is a Healthy Campus Community where the people, programs, practices, policies and spaces foster well-being as a resource for community members to thrive & succeed at SFU and beyond.

“Health is a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”

(WHO, 1948)
The intention of the project is to both reduce negative outcomes for students and enhance positive ones:

**Alignment with Academic Plan:**
This aligns with SFU’s academic plan (objective 1.2.3) which emphasizes the importance of building community within academic units as a means of supporting student retention and success. It also aligns with SFU’s vision of being Canada’s most engaged university.
The following conditions for well-being have been identified through a process of literature review and campus consultation. They provide a framework for exploring opportunities to optimize both well-being and student success within academic settings:

- Social Connectedness
- Supportive Institutional Culture
- Reducing Undue Stress
- Opportunities for Personal Development
- Strengthening Balance and Resilience
- Inclusivity
- Involvement and Engagement

“Since learning is a complex activity of the whole person, advancing student success requires attention to students as whole people, and to their individual and collective well-being.”

[Keeling, 2014]
Social connection is about providing a sense of community on campus that helps students feel welcomed and connected within the campus community.

“A sense of belonging and connectedness in school community is not only protective of health but is also identified as contributing to improved academic achievement and engagement.”

[Rowe, 2006, p.524]
SFU Tech Connect Program Provides Social Support

Within the Faculty of Applied Sciences, the Tech Connect Program is a first year cohort program that helps create a sense of community among first year students. Students report meeting friends who they can rely on during stressful times, and feeling more connected to their department.

"It’s hard to make new friends, but [in Tech Connect], we met each other in the first week and we knew each other for the ongoing semester and we ended up helping each other out."

[Tech Connect Student, 2013]
The Education Learning Hub Fosters Connections

Within the Faculty of Education, a new and innovative space called the Learning Hub has been created that contributes to social connection. The flexible space offers moveable furniture enabling students to connect in small groups, or work on group projects in a comfortable and welcoming space.

"Space, well-being and learning are intimately connected. Our study suggests that there is thirst for spaces like the Learning Hub. There is a need for imaginative ways to conceive more creative learning spaces to foster students' well-being and enhance their learning."

(Learning Hub Evaluation Report, 2014)
Supportive Institutional Culture

A supportive institutional culture embodies values of well-being, respect, fairness, kindness, transparency and flexibility and ensures students feel welcomed within the institution.

“Our capacity to keep students engaged hinges on the establishment of a healthy, caring environment which enables individuals to find a niche in the social and intellectual communities of the institution.”

(Bergen-Cico & Bylander, 2012, p.103)

Opportunities for Action

- The faculty is welcoming and supportive of all students, staff and faculty
- The workplace culture is conductive to staff and faculty well-being
- The academic mission reflects the importance of well-being as a foundation for learning and success
- Opportunities for connection between students and faculty members
- Communication with students, staff and faculty reflect a sense of trust, respect, fairness, collaboration and inclusivity
- Academic policies and processes utilize a supportive approach whenever possible
- Well-being is considered in department activities policies and plans
Welcoming Students in Biological Science

The Department of Biological Sciences at Simon Fraser University has made a concerted effort to create a positive academic culture that makes students, staff and faculty feel valued, welcomed and included. This has been achieved by enhancing communication strategies with students to ensure that they feel welcomed to the department and are aware of opportunities to engage. In addition, policies and processes that reflect a culture of kindness, transparency, inclusion and fairness have been developed. For example, a course evaluation question related to classroom respect is given a high degree of importance in course reviews, and policy has been developed to ensure all instructors (including teaching stream instructors and sessional instructors) can sit as faculty on the undergraduate curriculum committee.

“Communication and transparency are important for overall experience and can create a culture of respect and a sense of community within the department.”

[Dr. Elizabeth Elle, Undergraduate Chair, Biological Sciences]
Fostering a Positive Departmental Culture in Hellenic Studies

The Department of Hellenic Studies creates a positive and supportive departmental culture for students, staff and faculty. While hosting departmental cultural events, lunches and symposiums, Hellenic Studies intentionally extends invitations to staff, faculty, administrators and all students within the department (including the online student community) in order to encourage collegiality and connection. Recently, the department renovated and created a multi-functional space equipped with views of the outdoors, a kitchen and lounge area. Undergraduate and graduate students, staff and faculty have access to the shared space to prepare food, study or socialize which enhances the sense of connection and fosters a caring culture within the department. Valuing respect, collaboration and student participation, Hellenic studies exemplifies an academic department committed to creating a supportive atmosphere for all of its community members.
Reducing Undue Stress

Providing students with a level of challenge that enhances optimal learning, while minimizing unnecessary stress is an important part of well-being within academic settings. The impacts of stress on overall health and well-being are commonly known to include both physical and mental health impacts.

