

Background

The Recreation Management program offers a General Education Course, REC 150: Leisure, Quality of Life, and Well-Being (REC 150). The course teaches students the knowledge and skills necessary for integrating the major elements of well-being (physical, emotional, spiritual, environmental, intellectual, social, and occupational) through leisure into a balanced and fulfilling lifestyle throughout their lifespan. The course provides a foundation for enhancing overall wellness, building coping strategies, and negotiating a balanced, fulfilling life through leisure.

Introduction

One of the keys to students' persistence in college is a sense that those at the university - other students, faculty, and staff - value their membership within the community (Tinto, 2017). This sense of belonging is most directly fostered by their daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators. When students have a strong sense of belonging, of connection to the University, they are more likely to persevere through challenges with which they are faced as they feel a greater sense of commitment to the institution - especially when the belonging they feel is associated with the institution rather than smaller communities within the university (e.g., small friend groups). A sense of belonging in the classroom impacts not only students' motivation to persist, but also their motivation to learn (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Classrooms that implement strategies that promote shared academic and social experiences are especially important and the earlier these types of experiences and work toward building student engagement begins, the more impactful they will be for students (Smallhorn, 2017). This sense of belonging enhances both the student learning during their first year in college and in their persistence towards completion of their degree (Tinto, 2017).

When REC 150 was created, one of the key components of its design was to build relationships - between students, faculty and students, and students and the university. The design from the in-classroom structure to course assessments were built to maximize student engagement, relationship-building, and the students' sense of belonging at UWL. Though launched in the Fall of 2020, these design elements had not been formally assessed. This project sought to gain a better understanding of how the design elements of the course support or detract from achieving this goal and students' perceptions of how this course was similar to or different from other courses they have been enrolled in at achieving these goals.

Methods

Students who were enrolled in REC 150 sections 2 and 4 during Fall 2023 were invited to participate in focus groups. Twenty participants signed up to participate and nineteen completed the focus groups. Questions were focused on their sense of belonging and their perception of how the course and their experiences in college have impacted that sense of belonging. Additionally, they were asked about tools they use to navigate difficulties faced in college. The data was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then coded using open coding and sorted into themes. The researcher and a graduate assistant independently coded the data and results were compared for inter-rater reliability which was deemed acceptable at greater than 80%.

Results

Five main themes emerged from the data: Building relationships (between students and with the instructor), Class culture, Leisure as connection, Connection and Belongingness, and Building Resiliency Strategies.

"[There was] a lot of mutual respect between us as students and [the instructor], and so I just wanted to come to class."

"It was cool to be in groups with people from other classes, my group had some sophomores and a freshman, and I'm a junior, and that was cool because we're in different parts of our college experiences; they have been really different so far but we're all here at the same school in the same class which is cool to talk about it"

"To be honest I took the class thinking I could just take it and not show up and it's not just one of those filler classes...what we talked about made it engaging to go to class and actually you wanted to learn and see how it applies to your real life."

"It was fun, we didn't dread going to class. There was a day that we played board games all day, and that didn't happen in any other class. You're always going to have fun..."

I think it made me like feel more part of the the La Crosse community. it was my first semester, you come in not really knowing anyone so then having the time when you go to your classes and work with a group of familiar people you feel more connected

I feel like the mindset coming out of this class is very different than...the mindset I entered it with. Before I feel like I took everything very, very seriously I'm a very serious person and I'm very anxious. I feel like this class was one of the first ones where the professor was like, 'hey like take a breath, like sit down, like you should enjoy this moment.' I feel like that mindset kind of permeated through all of her lessons like there was always intention towards like mental well-being as well as [overall] well-being and how they're tied together and how leisure and recreation is important for both and I just thought that was really cool and I feel like...that mindset has stuck with me.

Implications

Students identified these five specific aspects of their experience in their General Education(GE) course that they found impactful towards building a sense of belonging and resilience at UWL. To continue developing these outcomes within GE, instructors should focus on:

1. **Building relationships** with students - students indicated this can be achieved in little ways ("she made an effort"; "she notices you", "she's easy to talk to") or in big ways (she was really responsive and [did] the extra stuff to...get you involved"; "she tried to create relationships with us").
2. **Creating a class culture** that aligns with the strengths of the instructor ("you don't know what you're gonna be doing every day, it motivated me to come to class because I didn't want to miss out on anything exciting because I actually felt like the classes were fun")
3. **Emphasizing personal/professional value** - REC 150 focuses on leisure, so provided students the opportunity to see how leisure could positively impact their personal life ("this class gave me ideas of different things I can do when I'm stressed to step away and relax for a little bit") or their professional life ([the course helped me focus on the] career aspect and just like taking my time and finding out my passion").
4. **Fostering connection and belongingness** through a focus on the broader community outside of the classroom ("it kept reminding you that [leisure] is important... In my first semester I didn't really make an effort to go out and do things, this semester I did and that made me feel more connected to the La Crosse area and to my friends")
5. **Allowing for reflection** - Students felt the assignments that allowed them to reflect on the impacts of what they were learning in the course on their college experience and their personal lives helped impart the lessons even more effectively ("I feel like the content was really good at reminding us that we need leisure and how important it is and not to get too caught up in stress or external factors. You can help your mental and physical health through leisure and I feel like this made me appreciate it more. [We watched] a documentary about the Green Book and the history of the inequality [in] leisure - that was really cool and it made me appreciate our access to leisure a lot more")

References

- Smallhorn, M. (2017). The flipped classroom: A learning model to increase student engagement not academic achievement. *Student Success*, 8(2), 43-53.
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- Walton, G., & Cohen, G. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 82-96