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The Story of Josie: From Involvement to Influence

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The Story of Josie: From Involvement to Influence

Abstract

This is a personal account of the author's journey through involvement with learning communities (LCs). She began college with little exposure to mentoring and research. Six years later, she graduated with a master's degree, a trove of experience from LCs, and the confidence to take on a research role in her profession. The author's personal roles in LCs over the years have taken many forms, but mainly relate to the mental health of college students. LCs have served as a vehicle for launching the author's career by helping her gain valuable experience in peer mentoring, research projects, and student poster presentations as well as providing opportunities to network, engage in professional development, and hone leadership skills. Student involvement is valuable throughout the LC experience to foster growth and development of not only the student, but the LC as well. The author witnessed firsthand the benefits of a partnership between students and LC team, demonstrating how much LCs benefit from integrating student input.

Keywords

peer mentor, student involvement, research

My name is Josie Mansperger, and I began my college experience in Fall 2014 at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) as a first-year student in the Dietetics program and member of the Honors Learning Community (HLC). After six years, I graduated from the Masters of Food and Nutrition program with a trove of experience from learning communities (LCs). As part of this path, I became involved as a member of the Health, Wellness, and You (HWAY) LC leadership team. The HWAY LC is designed specifically for incoming first-semester students with an interest in health, wellness, and/or research. The team overseeing the HWAY LC and corresponding in-person course consists of faculty mentors (Dr. Morgan, Dr. Kiss, and Dr. Ludy) and peer leaders (graduate/undergraduate students) in the form of research assistants and/or peer mentors. My involvement in the HWAY LC began as an undergraduate research assistant which led to my role as a peer mentor and continued throughout my graduate program.

This article presents an argument for strengthening peer leadership at the community, classroom, and individual levels. High impact practices (HIPs), such as LCs and undergraduate research, are utilized by universities to improve student attrition rates as well as promote student involvement and participation in campus activities (Kersh et al., 2018). LCs can serve as a vehicle for peer mentoring, research, and other HIPs. This integration provides students with opportunities to learn, grow, and become more involved resulting in improved retention rates and increased classroom engagement (Kersh et al., 2018).

As a case example, this article describes the impact of my experiences in LCs, in particular the HWAY LC, as a vehicle for launching my career. It explains how student contributions—my own and others'—have transformed the structure of the HWAY LC. Student voice can be the impetus for meaningful changes in LC learning outcomes and activities (Hill & Risolo, 2018). The collaboration between faculty, peer mentors, research assistants, and enrolled students has been a crucial element in determining the best format for the HWAY LC. This foundation can be utilized across other campuses to determine the best format for LCs. In order to appreciate the partnership of the LC team and benefits of integrating student input, it is important to explain the HWAY LC history (Figure 1) and collaborative research endeavors (Figure 2).

History of the Health, Wellness, and You Learning Community

BGSU is a large-sized, rural university located in Northwest Ohio. BGSU has over 20 LCs, including the HLC, which is one of the longest standing LCs, and the HWAY LC, which is one of the newest. The HWAY LC underwent many changes during my four-year involvement (Fall 2016-Spring 2020). It is important to note the history of this LC to understand its origins and trajectory. Figure 1 represents how a research study (conducted from Fall 2012–Spring 2016) served as the impetus for launching the HWAY LC in Fall 2016.

