

Summary of Results from Focus Groups On Loneliness, Belonging and Social Connection

Background

In the fall of 2014, the Mental Health and Wellness Committee (MHAWC) conducted a series of 8 focus groups with 6-15 students in each, to discuss the issues of loneliness, belonging and social connection on campus. MHAWC was concerned by the high level of loneliness Amherst students reported on the National College Health Assessment, conducted in March 2014. Three out of four Amherst students indicated they were very lonely within the last year, a full 20% higher than the national average. One out of three Amherst students reported feeling very lonely within the last 2 weeks.

MHAWC also chose to focus on loneliness and social connection because improvement in these areas has the potential to create a ripple effect that would positively impact other areas of mental health, physical health and academic performance. Sense of belonging is strongly correlated to academic performance and having positive social connections is the strongest single determinant of flourishing and well-being and is a protective factor for depression, suicide risk, and physical illness.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather more information on student experiences and to solicit ideas to address loneliness and improve social connection on campus. In addition, we believed that the very act of holding conversations about students' experiences of social connection would be beneficial.

Themes

Where Community is Found

There was a strong consensus that there isn't an overarching sense of community at Amherst, but that community exists within smaller groups. There are very few shared experiences to bring students together and give them common ground to talk about or "bond over," e.g. core curriculum, campus traditions, all-community events. Students felt the social options were limited and there weren't many opportunities to meet people and socialize outside of parties. A number of students mentioned they missed AC After Dark programming. Students also noted that there are not many physical spaces on campus that are conducive to mingling and being social. Each space has a dedicated purpose: the library is for studying, the Power House is for parties, and Val can be uncomfortable to navigate socially and is subject to strict unspoken seating arrangements.

Social Stratification and Rigidity

Students emphasized that social life is characterized by stratification, cliquishness, and rigidity. While a sense of community can be found within smaller groups (e.g. teams, identity groups, clubs), this often comes at the cost of exclusivity. Groups can be experienced as confining/stifling as there is often the sense that it is mandatory to socialize within your group and socializing outside the group is passively or actively discouraged. Some students described the experience of belonging to a group that was not a

good fit for them, and feeling trapped because they were afraid they would lose all social connection, no matter how unsatisfying, if they left the group. Several students mentioned that their primary motivation to join a sports team was for social connection, but they chose to leave the team because it wasn't a good fit. They characterized their experience on and off the team as "dramatically different," like being in "two different worlds." Students acknowledged that while belonging to a group has its challenges, not belonging is even worse, and mentioned "shadow Amherst," described as students who aren't visible or connected.

Most students agreed it was very difficult to socialize across group lines, though there were a couple of exceptions who consciously chose to "ignore the rules" and be friendly with students with a range of social affiliations. A few students noted that in high school they'd socialized freely across group lines, but quickly realized it wasn't acceptable to do that here. One student noted that attempts to address the problem of disconnection often take the form of creating another group, which is usually homogenous, therefore reinforcing the problem.

Success Vs. Vulnerability and Authenticity

This theme emerged consistently throughout the focus groups and seemed to have the strongest negative impact on students. Students described Amherst as a culture that expects smartness, achievement, success and invulnerability from its students, and constantly validates these qualities. Students experience pressure to live up to these standards, and perceive that there is no room for failure, flaws or difficulties. Students reported feeling that they couldn't share vulnerability with others, and therefore dealt with their problems alone. This effectively cut off support when they needed it most. Because difficulty and struggle are not aired publicly, students feel they "are the only one who _____," thus increasing their isolation. The vulnerability taboo prevents students from being authentic when they are struggling, which inhibits them from forming the genuine connections that are made by allowing others to see who we are. Several students mentioned imposter syndrome, and the need to put on a façade of invulnerability and it was noted that not acknowledging loneliness magnifies loneliness.

Workload

A few students mentioned that the heavy workload precludes time for self-care, developing friendships and maintaining good mental health. Students expressed frustration that they often feel they are neglecting the friendships they do have because they simply have too much to do. However, students acknowledged that academic stress is the one (and only) difficulty that is acceptable to talk about publicly.

Harmful Narratives

Students identified several narratives that exacerbate social pressure and loneliness. Foremost among these is the achievement/success narrative that excludes vulnerability, e.g. "Our students are brilliant, climbed Mt. Everest, won a Nobel Peace prize, etc." invites a sense of inadequacy, negative comparisons and questions of, "Do I belong here," "How did I get in/did Admissions make a mistake on me?" "Am I smart enough?" and "Why can't I do that?"

A number of students thought that the “Amherst Awkward” narrative may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It has become so normalized that students feel that it’s okay to not bother making an effort to be friendly. A couple of students mentioned that being told that “college is the best 4 years of your life,” and “you meet your best for life friends in college” contributed to a sense of inadequacy and social pressure.

Things that Work

A few students mentioned that when they had the opportunity to connect with other students one-on-one, the conversations they had were often “amazing,” but that these encounters happened by chance. There was a sense that the student body is a phenomenal untapped resource; we have amazing students and the potential for great friendships between them, but these connections simply aren’t happening. A few students mentioned “breaking the social rules,” e.g. pushing through the Amherst Awkward and saying “Hi,” sitting with the athletes, etc.

Students identified several programs that effectively created a structure for meeting and interacting with diverse groups of students and building community. These included: Pindar dinners, AC After Dark, CEOT trips, and orientation. However, students felt there was a lack of follow-up, and connections that had been made subsequently dwindled away.

