

Champlain Health and Mindfulness Program:

A New Vision For Wellness At Champlain College

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I. Introduction

College campuses across the country have seen unprecedented rates of students struggling with mental illness in recent years. This rapid, dramatic increase has outpaced the capacity of most institutions to provide appropriate support to students, as well as develop long-term solutions to address the crisis. Nationally, nearly 30% more students sought out counseling in the 2014-2015 school year than in 2009-2010, yet schools' counseling services only reach 15-20% of students (English, 2019). The counseling center at Champlain is overburdened with the needs of all students struggling with mental health issues. The newly implemented session limits make it so that students can only meet with counselors eight times per semester.

According to Champlain's own research, mental health issues are a driving force in voluntary withdrawal. Approximately 45% of these students identify mental health as key reasons for their withdrawal. Ensuring students mental health and wellbeing while living in Champlain resident halls is imperative for students success and increase student retention.

As Environmental Policy students that belong to a division committed to positive social and environmental change, we haven't always felt the ideals of EHS reflected across campus. Thus, we have committed our Capstone project to designing an innovative, comprehensive solution to promote thriving students across campus: establishing a wellness space for like-minded or vulnerable students to flourish and cultivate a sense of belonging to the Champlain community.

McDonald Hall is up for renovation in 2020. We propose to take advantage of this opportunity to jumpstart a new living experience for students. We want to create a themed first year residence hall with the intention of strengthening student's connection to their physical, mental, and emotional health, their diet, and finally their community. A residence hall should feel like home. We believe wellness has many complex components and that our project will create a space where all of these needs can be met so residents can take full advantage of their education without sacrificing their health. Residents of the dorm will either apply to the

residence or be accepted based on an identified need, in order to balance and diversify the community. Our design is a three-pronged approach focused on the physical space, green space and food systems, and recreation.

Transition into college can be an immensely stressful time in young people's lives. Navigating and balancing the social, emotional, physical, and familial stressors can have adverse effects on students' mental wellbeing. Students at Champlain also face unique challenges such as coping with bleak, long winters with limited sunlight, accessing green space, physical recreation, and adequate nutrition. Additionally, students that are health-conscious and oriented towards positive wellness also desire more opportunities and support. Access to green space, a healthy diet, and outdoor recreation can alleviate this stress and support mental and emotional stability while improving students' focus and motivation.

Food systems is a subject that is often overlooked by college students and faculty but knowledge of food systems is essential for students to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Poor diets can increase rates of physical and mental illness and impede a student's ability to learn. Outdoor recreation has also been shown to be a useful tool in addressing this problem, and schools around the country are beginning to utilize it. Many larger universities have been implementing outdoor recreation into their offerings for a long time, but smaller private colleges are only just starting to realize how useful these programs can be. Outdoor recreation programs can help alleviate the cabin fever that many students experience during the long winters, offer a break from life in the city, and allow students to experience the beautiful Vermont landscape.

II. Green Space and Nutrition

An essential component of wellness is access to green space. Green space has been shown to have a positive effect on anxiety, cortisol levels and overall well being (Barton, 2017). In addition, people living near green spaces have also reported less feelings of loneliness and isolation, a serious problem many first-year students face (Williams, 111). As part of the possible upcoming renovation we propose to create a permanent indoor green space within McDonald Hall. The creation of a green space on campus will give students a wellbeing option

that's both indoors and on campus. A green space will be a warm and sunny area which gives students a sense of wellness through connection with nature. Through this space students will have access to some of the benefits of being outside, but without actually needing to leave Champlain.

McDonald has a large porch space that is not currently utilized. A solarium is a room with extensive areas of glass to allow plenty of sunlight in. By glassing in the porch, the school could create a solarium, giving students a peaceful place to socialize, study or just soak up the sunlight. As a benefit of living in the hall, students would have access to the solarium and be permitted to store their own houseplants in the solarium as space allows. Wall and furniture installations that include a green facet, such as wall planters, would be an affordable addition to add to the greenery within the hall and Solarium. Watering the plants could be assigned to residents on a rotating schedule. Another possibility is that a work study position of "Plant Caretaker" could be created for the residents to apply to.

Residential life should give students the opportunity to learn the basics of food systems and develop a lasting relationship with the food they eat. Quick, cheap, and easy are often the main factors in students' dietary decisions, which creates a major disconnect between health and consumption (Thomashow, 48). On the other hand, mindful food systems and behaviors can improve students dietary behaviors and community morale. Every first-year student experiences the hall pizza party. While free pizza may be great once in awhile, this is a poorly executed way of getting students to socialize and doesn't cater to students with special dietary needs. We propose a regular hallwide dinner organized by the hall's resident assistants. These dinners, called Happy Meals, will build community and encourage students to eat local, whole foods that prepare together.

