

Centering Well-Being: Focusing on Authentic Experiences and Stories

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As we emerge from the worst of the still present COVID pandemic amid mounting political discord and economic uncertainty, our academic community, including students, faculty, and staff, are facing more pressures while experiencing increased stressors (National Communication Association, 2020). Prioritizing wellness and wellbeing is absolutely necessary for all schools, regardless of size or classification, and our Communication Centers are uniquely positioned to serve their campus in impactful and meaningful ways. Capitalizing on what we do best, crafting safe and empowering spaces that see the authenticity of each and every individual, we can lead by example and harness training and collaboration efforts to promote wellness and wellbeing across campus. Evolving beyond our role as a microcosm of the campus community, Communication Centers can and should develop into aspirational spaces where our authentic experiences and stories are curated, supported, and cherished. These spaces, with their visibility and intentionality, will undoubtedly support wellness and wellbeing throughout campus, especially among nontraditional and/or marginalized populations.

Dimensions of Wellness and Wellbeing

Wellbeing and wellness are multidimensional constructs often used interchangeably yet defined individually based upon our evolving needs and shifting situations. Despite the variability, however, there are some common threads and considerations. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes there is no one clear definition of wellbeing yet offers “well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good,” (<https://www.cdc.gov/hrqol/wellbeing.htm>). According to Dr. Debbie Stoewen (2017), “Wellness is a holistic integration of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, fueling the body, engaging the mind, and nurturing the spirit,” (p. 861). In essence, wellness is how we want to live a full and authentic life. Universities, colleges, and companies are placing increased emphasis on wellness in response to rising mental health concerns amid the pandemic and to foster a more positive, productive and successful climate for students and employees. According to the Center for Health Education and Wellness at The University of Tennessee (UT), there are “8 Dimensions of Wellness,” (<https://wellness.utk.edu/dimensions-of-wellness/>): emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, environmental, financial, occupational, and social.

Figure 1. *8 Dimensions of Wellness*, Center for Health Education and Wellness at The University of Tennessee



Using this framework, let's explore how a Communication Center might positively impact the "8 Dimensions of Wellness" identified by UT. First, by crafting a safe and supportive space for all, including those with high levels of speech anxiety, mental health challenges, neurodivergence, disability, first-generation college student, non-native speakers, LGBTQ, and other non-traditional and/or marginalized individuals, in a myriad of ways Communication Centers support the **Emotional** and **Social** dimensions of wellness (Carpenter & Apostel, 2012; Cuny et al., 2012; Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2021; Prentiss, 2021; Stewart et al., 2021; Yook & Sayre, 2012). The power of visibility is strong and has been "an act of privilege," (Michelson, 2019). When the campus community sees their faces and experiences reflected in the clients and consultants of our centers, they feel validated and respected. Those with the privilege of visibility can easily share that with others, empowering those who have felt marginalized, discounted, and invisible.

In some ways, that can also connect with the **Spiritual** dimension of wellness as all religions/faiths include some component of service and support to others and should be inclusive and welcoming to all in theory, teachings, and practice. Additionally, the Spiritual

dimension may encompass harmony and connection with self, others, and/or nature. It may involve experiences with self-reflection, yoga and/or mindfulness, and targeted or diaphragmatic breathing (Dwyer, 2015). As Communication Centers, during consultations and through training workshops, we can showcase the value of reflection, explore yoga and mindfulness, and teach targeted, diaphragmatic breathing and the power of positive visualization.

When we expand beyond a "one size fits all" approach to effective presentations and allow for more authentic expression of our experiences, perspectives, and skillsets, we directly support the **Intellectual** dimension. For example, a STEM student who is adept at explaining research data to fellow majors in an advanced chemistry class yet struggles to share their insight with classmates in a public speaking course can visit a Communication Center to learn more about audience analysis and data storytelling and can then effectively share meaningful insight with their public speaking class. We can provide a variety of stakeholders with the training necessary to promote their wellness and have our message resonate across campus.

For many of our students, challenges such as high speech anxiety, ADHD, anxiety and depression, and

neurodivergence (such as autism) can include physical manifestations ranging from mildly annoying to quite embarrassing to debilitating and everything in between (Dwyer, 2015; Gill, 2015; Prentiss & Violanti, 2019; Stewart et al., 2021; Turner & Sheckels, 2015), that impact their **Physical** wellbeing. When we openly discuss the prevalence and power of speech anxiety, rather than peddling the myth that only “some people get nervous before speeches,” we, again, use visibility to empower our students and community. When we accept how powerful speech anxiety is, we demystify it, and when we demystify it, we can journey forward to explore ways to effectively manage it. Whether we help students to “dial it down” before a presentation (getting a good night’s sleep, engaging in yoga or meditation, listening to classical music or going for a long walk) or teach them how to harness the power of natural endorphins by “ramping it up” prior to a presentation (working out at the gym, going for a run, playing a game of basketball or taking an aerobics class), their physical dimension is empowered and can be harnessed to manage their speech anxiety while promoting overall wellbeing.

