

The following are key points extracted from small group discussions among reading group participants. Each group provided their rough notes, which were then summarized by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024)

CONSIDER YOUR DEPARTMENT'S CULTURE. WHAT INITIATIVES COULD YOU PROPOSE TO CREATE A STRONGER "SAFETY NET" OF BELONGING FOR STUDENTS?

1. Department-Sponsored Social and Academic Events

- Host regular social events like mixers, panels, or ice cream socials to promote informal interactions between faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates.
- Facilitate outreach programs or interest-based panels open to both majors and non-majors to create a broader sense of community and visibility for departmental offerings.
- Offer consistent, predictable event scheduling, such as monthly gatherings (e.g., first Sunday events) to encourage regular attendance and avoid conflicts with other university events.
- Develop clubs or associations within larger departments to foster a sense of belonging through extracurricular involvement.

2. Peer and Faculty Mentorship Programs

- Encourage the formation of peer groups within departments to provide students with a structured support network and promote mentoring among undergraduates, graduates, and postdocs.
- Establish faculty mentor roles specifically for special populations (e.g., first-generation students, students from underrepresented backgrounds) to create targeted support channels.
- Draw on existing resources in university support offices (e.g., Wellness Office, CAPC) to integrate department-specific mentoring and universal well-being resources.

3. Dedicated Physical and Social Spaces

- Advocate for departmental lounges or informal gathering spaces, particularly for students in large majors, to foster a stronger sense of identity and place within their academic community.
- Support initiatives like study sessions, tutoring drop-ins, and peer interactions (e.g., CLIC language tables) as dedicated, accessible spaces for learning support and community building.
- Challenges: dedicated space is difficult to come by

4. Enhanced Faculty-Student Interaction Opportunities

- Increase meet-and-greet opportunities by encouraging faculty attendees to bring new colleagues to student mingles, ideally supported by incentives from departmental leadership.
- Require students to attend faculty and TA office hours or one-on-one meetings early in the term to build rapport and establish connections.
- Inform students about the myriad resources for academic support outside the classroom, e.g. peer mentors in residential colleges, etc.

These initiatives aim to address the unique needs of students at a high-performing institution by building meaningful connections, offering consistent support, and creating inclusive spaces that foster belonging.

IN WHAT WAYS COULD YOU AUTHENTICALLY INCORPORATE WELLNESS PRACTICES INTO YOUR SPECIFIC DISCIPLINARY CONTENT OR COURSE STRUCTURE?

1. Model Wellness and Boundaries

- Emphasize the impact of wellness on academic success early in the course; this sets the expectation that physical and mental health and wellbeing is something that matters.
- Model and communicate boundaries to both undergraduate and graduate students, highlighting healthy practices and setting realistic expectations. Consider sharing authentic reflections with students about personal wellness boundaries, which may include taking time to address personal challenges or maintaining a work-life balance (e.g. not answering emails outside of certain hours).

2. Provide Flexible Course Policies

- Allow some flexibility in attendance or assignment deadlines but communicate clear limits (e.g., offering a mental health day but setting boundaries on extended absences).
- Destigmatize course withdrawals or dropping a class as a valid wellness decision, acknowledging that various factors may play a role and supporting students in making these choices thoughtfully.
- Adopt “best by” dates for homework submissions to provide flexibility without compromising course rigor.

3. Embed Wellness-Related Information and Practices into the Course

- Incorporate wellness-themed topics relevant to the discipline, such as discussing nutrition and physical activity during a metabolic energy lesson in physics or discussing the importance of sleep in a memory class, to reinforce the importance of personal well-being.
- Create time within class sessions for brief “breathing” moments or reflections to help students reset and focus.

4. Offer Alternative Learning Formats

- Provide audio versions of lectures to allow students to listen while engaging in activities like exercise, giving them more portable access to course content.
- Use varied assessment formats, such as regular low-stakes quizzes, to build mastery over time and reduce high-stakes exam anxiety.

5. Promote System-Level Coordination for Student Wellness

- Work within and across departments to avoid exam clustering, especially for introductory or prerequisite courses, ensuring that first-year students are not overwhelmed with simultaneous exams.
- Coordinate mid-week problem-solving sessions outside of regular class times to provide additional practice and alleviate exam stress. An example of this is Math's Midweek Math Trainings (MMT) for lower division students.

6. Build Supportive Class Community and Encourage Growth

- Regularly “take the temperature” of the class with anonymous check-ins (e.g., eyes closed, hands raised on heads) to gauge student well-being and adapt as needed.
- Combat imposter syndrome by openly affirming that students are not alone in their academic journey, sharing experiences and emphasizing that struggles are a normal part of learning.

By incorporating these practices, instructors can create a more supportive and wellness-centered learning environment that aligns with the high expectations of academic rigor at an elite university.