Minutes: February 29, 2012


Upcoming meetings: April 4, 2012

Welcome and Introductions: Tim Marchell

1. Over the past few years, the Council has discussed many of the Mental Health Framework components and the strategies used to address those needs. Some of the components, such as “Restrict Access to Means of Suicide” or “Deliver Coordinated Crisis Management” work to reduce risk factors associated with mental health distress and suicide; while others, such as “Foster a Healthy Educational Environment” or “Increase Help-seeking Behavior” work to strengthen protective factors and reduce the incidence of mental health problems. During this meeting, we will focus on “Social Connectedness and Resilience” as a component that allows us to move further “upstream” to help students acquire the skills associated with resilience in an effort to reduce or prevent altogether the likelihood of developing mental health problems.

2. Leading the discussion is Janis Whitlock, Director of the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injurious Behavior in Adolescence and Young Adults, on behalf of the Mental Health Programmers Workgroup. She will review the known science and practical wisdom that has evolved over the past few decades about resilience and introduce a framework that addresses key areas in which campus efforts could be most effective.

3. The Mental Health Programmers Workgroup was formed in April, 2011 as a Student and Academic Services divisional initiative that aims to increase coordination of the development of educational programs and materials related to student mental health, including resources for parents. Members of the Workgroup include Catherine Thrasher-Carroll (Chair), Janis Talbot, Kirsten Post Eynav, Shura Gat, Casey Carr, Kiran Longaker, Sarah Jones, Amanda Carreiro, Kristyn Bochniak and Janis Whitlock.
Overview of Resilience: Janis Whitlock

Review the “Fostering Resilience Model” for college campuses.

1. The discussion today, while not presenting specific research studies conducted on resilience, will draw from data findings. This research has increased understanding of the continuum of mental health, the elements that enhance flourishing, and the means for early identification of students with vulnerabilities. The term “mental health” is fluid and generally refers to a range of psychological and emotional states. For our purposes, mental health refers to a positive state of psychological and emotional well-being.

2. The continuum of Mental health extends between:
   - Mental illness: any disorder of the mind, the psychological state of someone who has emotional or behavioral problems serious enough to require psychological/psychiatric intervention.
   - Thriving: Flourishing, living up to one’s potential (e.g. academic, personal, social) and experiencing a sense of purpose, life satisfaction and wellbeing.

3. In the past, “our” focus commonly was on the mental illness end of the continuum because of the need to ensure that youth experiencing mental illness or disorders receive the attention they need, rather than examining mental health through a more positive lens. Over the past decade, more research has shifted to focus on ways to enhance mental health and thriving.

4. Mental health is more fluid and malleable than was previously known. Research (Whitlock, Keyes) shows that 6% of the population has signs of high psychological distress, 35% exhibit some signs of distress and 59% show no distress. Many of our resources go to the 6-15% of those experiencing high levels of distress. Of those showing no distress, only 20% are thriving. Life is dynamic, and over the course of time people can move up and down this continuum. It is possible however, to engineer environments and opportunities that facilitate resilience.

5. What predicts who is at risk for later psychological distress (as measured by non-suicidal-self-injury, suicidality, and global psychological distress)?
   - There are risk factors that can’t be changed, these include: having a history of mental illness or physical abuse, sociological/economic/status, and number of traumas reported.
   - Many students at risk for later psychological distress enter college with potentially mutable vulnerabilities. Those factors that can be changed include: stigma on receiving therapy, life satisfaction, endorsement of physical aggression, social connectedness, sense of meaning in life, emotional acceptance/regulation. A particularly powerful predictor of later distress or flourishing is one’s cognitive style (pessimistic versus positive), and this too can be modified (through cognitive reframing). A student’s social connections with peers, adults and especially with parents can also exert a powerful influence on his/her mental health and wellbeing.
No more than 40% of the variance in most mental illness is accountable to immutable factors such as genetics or other neurobiological conditions (True et. al., 1993; Scherrer et. al., 2000; Haglund et. al., 2007). It is through gene – environment interaction (epigenetics) that genetic potentials are activated. Most of the traits associated with resilience can be learned and are mutable – even at the bio-neurological level. Studies show environments can even alter some established bio/neurological pathways. For example, while academic stress does not cause psychological distress, it can exacerbate distress tendencies among those who have existing vulnerabilities.

6. What is human resilience?
- An individual’s ability to positively cope with stress and adversity; “to bounce back” to a previous state of normal functioning, or using the experience of adversity to enhance flexibility and overall functioning.
- **Resilience stems from** the interaction of a person with their environment and the resulting processes that either promote well-being or protect them against the overwhelming influence of risk factors. One of the best ways people build resilience is through interaction with others.
- These processes can be helped along by experiences in families, schools, and other communities that help individuals learn how to productively confront adversity.