“Whilst learning in university should entail challenge, it need not entail excessive stress - students will not perform at their best if they are unduly stressed.”

(Burgess, Anderson & Westerby, 2009, p.1)

Opportunities for Action

- Curriculum mapping
- Communication with students (e.g. clarity, tone & content)
- Efforts to reduce common scheduling conflicts
- Grading policy and program requirements are fair and clearly communicated
- Program advising and course access
- Transition supports (e.g. orientation; first year learning communities)
- Career mapping and transition to workforce support
- Clarifying expectations
- Career mapping and transition to workforce support
- Connecting students to relevant resources and services
Creating Supportive Policy in Economics

The Department of Economics at Simon Fraser University has undertaken a series of changes that enhance student well-being by reducing undue stress and enabling opportunities for personal and professional development. The department created a number of early supports to ensure that undeclared students who are not admitted into the Department of Economics have adequate access to the resources and supports which enable them to navigate their alternate career options and find a program that suits their needs and interests. For example, Economic Advisors in tandem with advisors from SFU student central come into one of the required classes for Economics major, and speak to students about the options available to them, in the case that they are not successful in the course. In addition, the primary gateway course for Economics was moved earlier in the program so that unsuccessful students would have additional time to find an alternate program option.

“Whilst learning in university should entail challenge, it need not entail excessive stress – students will not perform at their best if they are unduly stressed.”

(Burgess, Anderson & Westerby, 2009, p.1)
Reducing Undue Stress through Curricular Changes in Engineering

The Department of Engineering has made a number of curricular changes that have helped to reduce undue stress among students while enhancing the sense of support within the department. The changes include reducing the required number of credit hours in the first year in response to feedback that many students found the first year overwhelming as they transitioned from high school and a desire to increase retention rates. In addition, preparation courses were added in the first and second years that provide specific foundational content that directly feeds into challenging higher level courses with high failure rates. Finally, an Academic Enhancement Program was created to embed study skills and other resources into the curriculum of various courses in order to enhance students’ skills for success in their studies and university experience.

"While many experts in business and education have emphasized the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and creativity for success in the 21st-century economy, these are among the qualities that are most severely impaired by both acute and chronic stress."

(Stixrud, 2012 p.135)
Opportunities for Personal Development

Enabling students to develop as whole people and engaged citizens allows for success both at university and beyond. Increasing students’ personal development is important for overall well-being and can contribute to enhanced learning, self-esteem, social connectedness and engagement as well as decreased stress and anxiety.

“One of the biggest challenges [for] students is making that transition into the work world because there is a competitive job market. Helping the students with their life skills, [and] enabling them to become active and engaged in a community is very valuable and hopefully that will help the transition into the workforce.”

(Alex Donald, SFU Master of Public Health student)

Opportunities for Action

- Opportunities for personal and career skill building within curriculum (e.g. communication skills, group interaction, self-awareness, presentation skills, etc.)
- Career exploration built into program early on
- Career exploration and networking through connection to alumni (e.g. alumni mentorship)
- Opportunities for connection between students and faculty members
- Connecting students to resources and services (leadership programs, career services, volunteer opportunities)
- Experiential learning, co-op opportunities, internships, capstone projects, service learning and other applied learning opportunities
- Learning communities
Health Sciences Graduate Program Connects Students with Alumni

Within the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University, alumni presentations have been incorporated within the Masters of Public Health curriculum. Through these presentations, recent alumni speak to current students about their career development and provide insights related to how public health knowledge can be applied in practice. Alumni share examples, challenges and experiences that may help students navigate and reflect on their own career interests. These presentations create a sense of confidence related to career opportunities in health sciences and build personal and professional competencies related to career exploration and navigation. With alumni sharing experiences with current students, the program is creating a community of public health practitioners for both students and alumni.

"Long term health outcomes are "meditated by relatively immediate impacts of learning upon psychosocial qualities; self-esteem, self-efficacy, a sense of purpose and hope, competences, and social integration."

(Hammond, 2004, p.551)
**OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE WELL-BEING WITHIN ACADEMIC SETTINGS**

**Strengthening Resilience and Balance**

Strengthening resilience and balance includes providing students with the tools, resources and opportunities to maintain optimal health and well-being. Developing personal health resources and skills will help students to manage stress, succeed with their academic goals and become resilient and engaged citizens.

