



Live with Sara Rutledge: Fostering a Trickle Effect of Happiness on Campus for Both Faculty and Students

SPEAKERS

Sara Rutledge, Tierney King

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast, and I'm your host Tierney King. I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by The Wellbeing Elixir, Magna's brand-new wellness course for educators, where experts will help guide you through wellbeing and resilience. Alright, today we have Sarah Rutledge with us who is a professor of education and department chair person at Mount Aloysius College. This is actually her 17th year at Mount Aloysius and 27th year as an educator, so just start us off and kind of explain you know how you became interested in these concepts of wellness, wellbeing, mindfulness, mental health, and happiness.

Sara Rutledge 00:50

So as a professor of education, I teach a course in our teacher education program titled EDC 290 health, physical education and nutrition in early childhood and elementary classrooms. And in this course we discuss a variety of health and wellness topics. And I model and my students engage in numerous classroom activities and topics that promote general wellness in the classroom, including the overall early childhood and elementary classroom environment, such as flexible seating, so using beanbag chairs, stools, pillows, standing desks, desk configurations that promote wellness like U-shaped configurations for activity space and small desk pods for interaction. I talk about integrating mindfulness, meditation, and yoga into the classroom. I connect my students with great online resources such as GoNoodle, PE with Joe Wicks on YouTube, and the Child Mind Institute and Mindful Schools. I share with them mindfulness toolkits, which discusses the research on how mindfulness in the classroom and how it promotes positivity, creativity, and connection, and helps the students stay focused and calm. We talk about lighting options, playing background music and nature sounds in the classroom, using plants in the classroom. We talk about the growth mindset and using positive talk, and so in that 290 class, I model mindful moments at the beginning of class. We do five-minute breathing exercises, morning stretches. We use music and yoga. So in general, and all of my teacher prep classes, I discuss, obviously, the textbook content, the required curriculum, and you know, making sure that the students are prepared to be wonderful teachers and prepared to take their PECT, their Pennsylvania Education Certification Test. In the classroom, I also talk about keys for success in the education department, which include a wide variety of tips, study tips, those kinds of things. And I also share my own planner that I use on a daily basis with my students. And that's good for them to see how

I organize my day, so they can better organize their day to promote, you know, just a healthy day for themselves. And that includes things like, you know, getting enough water, getting enough sleep, integrating mindfulness and meditation into my morning and evening routine, you know, checking the rings on my watch, reading, gratitude, and planning my workout and healthy meals for the day. So I actually model this for the students. So I got interested in this because my student evaluations for this course have always been very positive. And our students end up doing very well on the content portion of the pact. So I know that student engagement and learning are high in that class. And in addition to discussing classroom strategies, I also try to model outside of the classroom how future teachers can stay healthy in regards to their physical and mental health and wellness. So once again, I show them my planner, and I'm open with them about how I manage stress in my daily life in a healthy way.

Tierney King 03:45

Real quick, have you always shared this stuff? Or just recently because of you know, the pandemic? Did you just integrate this?

Sara Rutledge 03:53

No, I've always shared with my students tips for organization and planning and having a calendar. And that does ease stress and anxiety during the day if you plan your day out the night before, and you're really intentional about maybe, you know, your three main priorities for the day and, you know, just prepping and setting up your next day for success. Yeah, so I've always done that, that's kind of a teacher thing.

Tierney King 04:18

So you've been setting them up for success even before the pandemic hit them, right?

Sara Rutledge 04:22

Exactly, exactly. So lastly, just in relation to that all faculty are required to include a statement in their syllabus on mental health and services and resources offered on campus, including virtual and in-person counseling services. And they do offer a large variety of day and evening hours. But yeah, faculty are required to put that in their syllabus.

Tierney King 04:43

And then you know, you have a whole list of things where your faculty, yourself, and your university are doing to kind of foster this positivity. So you know, rather than just focused in your class where you're doing all these things, it's become a lot broader and bigger spectrum at your university, and so take us through some of those things that you've done at the university or that your university has been doing.

Sara Rutledge 05:07

So three things: First of all, I'm preparing preservice teachers to create healthy classroom spaces when they become teachers. Secondly, I'm preparing preservice teachers to make their own health and wellness a priority as future teachers with a long career ahead of them in education. I mean, some of them might be teaching, possibly over 30 years. So not only do I talk about it, but I model it and so do the other faculty in the department. And once again, promoting health and wellness among the students in our department is important to all of us. So that's what I'll be talking about next, which is things that