7. Resilience is multi-dimensional (Wong, 2012):
- **Cognitive**: how events are interpreted (i.e., cognitive style, appraisal, attribution); how daily stressors and life circumstances are negotiated (i.e. coping skills).
- **Behavioral**: habits of persistence and endurance in the face of obstacles and failures.
- **Motivational**: clear sense of life’s purpose and commitment.
- **Existential/spiritual**: sense of larger purpose and meaning of human life.
- **Relational**: sense of social connectedness, engagement, and altruism.
- **Emotional**: Ability to tolerate negative emotions and rejection; and to maintain emotional confidence and hopefulness (i.e. emotion regulation, emotional intelligence)
8. Overview of Resilience framework
(Created by Janis Whitlock with the Mental Health Programmers Workgroup)

There are four inter-related pathways for building student resilience:
- Offering opportunities for service
- Providing opportunities for connectedness to others
- Affording opportunities to increase one’s self awareness
- Offering opportunities for efficacy and mastery
This is the action dimension of the model, in which assessment can direct future actions.

Skill Areas:
Items in blue on the diagram (at left) represent skill areas that students can develop through the four pathways (by having opportunities / experiences in each). They include:
- Social engagement
- Self-awareness and Self-care
- Attention and Focus
- Meaning

The placement of skills on the diagram is not fixed; each skill can have a relationship with each of the pathways.

The final addition to the framework (in black) shows qualities that can evolve as one develops the skill. These qualities exemplify the existential/spiritual, emotional and relational dimensions of resilience.

Resilient people hold one or more of the qualities in each of the skill areas. This model can be applied throughout our life span as we work to strengthen our resilience to meet life’s changing challenges.
9. **How do we enhance/expand our efforts?**

- Assess how many programs, policies, and practices we already have in each of the four “pathways” or action areas.
- *Within* existing programs, assess alignment with the resilience framework (e.g. in stated intention, in messages about resilience and growth, and in assessments of individual experience and impact).
- Create new strategies, programs, and/or approaches to better incorporate under-represented action areas (e.g. Self-awareness and Care).
- Focus on building universal and targeted outreach to particular groups (including early assessment of resilience and vulnerability profiles).
- Create group-specific messaging and programming.
- Adapt framework to systems to identify opportunities for building resilience within groups, programs, and organizations (e.g. students/staff/faculty, departments, units, etc.).

**The following is an overview of Council discussion and comments:**

- Are these things that can be taught in an introductory course? *There are experiences in the classroom that contribute to resilience, such as small group work and team-building exercises. Skills take time to process.*
- Mentoring younger students can build a sense of connectedness for both the mentor and the mentee.
- How can those at greatest risk be reached? *There might be online ways to identify traits (cognitive style, emotional regulation) and offer online interventions /communication.*
- How can these interventions be paired with developmental needs?
- Religious participation and affiliation with a faith-based community is not only a protective factor, but also gives meaning and purpose to life. Interfaith cooperation could offer other opportunities to build resilience.
- How are we helping students make meaning of their life and to answer questions such as “who am I,” or “what am I doing”? Can we assist students in making real friends versus virtual friends?
- Discussion about technology’s impact and our inability to filter this out. It can become a source of negativity that can be internalized. *One way to help others stay in the present is through cognitive reframing.*
- Next steps could be to identify gaps, infuse messages, and create programming to support resilience. For example, how to reach students in the most need.
- Messages can be infused in all our departments’ programs and in our academic work as well.
- Stanford, Harvard and Duke include information to support students in maintaining perspective by stating “we all have our success and failures.” Harvard’s “Reflections on Rejection” initiative is an example of this approach.
- Resilience is such an important aspect of life that we need to keep the conversation going with students. Can the faculty handbook include this information and offer ideas on how faculty can talk with students about this? What is it we want faculty to say/do?
- Perhaps we need to create a companion piece to the “Notice and Respond” series that disseminates instructional and advising strategies that can help foster resilience. *The Center for Teaching Excellence may be able to assist in this.*
Janis Whitlock described how one researcher defines people with resilience: they are able to counter each single negative thought with three positive thoughts.

One place messages could be shared is on electronic boards in various campus buildings. For example, Human Ecology has tried this during stressful portions of the semester. *This would help us build our responses and initiatives on multiple levels.*

We all need to see that it's important to help students develop resilience and do what we can advance this while keeping within our role. Students need to know that is important for their health and longevity.

We may have a hard time shifting the paradigm for some of our faculty who hold more of a “smack down” pedagogy. But many of our faculty members are supportive of these ideas and would welcome recommendations. How can we stimulate a conversation with faculty that will influence change?

Perhaps we need to respond more broadly to things on the framework. For example, would offering free gym memberships for students provide a stronger impact?

In Human Resources, we are using a wellness or “model of well-being” for campus. This framework can be applied to that model as it applies to all of us.

We also need to look at systems and how they do or do not support resilience-building efforts. A commitment at all levels will be needed to address systemic issues.

Cornell Minds Matter shared with the group one of their activities to help students remember the ways they can build/strengthen their resilience: At various events the group distributes: *The Soap of Happiness.* This is an actual bar of soap with a label describes four ways to cultivate personal happiness:

- **S**= Nurture your Social connections
- **O**= Develop an Optimistic thinking style
- **A**= Practice Appreciation and Gratitude
- **P**= Engage in a Purpose or Passion beyond yourself

*Council members were reminded that “there is long ramp” leading to changes on our campus. By involving more faculty, staff and students in our discussion, we can identify new avenues of opportunity.”*

*Minutes taken by Janis Talbot*