Nutrition is an essential aspect of wellness, especially mental health and productivity, and it's important that students are equipped with the knowledge and tools to fuel themselves in a healthy and mindful way. A healthy balanced diet has been shown to prevent depression and anxiety while a diet high in processed foods and sugars has been shown to increase the risk of these mental health issues (Dasgupta, 190). A kitchen would considerably benefit the house as it would make nutrition, self-sufficiency and community bonding more accessible to residents.

Most of these students will be living on their own for the first time and it's crucial to help them develop the skills to sustain themselves in a healthy and efficient way. By creating good habits around nutrition and mealtime, students can carry forward these habits into adulthood, preventing negative health effects later in life.

III. Mindful Design

The wellness house should also utilize other design features outside the realm of green space to insure students have an adequately stimulating environment that supports their mental health. Any combination of these components could be utilized.

A Room Designated for Wellness Activities

By having a room designated as a wellness space the students can have a space that they feel is designed for their wellbeing. It will also provide students, faculty, and the community an opportunity to engage students in hands on wellness learning through expertise of local health specialists. Acupuncturists, masseuses, herbalists, counselors and therapy animals are all examples of programs that could be hosted in this space. These activities would be meant to increase happiness and wellbeing for the residents. For example, receiving a massage reduces cortisol and increases dopamine and serotonin which causes happiness and reduced stress (Dasgupta, 155). Another event that could be hosted in the wellness room would be visits from therapy dogs because pets reduces loneliness, stress, anxiety and depression (Dasgupta, 190).

Outdoor Jungle Gym

By placing a jungle gym, or similar outdoor climbing structure on the front lawn outside McDonald Hall, students would have access to an outdoor space, but still be on Champlain's campus. An outdoor climbing structure incorporates biophilic design for stress reduction by providing a tree-climbing experience (Thomashow, 138). The structure would also be a convenient and fun way for the residents and other students on campus to exercise, a proven stress reducer (Dasgupta, 115). This structure would provide a conversation starter, a gathering space and an overall focal point of interest for Champlain's campus.

Sun Lamps

Vermont's cold and dark winters can cause a strain on students mental and physical health. Around 22% of adults in living in the state of Vermont suffer from depression. According to nurse practitioner Patricia Towle from the Thomas Chittenden Health Center in Williston , Vermont "Probably close to 60 or 70% of the depression I treat seems to have a seasonal pattern" (Johnson, 2018). Sun lamp therapy has been shown to help alleviate seasonal affective disorder (Klinkman, 2011). By putting sun lamps in the common room, or putting one in each dorm room, residents can experience the therapeutic benefits of sunlight that they are missing during the winter.

IV. Additional Activities

We've also included activities that are meant to be implemented along with the physical design of the residence hall with the purpose of building community, mitigating stress, and helping students stay grounded, healthy and stable. Resident assistants will receive some additional training upon being placed in the Solarium House. Students with majors associated with wellness (Environmental Policy, Psychology, Social Work, Education) will be given priority to be the resident assistants. This can give upperclass students an opportunity for service-learning or even possibilities for a wellness or sustainability related capstone relating to the hall. The greatest aspect of the residence hall and its initiative is that wellness can always be improved; students passionate about their health and the health of their peers can make a difference just by getting involved. At least one of the following components should be incorporated into each hall activity or event. Any combination of these components could be utilized.

Yoga and Meditation

Yoga and meditation are very effective tools for reducing stress, anxiety and depression (Dasgupta, 116). People who regularly meditate or do yoga experience reduced cortisol levels which indicates that they are less stressed overall (Dasgupta, 131). Residents will be encouraged to attend the regular yoga classes at the Champlain Fitness Center as well as yoga and meditation

events in the residence hall. Residents, resident assistants and occasionally guest professionals will lead the hall in yoga and meditation practices on a semi-regular basis. Educational materials on yoga and meditation will be readily available to residents and they will be encouraged to take control of their own wellbeing through these practices.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy can provide relief from stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia and other conditions (Dasgupta, 144). Essential oils that are associated with positive mental health benefits include bergamont, cedarwood, geranium, jasmine, lavender, marjoram, orange, peppermint, rose, rosemary, sandalwood and ylang ylang (Dasgupta, 145). Essential oil diffusers would be a cheap and safe way for students in the hall to relax in the common room. A poster displayed in the common room listing the therapeutic benefits of different essential oils would peak residents interest and maximize the benefits of aromatherapy.

