First-Year Learning Communities

First-Year Learning Communities (FLCs) are positively impacting the health of our campus community. A FLC is a group of students in the same area of study, who are enrolled in core courses and who meet regularly outside class time to take part in academic, developmental and social activities. Developed by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at Surrey, FLCs were launched in September 2011 to expand the range of first-year experience options for new students at the Surrey campus.

FLCs support the concept of a healthy campus community by focusing on the opportunity to meet classmates, form meaningful friendships as well as develop academic and personal skills. FLCs encourage students to feel part of a thriving and supportive community. This is in line with viewing health and well-being as broad, holistic and positive states that include physical, mental and social dimensions.

SFU’s FASS has followed the footsteps of other world-class universities that developed FLCs in a bid to enhance the first-year experience, as well as improve student retention and engagement. In addition to core courses taken over the first fall and spring semesters, FLC students meaningfully connect with one another through weekly group meetings facilitated by trained peer mentors, senior SFU students in third year or beyond. This positive learning and working environment fosters resilience, academic success and well-being.

The transition into university often presents challenges for student health and well-being. “First-year students negotiate an entirely new educational setting after five years in high school, dealing with issues such as study-work-life balance, confusion about course selection, new social circles, uncertainty about where to get help and so much more,” says May Doerksen, FLC advisor. “Research has shown that making this transition successfully increases the odds of academic success for students as well as overall satisfaction with university studies. Our FLCs aim to do just that.”

The university classroom setting and the Faculty culture can significantly affect student well-being. It can impact the level of stress that students feel and ways they cope with that stress, the degree to which they feel connected to others and the extent to which they feel meaningfully engaged in their university experience. All of these are important contributors to a student’s overall health and well-being. FLCs also introduce students to various campus resources, opportunities as well as the culture of SFU Surrey and the campus community, playing an important role in smooth student transition to university.

Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. “My year in the Global Issues FLC was the best remedy for my first-year anxieties!” Renita Bangert, an FLC alumni, comments. “It opened my eyes to the wide range of resources at SFU, reassured me that I didn’t have to rush into a major, got me thinking about building exchange and Coop into my academic career, and gave me a chance to make some fantastic friends. From the great lineup of courses to the weekly workshops and presentations to our incredibly helpful mentor and advisor, this FLC has changed my university experience for the better.”

Everyone plays a role in building a Healthy Campus Community at SFU. Congratulations to all involved in the First-Year Learning Communities for contributing to the well-being of first year students.
Career and Volunteer Services

Career and Volunteer Services are champions in creating a healthy campus community. They have shifted their way of working to go well beyond a traditional approach of simply helping students get a job or volunteer opportunity to instead focus on the holistic and complex concept of career and life exploration. This approach encourages students to think holistically about their future, including the personal and social dimensions that will allow them to thrive as people.

The new approach taken by Career and Volunteer Services impacts students' well-being by normalizing and helping positively reframe feelings of indecision and pressures to make the ‘right decision’ about their future academic and career paths. This can help reduce the insecurity, stress and anxiety associated with career discovery. The staff are helping students focus on their strengths instead of weaknesses and supporting students to view mistakes as powerful learning opportunities. This approach creates a positive focus, helps to build resilience and optimistic feelings about the future and thus supports overall well-being.

The change in philosophical approach and associated organizational changes that Career and Volunteer Services has undertaken are commendable. Impacting well-being often requires structural and cultural change, which can be challenging to carry out but extremely impactful. In addition, this approach helps to engage and connect students with campus opportunities that relate to their career and life development. Being involved on campus can help students build social connections, feel that they are making a contribution and experience a sense of community which are all also positive impacts on well-being.

In response to what others can do to help create a healthy campus for SFU, David Lindskoog, Career Services Advisor, noted, “Think of the bigger picture. Try to give students a long lasting message. It is not cultivating an attitude of ‘I have to be a great success’ . It is encouraging them to think about ‘what does success mean to you’”.

Everyone plays a role in making SFU a healthy and supportive campus community, congratulations to the staff at Career and Volunteer Services for making changes that will positively contribute to student well-being.