

FACILITATING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE: ONE WAY TO CONTRIBUTE TO CULTURE CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this commentary is to explain the integration of social emotional learning in higher education with faculty and staff. The University of West Georgia has established an applied holistic wellness lab, the Wolf Wellness Lab, that aims to facilitate social emotional learning for faculty and staff. The Wolf Wellness Lab was founded upon the National Wellness Institute's framework of holistic health, including emotional, occupational, spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical health promotion. The Wolf Wellness Lab provides a variety of education, services and trainings for faculty and staff that can serve as a model for other universities, businesses, and community centers to facilitate social-emotional learning. The Wolf Wellness Lab has helped create an identity of social emotional learning and overall wellness in the department, college, and university at large, and such an identity and culture are often needed for successful and long-term healthy change. This commentary will discuss specific resources provided for faculty and staff that promote a culture of wellness.

KEYWORDS: Wellness, Holistic, Higher education, Mindfulness

Researchers have noted the need for social-emotional learning for adults across a variety of professional settings including higher education, healthcare leadership, management, and business [1]. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is one way adults can become aware of, understand, and manage their emotions [2]. SEL also involves the ability to set, pursue, and achieve healthy goals, maintain positive relationships, and exhibit empathy [3]. SEL programs may improve social skills, attitudes and resultant behaviors, as well as enhance academic performance [4]. Various research projects and programs have been developed and implemented for children and adolescents, yet a need remains for SEL to be integrated into workplaces [1]. SEL programs provide agency for employees, long-term learning, and a help promote a healthy workplace culture; all important for an emotionally and socially healthy workplace [5].

The University of West Georgia has established an applied holistic wellness lab, the Wolf Wellness Lab (WWL) that aims to facilitate SEL for faculty and staff [6]. The WWL was founded upon the National Wellness Institute's framework of holistic health, including emotional, occupational, spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical health promotion [7]. The WWL provides education, programs and training for faculty and staff that may serve as a model for other universities, businesses, community and health centers aiming to facilitate SEL. The WWL is seeking to create a sustainable culture of SEL, healthy behavior change, and overall wellness in the department, college, and university at large.

One way in which the WWL may improve SEL is through access to an applied mindfulness room [8]. The mindfulness room is open for reservation by faculty and staff during university business hours. Interested employees have the option to use self-guided mindfulness meditation tapes, listen to evidence-based mindfulness podcasts, and participate in small-group Mindfulness-Based Compassion Training led by certified faculty and staff; sessions ranging from 10 to 60 minutes in duration. Or, they may simply use the space for prayer. The room provides an atmosphere of unconditional positive regard, encourages openness, honesty, and curiosity with the intention to positively impact attitudes (e.g. nonjudgment, acceptance), attention (e.g. ability to focus), and intention (e.g. to be of service to others) [9]. For example, a faculty member can use the mindfulness room with the aim to reduce stress throughout the day. The room allows the person to practice mindfulness free from external distractions (e.g. emails, telephone calls, disruptions, etc.). Participants may learn to treat themselves with compassion, kindness, and openness when distressed or exposed to distracting inner dialogue or self-criticism.

While the mindfulness room creates the space for awareness and intention for SEL to develop, further resources are required to ensure understanding and application of SEL. For example, a series of Lunch N' Learn sessions are provided each semester that target the core SEL competencies including topics such as mindfulness, the impact of exercise on holistic health, stress management, emotional eating, and thriving

in the workplace [2]. Faculty and staff are afforded opportunities to learn from experts, gain techniques to apply SEL in their workplace and personal lives, and practice in a group setting.

These procedures (i.e. establishing a SEL culture, offering mindfulness training, providing Lunch N' Learns) may foster a culture of positive social, emotional, and behavioral competency and action in the workplace. The WWL and mindfulness room are advocated for and supported by the University President and Dean of the college while departmental faculty and students handle the day-to-day logistics and program implementation. Evaluation and assessment are needed to determine whether the combination of evidence-based programs with both top-down and bottom-up approaches, effectively establish a workplace environment [10]. Through awareness promotion, education provided by trained professionals, and small group-based skill development, faculty and staff can, in turn, contribute to a workplace environment that values and establishes SEL [11]. Clearly, the WWL and service providers need to reinforce culture change at various university levels. To encourage operation and sustainability the WWL created the Wolf Wellness Committee with the mission to enhance organizational health and wellness by fostering interest and engagement in holistic wellness, including SEL, recognizing employees who participate in programs and initiatives, and developing a positive culture focused on improved quality of life [6]. Future evaluation and assessment are needed to determine the impact of the WWL and services offered on employee and workplace SEL. Each of the aforementioned strategies are inexpensive or free of cost, require minimal space for implementation, and target wellness topics that many employees in medical and healthcare fields can benefit from. Healthcare facilities can establish a culture of SEL with mindfulness, applied health education, and employee-driven advocacy to promote employee wellness. ■

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