The **Environmental** dimension of wellness refers to being in spaces that are safe, relaxing, positive, and inviting to support student success (Cuny et al., 2014; Oslund, 2014; Palmerton, 2015; Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2021). Whether we occupy a coveted space on campus, such as a room in the library of the student union, or have no more than a classroom, our Communication Centers are havens for connection, support, and camaraderie for clients and consultants alike. Communication Centers inarguably support the **Occupational**

dimension of wellbeing, as well, providing both clients and consultants enhanced communication skills, increased self-confidence and a better understanding of themselves and their communication style (Atkins-Sayre & Yook, 2015; Butler-Ellis & Stuart, 2021; Gann, 2021; Gill, 2015; McBride, 2018; Palmerton, 2015; Ray, 2018; Tonkins, 2018; Ward & Schwartzman, 2009; Wilson, 2012). These soft skills will, undoubtedly, support occupational and career success and wellness in the future. For consultants, working at the Communication Center may support current **Financial** wellness by offering pay, a stipend and/or tuition reimbursement. It can also support long-term financial wellness as careers are established providing more opportunities to utilize and showcase communication skills (Ray, 2018; Wilson, 2012). Moreover, consultants enjoy **Social** wellness through interaction with clients and peers. In short, our Communication Centers are vital to promoting the wellness and wellbeing of our campuses (Oslund, 2014; Palmerton, 2015; Prentiss, 2021; Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2021; Villano, 2020).

Role of our Communication Centers

The positive and profound influences of Communication Centers are well documented. From empowering students to more effectively manage their speech anxiety, to providing practical and applicable communication training, to developing consultation and leadership skills, Communication Centers play an important role in the promotion of wellbeing and wellness (Carpenter & Apostel, 2012; Cuny et al., 2012; Oslund, 2014; Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2021; Prentiss, 2021;

Stewart et al., 2021; Yook & Sayre, 2012). Intentionally, they support student empowerment and advocacy (Holzberg & Ferraro, 2021; Villano, 2020), promote IDEA initiatives that expand our concept of effective communication (Morin, 2021; Oslund, 2014; Prentiss, 2021) and harness the power of intentional language (Wilkinson, 2020), with push back against the standard of White Mainstream English (WME) (Ladva, 2020).

Though each Communication Center has its own unique mission, stakeholders, and team, there are certain approaches we can all use to impact our campuses. As we know from communication pedagogy, three points are a solid strategy for a presentation and, coincidentally, for a manuscript, as well. Therefore, here are three tips for Communication Centers to promote campus wellness and wellbeing:

- 1) *Appreciate all stakeholders.* Most, if not all, campuses are admitting a more diverse student body. Whether we are working with more first generation, nontraditional, and/or neurodiverse students, it is imperative that we understand their authentic stories and experiences. We must listen, observe, and collect and analyze data. We then need to share what we discover. When we understand and respect those we are supporting, we can design practices that reduce stress and anxiety while promoting authentic, empowered storytelling that supports wellness and wellbeing.
- 2) *Promote true visibility.* Everyone wants and deserves to be seen and heard. If we are newcomers

to campus and/or a member of an historically marginalized group, we may not see ourselves or our stories represented and may question whether we fit in. In genuine and meaningful ways, we need to collaborate with students and campus partners that promote these visible and powerful connections. Reach out to academic units and programs, connect with student groups and organizations, and build relationships with student support services. Hire and train consultants from across campus, not just Communication majors, who bring diverse perspectives, experiences, and stories. We can harness social media to promote stories, spotlight consultants and/or clients on the webpage to personalize the center, and engage in outreach such as speaking to classes, co-sponsoring events (such as a TEDx event) and hosting open houses. Simultaneously, we can promote the visibility of our Communication Centers and those we serve to craft welcoming, safe and inclusive spaces that support success for all.

- 3) *Support authentic storytelling.* Stories are a powerful communication tool that have existed since early civilization with cave drawings and across all cultures (Nossel, 2018). In fact, the narrative method detailed by Dr. Nossel includes tenets such as “humans are hardwired for story, everyone has a story, (and) everyone can learn to tell his or her story better,” (p. 3). When we share this with stakeholders and reframe

presentations and oral communication as something everyone can do and/or learn to do well, we empower all students to aspire to use their voice to share their story. Though it seems simple, it can be very powerful and impactful. For too long, communication education, especially that focused on general education/public speaking, has promoted an antiquated and damaging “one size fits all” approach to platform oratory (Gehrke, 2016; Ladva, 2020, Oslund, 2014; Palmerton, 2015; Prentiss & Violanti, 2019). We are the experts on authentic and effective communication and understand that whether students are engaged in a small group discussion, informing using PowerPoint slides, or presenting as part of a team, they are communicating. It is our duty and responsibility to promote authentic storytelling, invested interpersonal communication, and active listening. When we move beyond the erroneous expectation that there is “only one way” to deliver a great speech and recognize that effective communication must be authentic to be impactful, we expand the “comfort zone” for so many students, enrich oral communication experiences, and empower more students to share their stories.

Conclusion

Though so many of us are committed to communication pedagogy with the goal of empowering others, the reality is that what we do may cause

stress and heighten anxiety for many. The antiquated “one size fits all” ideal of public speaking is a real source of concern for many of our students and colleagues across campus. Instead, let us infuse the 8 Dimensions of Wellness into our Communication Centers to expand our impact even more. Let us be mindful of the Emotional, Spiritual, Intellectual, Physical, Environmental, Financial, Occupational and Social needs of our students, consultants, and colleagues. We can appreciate all stakeholders, promote true visibility, and support authentic storytelling. By intentionally reshaping effective communication in more genuine and authentic ways, supporting the success of stories shared from a variety of perspectives, voices, and experiences, and concentrating our focus on all eight dimensions of wellness, our Communication Centers will expand our mission to Center Wellness for all.

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