Sustainability Education

Teaching residents about sustainability will give them a sense of importance and meaning, a key to psychological well being (Thomashow, 130). We want the residents to become enthusiastic about making a difference, both on our campus and in the world. Community service indicates community wellness (Thomashow, 139). By having a student who works at the Center for Service and Sustainability talk to residents at the beginning of the year about environmental issues, how to be an engaged citizen, and their role on campus, students can gain insight in how they want to shape their college experience and impact. Residents should have easy access to materials that educate them about the environment and sustainability.

V. Outdoor Recreation and Exploration

Access to greenspace and outdoor activity has been shown to have positive effects in addressing the previously outlined stressors. Spending time outdoors is proven to reduce symptoms of depression, ADD, and even improves overall focus (Li, 2016). Walking or exercising in a natural environment is more effective for stress relief than exercising indoors (Dasgupta, 116). Champlain has several team sports clubs, but there are no physical activity requirements or options for those students who dislike team sports. This is problematic, because it is ignoring a part of the campus community who would both enjoy and benefit from recreation. Specifically, recreation that takes place in wild or natural areas improves mental well-being, self esteem, anxiety, depression, and overall tension (Andre et. al., 17). Outdoor programs also positively affect student recruitment, retention, and satisfaction. They do this by creating positive and developmental experiences for students, as well as increases in better mental/physical health, academic performance, and environmental sensitivities. In turn, this creates effects which benefit the entire college community. Such programs can be on-campus recreation activities, but when put in an outdoor and off-campus setting, the effects only improve (Shelman and Hill, 2017). Outing clubs are becoming increasingly more common, as college being to see their use as a tool for addressing mental health. Bates College, Middlebury College, and Dartmouth College have all created wildly successful outing programs. These programs are proof that outing clubs can function (and thrive) in smaller-scale private colleges, rather than just large state universities. The creation of a comparable program at Champlain that is focussed on getting students into the outdoors would leverage these same mental and physical effects in the campus community.

Access to both green space and outdoor recreation in Burlington is quite limited, especially in walkable proximity to Champlain College. There is little opportunity for students, especially those who have little experience in the outdoors, to get out into nature. Vermont is a relatively small state, and Burlington's city size is reflective of that. The city can begin to feel

like a prison for many students, especially as the winter months continue for what seems like Aforever. This is particularly relevant for students who are experiencing their first Vermont winter. Though it's easy to use the state's public transportation systems, it's still difficult—or impossible—for many students to access outdoor recreation. By having access to an outing club, students who would never normally have access to the outdoors would be given this new and exciting exposure. College is a time of great change, and students are easily molded during this period. Champlain puts a great amount of effort into marketing the fact that it's located in the beautiful state of Vermont, and this is a draw for many students. However, this does little good if students never get to explore the beautiful scenery that they were so attracted by. By immersing themselves in Vermont's landscape, students will also gain a newfound appreciation for their natural environment. Champlain does a great deal of good work in the field of sustainability, but students need to be in touch with the landscape that they are supposed to protect. Otherwise there will be little incentive for them to work hard for its well-being.

The creation of an outing club at Champlain could be organized as either an official college program that is managed by the school, or as a student run club. Larger colleges, like UVM, have college-sanctioned outing programs that are run more like sports programs. However, Champlain is a smaller school, so the greatest success for an outing club at Champlain, would be a student run club with heavy oversight from a faculty member (or group of faculty members). Club meetings could take place in the green living dorm, which would help to create a dialogue around wellbeing and outdoor recreation on campus. The breakdown for the club's management should be separated into a group of trip leaders, each of whom should be certified in Wilderness First Aid at the very least (Wilderness First Responder being ideal). Those individuals could either lead groups of students on hikes, ski trips, etc, or they could hire a professional guide. The perks of hiring a guide are that the students would be covered under the guide service's insurance (rather than the college's), the guide would likely be more highly-certified in first aid than the student leaders, and the guide would have an intimate knowledge of Vermont's landscape. The club wouldn't need to have weekly trips, but bi-weekly, or monthly trips would be optimal.

VI. Conclusion

Wellness and education go hand in hand, but all too often students are faced with choosing between the two. The campus mental health crisis is complicated, but can be alleviated through implementation of this plan. However, in order for it to be successful, dedication and participation on the schools part is necessary. Supporting Champlain students mental health is the most important thing the administration can do to support the students education. Our proposed initiative will help students develop skills to live a healthier lifestyle and give them the ability to be productive, engaged, and mindful Champlain citizens. The hall would give students who don't currently have their own niche the sense of place and community that they're lacking, but can also be utilized to give vulnerable students a safe space to grow and learn coping mechanisms to deal with the stresses and hurdles of the college experience. All students should be mindful of their mental, physical, and emotional well-being for the sake of themselves and their education, and the Champlain Health and Mindfulness Program would provide a way for students to gain these skills.

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