EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS: FOSTERING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS FOR THE TEACHER CANDIDATE

Invited CSOTTE Organization Editorial:
Texas Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

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TACTE President, 2020-2021

Mental health and wellness are at the forefront of discussions across our state, nation, and world. Almost daily, we hear of an athlete, artist, actor, influencer, friend, family member, etc. who is "taking" a break for their mental well-being. We hear of others disengaging from various information formats to take a break, rest, and rejuvenate their mind, body, or soul. We are inundated with commercials on how this product or that can help one increase their emotional well-being. We are also flooded with the reporting of mass-shootings, the high cost of inflation, discussions on the political climate, employment rates, and acts of violence against various groups. As we enter this "post-pandemic" period, teachers are leaving the education profession at higher numbers than ever before, while large numbers of students are choosing to not enter higher education for varying reasons. Many of these reasons are discussed as feelings of fear, tiredness, being overwhelmed, feeling alone, and so on. Therefore, it seems addressing the emotional wellness or welfare of the student is critical for the success of the education system, both the Prekindergarten through grade twelve (P-12), higher education, and alternative certification environments.

The candidates currently entering EPPs, labeled Generation Z (Gen Z), are on average between the ages of 18 – 26. Researchers have characterized the motivation of Gen Z as the desire to create relationships, advocate for something they care about, not let others down, and to make a difference. They are often described as loyal, compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, responsible, motivated, and determined. However, many Gen Z's have described themselves as lazy, curious, carefree, motivated, positive, and excited. Based on their experiences, these students are seen to be seeking opportunities, advancement, and financial stability. However, many students have seen their parents in great debt due to college loans, parents laid off from employment due to economic issues, and due to the pandemic have experienced a great amount of loss. These experiences often cause the student anxiety when entering the college setting.

According to research 65-70% of college dropouts left for reasons other than academics. Mental health was cited as one of those reasons. Students coming out of the pandemic have discussed the loss of experience, quality, and trust. Many have also discussed a fear of missing out (FOMO). During the COVID-19 Pandemic, across our nation, campuses (both in lower and higher education) closed, others went completely online, while still others worked through a flex model providing both in-person and virtual learning options. Though these models were put in place as a necessity to address an immediate need to further students' development, students have still identified that this period brought about feelings of loss, including loss of relationships and experiences they would have had on campuses. Students have discussed feelings of isolation and not being connected. This loss of connection includes the relationship with their teachers, advisors, instructors, and even their peers. Many also identified this loss in relation to the quality of the experiences either in the classroom or on the campus, such as the normal activities in which a graduating senior or incoming college freshman would participate. Many students have discussed that adjusting to the demands of being on campus, in a classroom, in-person, after being alone or online for a time, has been physically demanding. Informally, as we have spoken with our current students, many have simply discussed the idea of being tired. Many have chosen this summer to go home, to camp, to do something non-academic for the purposes of relaxation and rejuvenation of their mind, body, and soul.

EPP Support for Mitigating Stress, Anxiety, and Burnout

Many EPPs, as well as other education and employment organizations, have begun researching, exploring, and implementing methods to assist in the development of the learner's grit and self-actualization. Below is a list of some of these methods. These have been gathered from several different sources, EPPs, research articles, texts, journals, etc. Some or many of the methods listed below you may already be implementing, but hopefully, there is something for everyone to consider.

These suggestions are provided, hopefully, in an effort of collaboration and support for the candidates in your EPP.

- Establish expectations that are rigorous, realistic, and reachable for each student. Help the student to set goals by program, semester, and/or course.
- Facilitate candidates' responsibility and ownership for their learning. During the pandemic, too many candidates have alluded to the idea that, while in high school, they floated or were "given" a grade.
- Provide opportunity for self-reflection. However, self-reflection may not be a natural characteristic of all candidates. Therefore, the faculty, staff, or mentor, may need to help the student to develop this trait.
- Assist candidates in filtering data. Candidates are overloaded with information through many different formats. Help candidates identify the source of the information, determine if the source is credible, evaluate the information as necessary or extraneous, assess if the information is based on fact or opinion, etc.
- Ensure candidates have the tools necessary to successfully do their work.
- Create a physically and emotionally safe learning environment. Candidates need to be self-actualized learners (Maslow). Therefore, each candidate must know how to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize (Bloom's). However, to do this, the emotional and physical needs of the candidate must be met. How can an EPP help in meeting these needs?
- Provide support mechanisms to reduce feelings of fatigue and burnout. Who can a student turn to when these feelings surface? Is a counseling service provided by the university or alternative certification program? If so, how does the student connect to those services?
- Design a faster-paced learning environment. Break content into chunks, more hands-on activities, rigorous/meaningful questions, make connections, etc.
- Embrace the long-term impact that COVID-19 will have on our Colleges of Education and Educator Preparation Programs.
- Improve the personal/professional experience. Find out the strengths and areas of improvement for your program from past candidates.
- Create positive connections/relationships with candidates/peers, faculty, staff, and advisors.
- Connect the candidate with a mentor to avoid "Summer Melt". The "Summer Melt" phenomenon happens once a student is accepted to a university and the first day of fall classes. During the summer, accepted candidates often disconnect, and therefore do not show up for classes in the fall. This does not just happen at universities, it impacts alternative certification programs as well, when candidates are accepted, but classes, courses, internship, etc. may not start for a month or two. The mentor makes continual contact throughout this period to build a relationship that helps to keep the candidate engaged, answers questions that arise, and to help as needed.
- Provide a non-academic mentor throughout, or at for the least first year, of the program. The mentor should meet regularly with the candidate to discuss non-academic needs. Be strategic. For instance, if you are a university EPP, request freshman/sophomore candidates who's major is education. This goes beyond the student/advisor or student/faculty relationship. This person can help the student with non-academic issues, such as connecting candidate resources for housing concerns, counseling needs, financial issues, tutoring, etc.
- Model a growth mindset for all learners and help the student develop a growth mindset of their own.
- Construct opportunities for individualization and relevancy (Voice / Choice) through assignments, collaborative work, discussion boards, in-class discussions, small group activities, etc.
- Provide authentic and timely feedback, not just for assignments, but about professional or collaborative traits, such as designing a professionalism rubric. The professionalism rubric may address such things as collaboration or communication with peers, ethical conduct, professional attitude and dress,
- Create situations for the student to be responsible for their own decision-making.
- Develop real-world on-the-job field experiences, such as internships, residencies, and field experiences.
- Create inclusive learning environments that value diversity and enhance a sense of belonging within the EPP for all candidates.

The great news is that faculty and staff in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) know this information and are often the experts in developing these relationships, designing meaningful learning opportunities, and providing support structures. The faculty and staff of EPPs should be well suited to serve as models and resources for each other, for faculty and staff in other colleges within various university systems, as well as for the P-12 education systems for which each serve.

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