we do with and for our students in the education department now, and in the recent past. So as faculty in the department, we all look at our students in a holistic way, you know? What is their life like on campus in and out of the classroom? So to begin, when I became chair of the education department, I intentionally moved our department to a new building - it has lots of light and lots of space. And all the faculty in our department do a lot to promote overall wellness. It's easy for us because many of our students are already student athletes. So overall, most of our students are active. A lot of them want to become teachers and possibly coaches or athletic directors. So it's it's kind of a healthy culture to begin with. But in my office, I have a hospitality center in my department chair office, which includes coffee, tea, cider, a hot chocolate bar, I have snacks, we do have some students that have gluten allergy, so I have gluten free snacks. I have lots of flexible seating. I've purchased oriental rugs and soft lighting. And so it's a nice comfortable space for the students to come into and hang out with each other and me a little bit. So that's nice. I change up my office hours a lot. So I sometimes have walk and talk office hours. So we have a campus loop around campus, and I'll put a sign on my door and say, you know today we have walk and talk office hours. And we also have a wellness center on campus that has an indoor walking track. And so sometimes if it's winter and it's icy, I'll do my walk and talk office hours in the indoor track, but if it's nice outside, we just walk around campus. And it's kind of a nice informal way for students to say, "You know, I'm not really sure if I want to be a classroom teacher. I think I might want to work at a museum or be a museum educator." And it's just kind of a nice, relaxed way to talk to them about what they want their life to look like. We also do lunch with the professors in the campus cafeteria. So once a week, I'll have lunch in the campus cafeteria, and I have a little sign that says lunch with the professors and the students can come and they swipe their meal card and they just come and sit and eat with me, and so that's super relaxed. During COVID, you know during the the heat of it last fall, our campus administration rented red and white striped circus tents, and they were all over campus. Every student on campus was given a Mount Aloysius College camping chair with a logo on it, and we were motivated to then have class outside which was super safe. We were still masked, we were still spread out, and the students had their camping chairs with little, you know, carrying straps on him. But it was nice. It showed that the campus administration really cared about health and wellness and safety. And so we were out there until October. It was a great, it was really fun. But just overall on campus, it is kind of a model of best practices in terms of health and safety, especially during COVID. I'll give you some examples. Our administration purchased Adirondack chairs, hammocks, and so there were lots of opportunities for students to learn and study and be together outside in a safe and healthy way. But the other thing that our campus community did was they expanded the WiFi so students could bring their own mobile devices and stay connected all over campus. And it was nice for students to be engaged in club events and even classes we had outside. Other things that our campus did just in general, and things that we do in the education department, is we always post event posters in the classroom for kayaking trips, ski club, hiking club, you know, we live on this beautiful campus in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. So we are fortunate that there we have a lot of beautiful outdoor spaces and a lot of things the students can do. Students can easily see the posters about weekly yoga and spinning classes on the hallway bulletin boards, you know, outside of our classroom. Our professors also serve as positive role models for our students. So this fall the faculty in our department were running half marathons and 5Ks, we were playing golf and tennis and riding horses and hiking and the students hear us talk about those things when we're switching classes and it's really fun. So I think that really helps the students see that we care about them in and out of the classroom. We integrate a lot of music into the classroom into teaching and lectures. I have tea with the teacher

during special office hours in my office, we do picnic lunches outside, we do a lot of posting motivational signs and quotes in bathrooms and classrooms, and things like that. We hold department meetings with our students, which we do twice a year, so that's really good for the students actually to feel like they're part of a community and a group and that they're welcome - we do a fall meeting and a spring kickoff meeting, and at those meetings that we have twice a year, we give away prizes that promote health and wellness like water bottles and little cool hats for outside exercising in the cold. And you know, we spin a little virtual wheel and students win prizes and things, it's super fun. Other things we do is we host guest speakers in the classroom. We host a professionals and education panel every other spring where we bring our alumni back in a panel format to talk about their experiences as first-year teachers and as experienced teachers, district administrators, etc. So students and undergraduate students have the opportunity then to ask questions at the end. It's really fun for them to see, you know, what our alumni are doing out in the world. Classrooms and faculty office spaces include a variety of signs and posters about the spaces being safe spaces, and that all are welcome here and things like that. So we think that helps to promote wellness. We volunteer together so students and faculty volunteer together on and off campus. So even during COVID, you know, we had a trunk or treat and our students volunteered to help with trunk or treat. One of our students who's an RA invited me to give a diversity presentation at the end of the semester. And we painted glow board events with glitter on them, and it was really nice, it was for all students on campus, but a lot of the education students came and that was really fun. We do virtual study night now, for midterms and finals. But we usually do a study night at the library where there are snacks and they bring dogs, therapy dogs, and the students love it during finals week. It gives them a little mental health break, you know, they have beautiful trays that have like sandwiches and food, cookies and chips and drinks. And then they bring these dogs, and now we haven't done that during COVID, but we have virtual study night. So we do different things now, but you know, I think it's really good also for faculty to attend the events that our students are engaged in. So if we have a student that has an art show in art gallery, we go and see it, or if we have a student that's in a play, we go and see the play, or a choral concert. And so if they're involved in that we go, but you know, we go to their athletic events. And it doesn't have to mean you have to go to every soccer game or every basketball game, but it's really nice. I really try to make at least one athletic event for all the students in our department, you know, whether it's, you know, men's baseball game, or women's basketball game, or whatever it is. And they, it sounds really cheesy, but the students really appreciate when you go to their games, and you have like a Mountie sweatshirt on. You know, it sounds like such a little thing, but if you're on campus, and you just wait a half an hour and a game starts, if you just go and grab, they always have free hotdogs and things, you know, you just go grab a little dinner. And it's fun to be with the students outside of the classroom too. But I teach an aesthetics course in the spring, and so we will take a winter, indoor stained glass walking tour of the main building, which was built in the 1890s. We have beautiful stained glass, and so that's nice for students to get a little bit of, you know, a little art history background of the college that they're living at. So that's fun. Other things that I think are really great for our students is when we make our classroom lectures very hands-on so they can see how the theory applies to the practice to the art and science of teaching. So our science methods instructor this fall, you know, she was like creating and launching hot air balloons with our students. They created board games. She did this whole unit on robotics and computer programming. She talked about the life cycle of the butterfly. So we have all these chrysalis all around the classroom in jars and it's really fun. I think it's great for the students. And I think it does help with our mental health

to be on campus, in-person with the professors even though we're masked and social distancing. I think it's great for them.

