THE BRAIN, BELONGING, & STUDENT SUCCESS

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BELONGING MATTERS

1) Humans have a primary biological need to belong. We cannot reach our “thinking brain” without first establishing safety & security in the “social brain;”

2) There is an alarming multi-generational national decline in social resiliency. GenZ (iGen) is the most socially distressed generation on record;

3) There is a massive cultural blind spot for this biological need to belong, and often, our institutions & organizations operate against our needs;

4) Without a systemic priority of belonging-in-action, our students will not succeed.
MY COLLEGE STORY
THE NEW COLLEGE EXPERIENCE?
DECLINE OF PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIORS
GEN X, Y, Z (i-GEN)

- Less likely to date
- Decline in sexual activity
- Less interest in driving, obtaining license
- Less time on homework
- Less employment
- Less time unsupervised
- Sleeping less
- Stretched adolescence – 18 more like 15 (15 more like 13)
- 2000 – 2015: # of teens who get together with friends “nearly every day” dropped by more than 40%
- 2010 – 2015 “I often feel left out” rose from 27% to 48%
AMERICAN COLLEGE SURVEYS (SOCIAL FACTORS)

· 2018 ACHA (American College Health Assn) :
  · 28000 students, 51 campuses
  · >30% “felt very lonely” in previous 2 weeks

· 2018 CCMH (Counseling Centers & Mental Health):
  · 61.8% - social anxiety, social isolation, generalized anxiety
  · 49.8% - depression (link between depression & loneliness scales) (YOLO)
  · Social anxiety = fastest growing, most primary presenting concern

· American Freshman Survey:
  · 1965 – “helping others & starting a family” > “being very well off financially”
  · 1980s – reversed
  · 2012 – priority of “being very well off financially” peaks at 81%
Other Findings:
• 1:5 “rarely or never feel close to anyone”
• Nearly ½ Americans “sometimes or almost always feel alone”
• Youth & young adults = highest rates of reported loneliness
• “Over the last 6 months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?”
  1985 – 59% “3 or more”, 10% “zero”
  2004 – 37% “3 or more”, 25% “zero”
DIS-EASE IN THE MODERN WORLD

- 350,000,000 – people worldwide affected by depression;
- 40,000,000 – adults who suffer from anxiety disorders in the U.S.
- 6,100,000 – People in the U.S. suffering from some form of bipolar disorder
- 5,200,000 - adults suffering from PTSD in a given year
- 6,400,000 – children between 4-17 yrs of age who have diagnosed with ADHD (avg age = 7)
- 80,233,280 – Americans (age 6 & up) on psychiatric drugs
- 122,132,000 (38%) – Americans with obesity
- 125,000,000 (45%) – Americans with chronic inflammatory conditions

-Mental Health Statistics; SAMSHA 2013 report
WHY???

- Great Recession (hopeful/secure future)
- Social Media (1st iphone = 2007) (fb = 2004) – non human contact, anti-social behaviors
- Cultural Values: individualism/competition v. collective/cooperative, extrinsic v. intrinsic (Am. Freshman Survey)
- Outdated Institutional & Organizational Structures (v. current research)
- Cultural Trauma (mass shootings, poverty, opioid crisis, racism, prejudice)
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)
- Fear & Safety Based Culture (over-protectionism, tribalism)
- Psychological Overload (globalization, 24/7/365, witnessed violence)
BACK TO THE BRAIN...

And how does this affect student success?
THE BRAIN AND SOCIAL CONNECTION
“HARDWIRED TO BELONG”

The Human Animal

Primitive/Reptilian (instinct, sensation, pain/pleasure, safety/survival, primordial, fear, danger, protection, vital body functions)

Mammalian (social bonding, community, pack, tribe, status & respect, belonging, connectedness, emotions, stored experiences)

Human (meaning & purpose, values, cognitive functioning, abstract thought, imagination, planning, ego, consciousness)
“LIVING IN THE PRIMITIVE BRAIN”
(SAFETY & SURVIVAL)

- Fight/Flight
  - Cortisol, adrenaline releases for action
  - Increased heart rate & breath rate
  - Sleep dysfunction (alert state)
  - Scanning for threat & danger
  - Chronic stress, hypervigilance, panic
  - Inflammation, cortisol overload (memory, concentration).

- Freeze
  - Self-paralyzing response
  - Shallow heart rate & breath rate
  - Dissociation

- What this looks like on campus/in classroom…
Identity and Self Esteem generate from how we see ourselves in a group (status, respect)

If inclusion is withheld, humans cease to self-regulate, lose willingness to make an effort, will not make effort / sacrifice for the group

Social exclusion leads to substantial drops in intellectual performance, intelligence, social control, self-awareness & well-being

Chronic social exclusion leads to eroded arteries, increased blood pressure, substance abuse, irregular circulatory functions- “literally breaks your heart.”
THE BRAIN AND SOCIAL CONNECTION
“HARDWIRED TO BELONG”

- Dopamine – pleasure, reward, & motivational stimulus. Met needs. (infant / mother’s footsteps)
- Oxytocin – Touch, connection, social trust, relationship
- Endorphins – Pain analgesic, “nature’s opiates“
- Empathy – “the ability to understand and shared the feelings of others”…both wired & learned; mirror neurons
- Brain’s default network – social cognition
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

- Physiological
- Safety
- Love/Belonging
- Esteem
- Self-actualization
Social pain leads to decrements in intellectual process (Baumeister)
Experiment: social pain led to dramatic reductions in IQ/GRE scores

Belonging manipulation can lead 1st yr college students to earn significantly higher grades throughout college (African American study) (Terrell Strayhorn) (Walton/Cohen)

Positive affect leads to improved thinking, decision-making & working memory (Isen)
Prefrontal cortex rich with dopamine receptors; Cognitive functions are stimulated by social reward, leading to higher grades

Increase in university belonging leads to positive changes in self-perceptions (scholastic competence, self worth) and lower levels of problem behaviors (Pittman & Richmond)

College friend social support is #1 predictor of ‘mattering’; mattering is #1 predictor of academic stress levels (Rayle & Chung)

Belonging is the key component for physical health of college students. (Hale, Hannum & Espelage)