

WELLNESS INITIATIVES FOR THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY:

ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR THE WHOLE-STUDENT

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Background

It is no secret that college students face mental health challenges. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities were scrambling to assist their students with managing the difficulties of student life and clinical diagnoses. In 2019, right before the onslaught of the pandemic, the American Psychological Association reported that 80 percent of college presidents said that student mental health had become a greater priority on their campuses than it was three years prior. Not only were college presidents acknowledging these mental health challenges, but they were also acting on them. Seventy-two percent of the college presidents surveyed by the APA in 2019 had also reallocated or identified funds to address mental health issues on their campuses compared to three years prior.

This survey preceded the earth-shattering effects of COVID-19, a pandemic that left people around the globe reeling from traumas such as death, extended hospitalization, separation of family, and loss of careers. In addition to these struggles, college students had to readjust to the new landscape of higher education or give it up entirely. With declining enrollment in the years following the pandemic, institutions facing financial obstacles may not have been able to support students' mental health. While institutions of higher learning continue to recover from the pandemic, the obstacles faced by college students continue to pile up.



Throughout the United States, there have been promising strides within higher education to support students' mental health needs since the start of the pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education released new resources on supporting student social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health during the COVID-19 era. These resources include real-world examples of actions taken by educators and practitioners across the country. U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona stated, "Amid the pandemic, we know that our students have experienced so much. We cannot unlock students' potential unless we also address the needs they bring with them to the classroom each day. As educators, it's our responsibility to ensure that we are helping to provide students with a strong social and emotional foundation so that they can excel academically." This sentiment was already in play at St. Johns River State College's libraries before the pandemic.

With a smaller student body of about ten thousand students in its yearly unduplicated headcount, St. Johns River State College lands on the lower end of enrollment compared to other institutions in the

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Florida College System. Furthermore, while increasing enrollment is always the goal, there can be advantages to working with fewer students. The St. Johns River State College Learning Resources Department, which consists of the library, tutoring, and distance learning, took the initiative early to support the “whole student.” The library and tutoring staff have been instrumental in the work to aid student success academically and beyond. The department embraces a whole student approach to education which means working to meet the needs of students holistically, extending beyond academics. The whole student could include but is not limited to helping fulfill basic needs such as food and hygiene, assisting with mental health obstacles, offering opportunities for students to improve their physical health, and promoting healthy social interaction among students.

Of course, everything the library is traditionally known for, like instruction, reference, collection development, and programming, supports college student success. Studies have shown that libraries impact positive connections with student retention improvement, add value to long-term student academic experience, and improve student academic rapport and engagement. Moreover, while many campus libraries have the status of the “heart of the university,” it does not hurt to look for ways to solidify or grow that status. With the future of our institution and the well-being of students in mind, the SJR State Learning Resources Department has developed resources and strategies to assist the “whole student” in achieving academic success.

The student-centered resources and services at St. Johns River State College result from practitioner knowledge accumulated by a department culture that values user experience (UX), observational data, and user feedback. The St. Johns River State College Library received a Northeast Florida Library Information Network (NEFLIN) grant for UX training in 2016 that provided training and professional consultation in UX design for libraries. Thanks to that experience, our department has adopted a culture that embraces UX and uses observational data and patron feedback to guide our decisions and practices to improve user experience in our libraries and digital spaces.

It is important to note that, like most institutions, there is no funding for most projects that fall outside of traditional services and resources. Many of the services and resources discussed in this article are made possible either by staff creativity or the

generosity of our college community, and result from successful partnerships between Learning Resources and other departments. These solutions result from Learning Resources staff observing students’ challenges and working to help where they can. The services and resources discussed in this article are whole student guided and are part of an ongoing wellness initiative.

Wellness Services and Resources

The Viking Exchange

Food insecurity is an issue for students at our institution. We know this because of information gathered from other departments at the institution, observation, and because students have shared their experiences. The Viking Exchange (VE) food and supply pantry was created as a partnership between several college departments to support students’ basic needs. Each campus library has a conveniently located pantry that students can access without staff assistance. There is also a pantry at the Palatka Campus location in the Advising Department. The St. Johns River State College Foundation funded the start-up. The funding purchased shelving units for each VE location and an initial stock of food items.

Donation drives at each campus several times yearly replenish the VE. In addition to the drives facilitated by the Learning Resources Department, some student clubs on campus also host drives throughout the year. Each campus library location also has donation boxes in public areas to collect donations year-round.

