FOSTERING RESILIENCE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES | Belonging from a Distance
INTRODUCTION

College and university resident and student affairs professionals are in the business of student resilience. On large and small and public and private campuses across the United States, higher education leaders help students prepare for life’s challenges, providing a supportive space to navigate adversity, apply critical thinking skills to solve problems and prepare for a world that is constantly changing. Over the last decade, higher education has been bombarded by a variety of complex issues—the needs of growing numbers of first-generation students, technology, campus security, financial stewardship, deferred maintenance and student retention.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, those operational, policy and budget challenges may seem insignificant compared to the depths of this current crisis where each day brings an overwhelming number of decisions that impact the health and safety of every member of your campus community. Within those decisions are implications for the culture of your campus—today and tomorrow. As partners in student life, our entire Sodexo team is also imagining the post-pandemic future of higher education, the nation and the world.

Although 2020 spring semester planning did not include pandemic response and its ripple effects on mental health, our Sodexo team can apply best practices from our work managing more than 13,000 beds worldwide through our Student Living, residence life and accommodation offer.

Every member of your campus community is experiencing some combination of fear, anxiety, isolation and stress. While the emergency is ongoing, with students dispersed and staff and faculty working remotely, is there an opportunity to foster a deeper sense of campus identity and belonging and to help nurture resilience?
**TOGETHER, APART**

You may be working from a home office, spare bedroom or the kitchen table. Perhaps there are international students still living on campus and eating in the dining hall. Your campus may even be partnering with the state or local health system and be preparing to house COVID-19 patients. Faculty are likely ramping up distance learning. Continuity plans are being tested and refined.

**But, how is everyone really doing these days?**

Essential to mental health is the need to build resilience. There are two parts to resilience. First, resilience speaks to how quickly we can respond to or recover from difficulties. Second, in psychological terms, resilience is understanding the brain’s and body’s natural reactions to adversity, trauma and stress, acknowledging them and adapting to them.

Here’s some great news: the majority of your students know that their wellness and mental health are important priorities at your college or university. According to the American College Health Association’s (ACHA) fall 2019 survey, 84% of undergraduate respondents somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed that their college or university prioritizes student health and well-being. That same percentage of respondents also agreed that their campus was a place where students “looked out for one another.” The vital work your teams have done to build vibrant student life, counseling, wellness and other supporting mental health infrastructure means that your undergraduates know that their college and university communities care for them.

Our Sodexo teams are involved in these community care paradigms. Our Student Living teams and partners are trained in Mental Health First Aid. These evidence-based courses provide trainees with five clear steps for how to immediately assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance abuse crisis until professional treatment can be obtained.

The challenge now: how do we look out for one another from a distance? Beyond virtual classroom experiences, how do we reconnect the campus during and then after COVID-19? How do we make sure students have the resources and space to build their resilience and seek support and help if they are struggling?

**IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND IN-REACH**

You are undoubtedly aware of the statistics regarding mental health struggles facing 21st century students. Pre-pandemic, stress has persisted as a core challenge for undergraduates, with over 76% reporting moderate to severe stress in the previous month. The ACHA survey also demonstrates steady and growing levels of feelings aligned with anxiety or depression in 18-24 year-old students. The feelings of fear, worry and isolation all members of your campus community are experiencing are amplified for students who already face mental health challenges.

It is likely that your campus counseling and wellness centers have already begun deploying new methods to reach students, and that is essential work. Of the 25% of students who report accessing mental health services during college, over half of them utilize on-campus counseling centers, with another 22% accessing counseling centers near campus. For those students to continue with their mental health services, which are more important now than ever before, they may need immediate support and encouragement in connecting with mental health providers near their homes. Alternately, campus counseling centers can use telehealth portals to work directly and continue care.

Beyond students with acute needs, all students need tools that help them transform the current multi-layered adversity into resilience. Data show they are ready for this growth and learning. Even in this time of social distancing, students are more likely than not to be ready to connect and seek help. According to ACHA, over 75% of undergraduates report that they would seek help for a problem or issue that was really bothering them. Identifying ways to use communication tools for in-reach to be proactively available for those students who are experiencing unprecedented levels of new stress will be essential in the coming weeks and months.
WELCOME

Often the instinct for leaders during emergency events is to focus on demonstrating unrelenting competence. You may believe that your students and their families need unflinching leaders who continue rolling out plans and clear guidance in the thick of the chaos — akin to the weatherperson who delivers the forecast while standing in the hurricane.

While leadership does require courage and confidence, what your students likely need more than anything is what attracted them to campus in the first place: a sense of warmth and welcome. Sodexo’s research on student recruitment and retention demonstrates that 80% of students note “friendliness” as the characteristic most important to their decision to attend their college or university of choice. Virtual opportunities, texting, phone calls and other points of in-reach are all logical ways to remind students that their campus home is still friendly, warm and welcoming.

TOUCHPOINTS

There is no shortage of literature about the lack of resilience among 21st century students, but your students also know how to ask for help and what makes them feel supported. Sodexo’s research on connection, retention and student satisfaction reveals that resident students feel most supported when they have two conversations or check-ins with their Resident Assistant (RA) each week. So, during this time, it makes sense to rally your RA team to text, call or create a virtual hangout with their residents as a cheerful way to reengage with students who are feeling isolated. It also may be time to reconsider how to connect with your commuter and off-campus students, perhaps applying some of the same tools you use for your resident students. These practices may actually inform and improve efforts when students return to campus.