Several students also noted that having a sense of purpose or a role in which they contributed to the community made them feel more invested and connected. Examples included being an RC, SHE, PA or member of the Student Wellness Team.

Ideas/Suggestions

Students liked the idea of having more shared experiences to bring them together, including traditions and community events. It was noted that the fall festival and winter carnival are enjoyable events, but that students go with their friends don’t tend to meet new people. A regularly scheduled “community hour” with a planned activity was suggested. Students also liked the idea of structured interaction, e.g. Pindar dinners, coaches mandating teams to mingle in Val, hosting events that bring two different groups together. Similarly, students expressed the desire for faculty to facilitate greater interaction through encouraging discussion and group study sessions, making introductions and using students’ names, and by ensuring that classroom conversations are inclusive and culturally sensitive. In addition to creating structured opportunities for students to interact, students noted the importance of creating physical spaces that encourage students to mingle, meet each other and socialize.

Positive Messaging

Students felt strongly that they need to hear messages that counterbalance the “success narrative,” including stories of struggle, and failure. Students want to be told that, “It’s not always going to be easy or perfect, but you can make it!” Students also wanted to know that they could, “make friends anytime,” to address the anxiety that if they didn’t make friends during orientation, or by the end of first year, the window of opportunity closed.

There was discussion in several focus groups about the benefit of developing a higher “awkward tolerance,” and recognizing that it’s important to be friendly even though it isn’t always socially comfortable or easy. The perfectionistic culture created by the “success narrative” may make students feel that they should be skilled at any endeavor they engage in, thereby discouraging the risk-taking that is integral to building new relationships. In a similar vein, students thought that it was important to de-stigmatize aloneness, and convey that spending time alone, in public or private, is a valid and healthy choice. Several students mentioned the idea of being an active bystander socially, by actively reaching out, inviting others to events, being inclusive, and checking in with a student if they appeared to be upset. A few students shared that another student acting in this role had made a huge difference in helping them integrate into Amherst social life.

Next Steps

Language

The focus groups emphasized that the way we talk to and about students has an enormous impact. In particular, we need to change the way we portray the “Amherst student,” and “success.” Students would benefit greatly from a college-wide shift from what researcher Carol Dweck, Ph.D. has labeled a “fixed mindset” to a “growth mindset.” A fixed mindset focuses on accomplishments that are the result of inherent qualities, talents and accomplishments, and are therefore unchangeable, whereas a growth mindset focuses on lifelong learning, growth, improvement and change that are the result of a person’s behavior. We need to highlight the hard work, struggle and mistakes that go into accomplishment, and encourage students to take risks. We ought to highlight the process of learning, not only the end result. This means granting students permission to be beginners and “bad” at a new skill or area of knowledge before they become good at it. It will be important to share the concerns surfaced by the focus groups with key offices, such as Admissions, Public Affairs, and the orientation committee, to strategize how to feature success and accomplishment in a way that does not erode students’ sense of self.

Programming

Several programs that facilitate social connection were cited in the focus groups, and it was suggested that they include a follow-up component, e.g. Pindar dinners, CEOT trips, orientation. Results also suggest that mentoring programs may help facilitate students’ adjustment and build social connections between years. There are a couple of new mentor programs underway, including one at the MRC and one pairing Student Support Network training graduates with incoming transfer students and returning students.

A few students mentioned that meaningful involvement contributed to a sense of belonging. There may be opportunities to incorporate a community service component into Residential Life, first year seminar, or other areas of student life.

There is also likely benefit to programs targeted at shifting harmful aspects of the campus culture and creating healthy dialogue. Examples include the Day of Dialogue, the programs Life Stories and Stories

of Amherst which provide a forum for the community to share strengths, vulnerabilities and challenges, the “I’mperfect campaign,” and the Facebook pages “Humans of Amherst” and “Show and Tell.”

Belonging and Mindset Interventions

Research out of Stanford and U of T is showing that short, online belonging and/or mindset interventions can have a long-term impact on disadvantaged students’ academic performance and mental health. The interventions are usually administered online to the incoming class prior to their arrival on campus and involve reading an essay targeting specific areas of concern and completing a writing assignment, taking less than 45 minutes to complete.

Students receiving the “belonging” intervention read messages from upperclassmen explaining that they felt alone and excluded when they arrived on campus, but then realized that everyone felt that way and eventually began to feel at home. Students receiving the “mind-set” intervention read an article about the malleability of the brain and how practice makes it grow new connections, and then read messages from upperclassmen stating that when they arrived on campus they worried about not being smart enough, but then learned that when they studied they grew smarter. Students were then asked to write their own reflections on what they’d read in order to help future students.

The results showed that these interventions had no apparent impact on advantaged students, but that it significantly improved the academic performance of disadvantaged students, cutting the performance gap between themselves and the advantaged students in half compared to the control group. The researchers speculate that the interventions work with “students facing the particular fears and anxieties and experiences of exclusion that come with being a minority — whether by race or by class — who are susceptible to this problem [self-doubt]. Those students often misinterpret temporary setbacks as a permanent indication that they can’t succeed or don’t belong. For those students, the intervention can work as a kind of inoculation. And when, six months or two years later, the germs of self-doubt try to infect them, the lingering effect of the intervention allows them to shrug off those doubts exactly the way the advantaged students do.”

Mindset interventions have also been shown to “inoculate” high school students from developing depression at a time that is particularly high risk. These interventions are low-cost with huge potential impact and can be tailored to address the specific concerns raised in the focus groups.