Each pantry has various food items, mainly “easy to prepare” foods and snack items. Since the inception of this project, the Dean of Learning Resources has carefully tracked what items need restocking most often, so that replenishment efforts are focused on those items. In addition to food, the VE has general hygiene items like shampoo, body wash, and deodorant. Basic school supplies are also available at the VE, including notebooks, paper, and pencils.

As an extension of the VE, the bathrooms at each library provide hygiene products, including tampons, maxi-pads, and panty liners. Requests for hygiene products are included in restocking drives. These products are also available at the VE locations.

Online Wellness Resources

During the work-from-home period of the pandemic, the librarians focused on creating online help resources for students. Health and wellness were trending topics, so a wellness resources collection was added to the department web page. Upon initial

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creation, the resources mainly included an accumulation of online resources carefully cultivated for student use.

The project evolved into an ongoing partnership between the librarians and the college's mental health counselor. Through this partnership, various "crash courses" have been created for students. These recorded webinars focus on whole-student education and tackle issues such as overcoming procrastination, communicating with professors, test anxiety, mindset, and goal setting. The collection of online wellness resources continues to grow.

Referrals

The partnership between the Learning Resources Department and the mental health counselor has also resulted in a mutual referral system between the two departments. Library and tutoring staff will refer students in mental or emotional distress to the counselor for assistance. The counselor's business cards are readily available at our service points for referrals. The counselor refers students needing academic support services to the library and tutoring. As an additional service, the counselor often brings the student to service points and introduces the student to the appropriate staff. The librarian and counselor will then consult the student together to suggest appropriate services and resources to facilitate the student's success.

Wellness-Focused Professional Development

Learning Resources staff are encouraged to pursue professional development opportunities focused on wellness, whole-student education, social and emotional learning, and other related topics. These professional development opportunities may include live webinars, conferences, books, and training opportunities from vendors. Learning Resources staff also provide professional development opportunities at our institution for others wanting to learn more about how to support students. Learning resources employees have presented on these issues at our annual St. Johns River State College Professional Development Institute. In-house professional development is an excellent avenue for promoting wellness initiatives to other departments on campus and has been the catalyst for new partnerships and opportunities to grow the project's reach.

Future Growth

As an extension of the services and resources discussed, new ideas for further whole student-

centered help are in the works. With the transition back to on-campus programming and events, the librarians and the counselor developed a series of workshops focused on anxiety. This workshop series includes a speaking portion hosted by the counselor and a librarian. The partnership will allow the students to learn anxiety coping strategies from a mental health and an academic perspective. Plans for these workshops include an activity portion, where students will participate in meaningful discussions with their peers.

The online wellness resources continue to grow. There have been requests for future content development. The academic success course at the institution is already well saturated with whole-student content as part of the wellness initiative, and more requested content is in the works.

Encouragement and Recommendations

Starting a whole-student-centered wellness initiative can seem like a daunting task. Here are reflections from a wellness project in progress.

1. **Listen to Students.** Staff does not have to be well trained in UX practices to listen and observe students. Pursuing UX training is encouraged and worth the time, but a whole-student mindset can be embraced informally. Librarians can begin by observing how students interact with staff and use facilities. Additionally, learn about student struggles through friendly chats at service points or during reference interactions, and ask students directly what they need via surveys or focus groups. A more structured approach could include consulting a UX professional to design a user experience study for the institution.
2. **Create Partnerships.** The Learning Resources Department has worked campus-wide to make this project a success. The Foundation helped to start the VE pantries. Faculty, staff, administrators, board members, and students help maintain a well-stocked *Viking Exchange* for the students that need it most. The care counselor, who works among the three campuses, uses the library and tutoring staff to fill gaps for students. Staff in other departments bring struggling students to the library for support.
3. **Prioritize.** After collecting information and analyzing needs, it may be tempting to jump headfirst into a wellness initiative that tackles all issues at the institution. Having too many irons in the fire may inhibit the ability to be effective. Instead, list goals in order of priority. How priority is determined may be influenced by funding, the potential for partnerships,

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or the severity of need. As the project progresses, it may evolve, and new opportunities may become available.

4. **Focus on Essentials.** Never forget that sometimes the most effective solution may also be the simplest. The library can be a safe place for a student to break from a challenging class or a difficult home life. Greet students with a smile. Treat them with respect. Know what resources are available at the institution and within the community for issues that may arise. Be willing to listen during interactions with students. Introduce students to other people on campus that can help them. Small actions of support can be significant.

The dedicated staff at St. Johns River State College Learning Resources Department are always looking to learn and grow. The wellness initiative is ever evolving. The resources and services will continue to grow as we learn, gather data, and create new partnerships.

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