**Opportunities for Action**

- Provide resources and supports related to balance, resilience and healthy lifestyles within curriculum
- Create physical environments that enhance balance, social connection and active living
- Include modules on balance, resilience and healthy living within curriculum, transition programs or orientation
- Share information on co-curricular opportunities such as Peer Programs that help students build resilience and balance
- Actively connect students to relevant resources (e.g. Health and Counselling Services)
Enhancing Student Resilience and Well-being

An online Canvas course called “Bouncing Back” has been created by SFU Health Promotion to support student resilience. The course incorporates visuals, YouTube videos and self-reflection activities, providing students with practical and research-based strategies and tools for building their resilience and supporting their well-being. The course also introduces and familiarizes students with relevant services and supports available to them both on campus and online as an SFU student. Moreover, students retain unrestricted access to the course throughout their academic journey allowing them to revisit the course content. The course is available for Faculties and Departments to share with students as a means of building their personal resilience and strengths in order to successfully navigate their academic program, and maintain their own personal balance and well-being.

The course is open for all SFU students through the following Canvas link: [http://canvas.sfu.ca/enroll/YEPJLM](http://canvas.sfu.ca/enroll/YEPJLM)
OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE WELL-BEING WITHIN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

Inclusivity

Ensuring equity, safety and a sense of inclusion for all members of our campus community is a key component of well-being in academic settings. Inclusivity has been widely shown to be correlated with improved health outcomes for individuals and communities.

Opportunities for Action

- Utilize principles of Universal Instructional Design within curriculum
- Flexible learning for diverse student needs and online learning
- Expand intercultural competency training and global education opportunities
- Create an inclusive campus culture that recognizes diversity as strength
- Actively connect students to relevant resources (Centre for Students with Disability, International Services for Students, Indigenous Student Centre)
- Consider how policies may affect diverse students (ie international students, students with mental health challenges, etc)
- Consider how polices support inclusivity, equity and safety for all

“Inclusion is one of the key protective factors for mental well-being at a population level.”

(Cooke et al., 2011, p. 17)
The Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University is creating a sense of community and inclusion among diverse students through the Business Foundation Program. Two introduction to Business courses have been designed to welcome both incoming students and transfer students to the school, while building students’ resources and skills for success in Business. In particular, students in the program participate in coursework and activities that help them develop skills for working effectively in teams. This involves an emphasis on skills for creating understanding, teamwork and trust. Students with diverse backgrounds and experiences are seen as a resource within the program and all students are encouraged to build skills for working in diverse teams. These skills are seen as beneficial to student experience, and as resources for success following graduation.

“It’s very important for students to have opportunities to learn about working in diverse teams and for this to be built directly into their coursework and academic programs. It’s a skill students will need in their futures and it helps create a positive dynamic within the program.”

[Marissa Funaro, Undergraduate Coordinator, Beedie School of Business]
Involvement and Engagement

Involvement and engagement ensures meaningful participation and contribution of all community members and students. Involvement and engagement contribute to a sense of inclusion, personal development, community cohesion, agency and civic responsibility which together support individual and collective well-being.

Opportunities for Action

- Opportunities for student input and governance
- Support for student unions and student led programs / activities
- Student voice is included in decision making
- Provide students with service learning, community engagement and volunteer opportunities
- Student leadership opportunities
- Undergraduate research opportunities

“Evidence suggests that volunteering or otherwise making a valuable contribution to society is good for a person’s individual well-being as well as for society as a whole.”

(Huppert, 2009, p.151)
Student-Led Peer Mentorship in Health Sciences

The Faculty of Health Sciences’ Peer Mentorship program is a student developed and student led program through which upper year Health Sciences students mentor incoming students. The Faculty has actively supported this program that welcomes new students and supports them to become aware of resources, services and supports that will assist them throughout their degree. The program demonstrates the value of student voice and leadership in establishing a program that meets student needs and creates a sense of community within the faculty. The evaluation of this program has shown that both the mentors and mentees benefit from being involved in the program.

"The Student-led nature of our program helps facilitate genuine, candid and trustworthy interactions between our first years and senior students."

(Malinda Pathacharige, Health Sciences Student)
This casebook features a sampling of SFU examples that are creating positive conditions for well-being at SFU. This is not meant to be a complete list, but it is hoped that they will inspire future action. The casebook also introduces a number of opportunities for action within each condition for well-being. These were developed through a process of engaging with SFU Faculties and Departments and are intended to provide ideas.

Please connect with SFU Health Promotion to share your own examples and receive support in evaluating the impacts of your programs and activities on student well-being and success.

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