Everyone is feeling a bit left out these days. Your students are missing traditions, rituals, games, clubs and other events they cherish — both the milestones and the mundane are absent right now. Seniors are likely wondering about commencement, but they are also missing opportunities for internships, on-campus job recruiting and guidance from the career center. Support your students in making space to express disappointment and sadness, too. Under typical circumstances, the AHCA survey reveals that 65% of undergraduates sometimes feel left out, from social events or campus routines.

The AHCA data mirror findings uncovered in Sodexo’s research with Skyfactor: the degree to which people care about your success, make you feel valued and know who you are strongly contributes to the notion of recognition, which is highly correlated to student retention. How might the campus unite now and generate even more high-value, meaningful touchpoints for your students, no matter where they are?

Regardless of how your team and your students design and use these touchpoints, what your students will remember most right now are the personal connections and demonstrations of care. Loyalty and retention post-pandemic will be strengthened by these common bonds and the recognition that their college or university strove to ensure everyone was included during this time. These moments also call for including students in celebrating the active support your college or university may be providing in the community. Are your team members donating food or supplies? Are your students providing online tutoring to K-12 kids? Some of your students’ favorite Sodexo dining services employees may be redeployed to support our tireless healthcare workers—we have nearly 200 of those redeployed staff in the Boston area, alone.
SIMPLICITY

Along with delivering a sense of long-distance hospitality and warmth and increasing the variety and frequency of touchpoints, it’s good to keep communication direct, clear and simple. The 24-hour news-cycle coupled with constantly evolving state and local health and safety information means that many of us are drowning in the details. Students were suddenly flung back with their families or other living situations with new instructions from parents and other family members; many may have new caregiving responsibilities for siblings in addition to managing their classwork, papers and exam preparation. Professors and staff are likely setting up a variety of communication tools with students, depending on your technology platforms or norms. Asking students how they wish to receive updates, if possible, may be helpful. While 21st century students are digital natives, you might consider separating the social, the procedural and the academic digital platforms to give them distinct moments that are focused on work, pleasure and socialization.

Creating online ease and efficiency is perhaps more important now than before. In the 2019 National Student Satisfaction Report (NSSR), students felt that today’s campus “runaround” was more focused on navigating websites and other online information, rather than yesterday’s “runaround” which meant more literally walking from campus office to campus office. In either scenario, the NSSR data reveal that students feel more satisfaction and less stress when their college or university reduces barriers to information, a fact that may certainly be more useful now than ever. Since the 2018 NSSR survey, we have seen student satisfaction regarding avoiding “runaround” increase 6% at 4-year private and 13% at 4-year public colleges and universities, a reflection that correlates with work to improve the organization and navigation of online resources. Therefore, as staffs may be working remotely and there may be challenges with bandwidth or other issues, it is essential to maintain digital resources and provide timeline, program and service adjustments related to COVID-19.
Together, we are facing a moment that historians are likely to mark as one of the most stressful of the 21st century. Recognizing that resilience is critical to student retention, Sodexo has long-valued supporting our college and university partners in designing living-learning communities that help students adapt to change, maintain healthy habits and thrive.

Through our decades of collaboration with campus partners, market research and data, we have written and curated a body of resources and research on resilience and retention, much of which underpins recommendations in this paper. We will strengthen our campus communities if we use every opportunity to communicate, build touchpoints, foster warmth and welcome and be flexible. Beyond academics and procedural items, consider using APA’s key resilience-building behaviors to generate the themes of your student living messaging:

**Prioritize Relationships** – Social distancing doesn’t mean that relationships should be sacrificed. Campus leaders can help support virtual gatherings for students and their friends; this generation of digital natives leverages technology more than ever before.

**Join a Group** – Consider ways to extend campus organizations, support groups, clubs and other affinity groups; share campus network and technology solutions that allow everyone to feel included.

**Foster Wellness, Body, Mindfulness** – Share quick tips for mindfulness, and ask your students what they need. If you have a Sodexo chef or Registered Dietitian on your campus, they will gladly share recipes and healthy diet tips.

**Find Purpose, Share Culture** – Wherever they are, help your students remember they are part of a bigger community. If your college or university has cultural, religious, athletic or other traditions, find ways to adapt them and include students virtually; consider on-line spirit days and other moments to reconnect with campus identity. Help students share individual successes during this time, too. When students return to campus, they will share this common experience – this will be part of their culture, their memory and contribute to their life-long sense of college or university loyalty.

**CLOSING**

Mindset is vital to resilience; indeed, your mindset as a campus leader is an essential component. While response and continuity plans are unfolding, remembering your vision and mission and envisioning the future of your campus post-pandemic is essential. While the news is tough and is likely to remain so for a while, remaining hopeful and finding joy with your students is the way we can support an extended living-learning community. Each day, we will find new ways to connect the flexible fibers that support resilient students and campus communities.

Truly, we are in this together. Our Sodexo campus teams miss their daily interactions with students in residence halls and dining facilities. As we all collaborate and care for one another from a distance, we share the goal of fostering more resilient students and campuses that support student satisfaction, achievement and retention.