Fostering Well-being and Learning Through Nature Connection

An introduction to the Teaching Hub Collection

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A rapidly growing body of scientific evidence shows that a positive emotional connection to the natural world is directly linked to better mental, physical, cognitive, and spiritual well-being as well as pro-environmental attitudes and behavior.[1,2,3] The vast majority of college students have been adversely impacted by the well-documented nationwide decline in nature connected activity in childhood.[4] For most students, childhood was dominated by indoor activity in front of screens.[5] In college, screen time significantly predicts higher anxiety, depression, and stress whereas spending time outdoors ("green time") significantly predicts lower stress and depression.[6] A proportion of students had extremely limited exposure to nature given inequitable access to green space, with students from urban underserved populations most adversely impacted.[7] It has become increasingly necessary to create opportunities for students to intentionally connect with nature for their mental health, for general well-being, and for learning.

Campus greenspaces are underutilized resources that campus professionals, including instructors can leverage to support student learning and well-being. While there is a rich knowledge base for K-12 educators on integrating nature connection into the curriculum (think forest schools), the literature for higher education faculty is just emerging. This collection seeks to inspire instructors to improve their own and their students' mental health, creativity and cognitive functioning by taking class outside, incentivizing outdoor study time and instituting walking office hours.

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[4] Gray, P., Lancy, D. F., & Bjorklund, D. F. (2023). Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Wellbeing: Summary of the Evidence. *The Journal of Pediatrics.* DOI: 10.1016/j.jpeds.2023.02.004

[5] National Recreation and Park Association. *Children in nature: Improving Health by Reconnecting Youth with the Outdoors*

[6] Deyo, A., Wallace, J., & Kidwell, K. M. (2023). Screen time and mental health in college students: Time in nature as a protective factor. *Journal of American College Health*, 1-8.

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