Tierney King 14:21

Have you seen like a trickle effect? I mean, you know, you put so much energy and positivity into all of these things and just attending events and trying to keep up this this happiness on campus. Kind of what kind of trickle effect have you seen in your students and students on campus?

Sara Rutledge 14:40

I see the older students mentoring a lot the new students, the transfer students, the freshmen students, because it's hard. I mean education major, it's hard. I mean there's a lot going on. And so I do see that the older, you know, students in department love on the new students, and they say "Yeah, you know, it's hard." But I see them when they go out and do their pre-student teaching and their student teaching. That for me is so exciting because I teach freshmen and I teach seniors and I see them, you know, fall semester freshman year, they have me for class, and then I see them their senior year, and it's just so great to see their growth, you know, over the four years, but then also to watch them in the classroom. And while they're student teaching with their own students, and to see how much their students love them, and I love to go in and, you know, I can see them taking, you know, small breaks with the students. Yeah, it's, it's great to see that.

Tierney King 15:36

Did you have anything that changed, you know, these past few years just being online, or preparing maybe students to teach online? Did you have to change, you know, kind of your curriculum a little bit for when you're preparing these future teachers?

Sara Rutledge 15:52

Absolutely. So I teach the technology and education course, and our students actually, within that course become Google certified. So they become Google for Education, certified educators level one. And that's a great tool for them in terms of teaching, but also, you know, on their resume in terms of, you know, getting jobs that are already, you know, Google certified before they even graduate. But yes, we talk a lot about that, and also, I feel like I'm more intentional now about talking about giving your students brain breaks and movement breaks and things like that, because yeah, some of them are teaching online.

Tierney King 16:29

Did you teach online for a little part of it as well?

Sara Rutledge 16:33

Yes, we did pivot to online.

Tierney King 16:35

So when you, you know, when you pivoted, you guys have such amazing things that you integrated to try to get everyone back in person. But when you're online, what was most useful or helpful for you when you were teaching online?

Sara Rutledge 16:47

For me personally, trying to have as many live meetings with my students as I can, having live virtual office hours, where they could send me an email and say, "Can I talk to you about this assignment," and they could at least see me live virtually, you know. I think they had a harder time with the asynchronous where I was just posting things, and they were just responsible for reading and doing papers and discussion boards. They actually did better when they were able to be with me this way. And it was actually nice for me, because I had some students who I didn't even know what they looked like, because I've only ever seen them in masks. And actually I kind of like the virtual office hours, I'll be honest with you, because I'm like, I didn't even know that's what you look like! So I actually don't mind that, and I'm splitting my office hours for the spring. I'm doing some in-person and some online, and I'm letting the students choose what's good for them. So if they do have a question on a Sunday afternoon, or they're working on a paper on a Friday, or whatever, I can help them virtually, which is great, but I do like to see their faces.

Tierney King 17:49

Alright, and then lastly, just you know, kind of anything else that we might have missed or that you wanted to share that you've done on campus?

Sara Rutledge 17:56

I also like promoting other campus events outside of the education department. So like I said before, we get to post a lot of informational flyers about things going on campus. But if there are movie nights, or bonfires, or cornhole tournament, you know, 5Ks on campus, any of those kinds of things, too, I think it's good to even just in your morning announcement, and you know, when the students are coming in, just say, "Hey, don't forget, I'll see you tonight at the cornhole tournament," anything to get students out of the dorm, you know, and moving and meeting new students. And it has been really challenging during COVID, but we're fortunate to be, you know, on this large campus, you know, 193 acres in the Allegheny Mountains, and we have a great campus activities coordinator who's always trying to promote new things. A couple other things I wanted to talk about was hosting guest speakers in the classroom. I think bringing in, not only our alumni, but other you know, guest speakers who are professionals in the field or retired teachers are great to bring in to kind of give the students a good perspective. I believe that getting the students into the real world for observations, teaching lessons, tutoring service conferences are all great experiential learning opportunities for them. And it keeps them involved and motivated throughout their four years. So they, you know, once again, they're they're going and teaching at the campus lab schools. They're teaching health, nutrition and physical education lessons at those sites in the spring. We take our students to professional conferences, so this fall, they attended two conferences, and tomorrow they're attending a virtual conference. And then in April, they're also attending a virtual conference. So I think all those activities are making our students feel more connected to us, to each other, and to the education profession even during COVID with masking and all these other protocols in place.

Tierney King 19:52

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