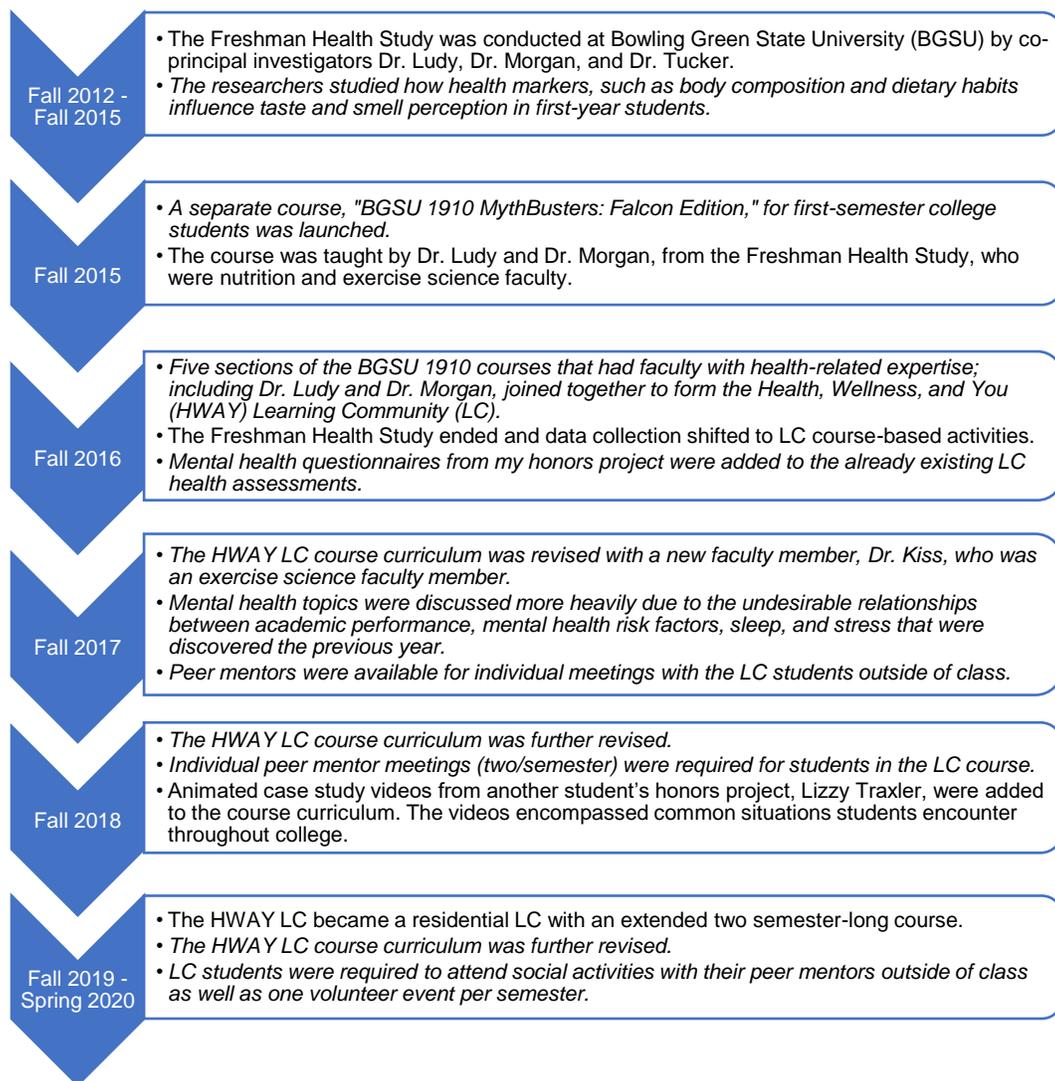


Figure 1. History of the Health, Wellness, and You Learning Community.

Josie's contributions can be found italicized in the timeline above.

Documenting the progression of the HWAY LC is a form of visible listening (Mino, 2014). It is a way for our LC team to visualize what we have learned and are continuing to learn every year. Documentation also allows the team to “revisit, reflect on, and integrate” new learning strategies (Mino, 2014). As seen in Figure 1, many LC changes that occurred between Fall 2016 and Spring 2020 stemmed from student assistant and peer mentor contributions. Student involvement led to the addition of mental health questionnaires, mental health topic discussions, peer mentor individual meetings, animated case study videos, social activities, and

volunteer work to the LC curriculum. These changes happened gradually, beginning during the years of my involvement in the HLC.

Josie's Learning Community Progression: From First-Year Member to Graduate Student Leader

Research Involvement

My journey and involvement with LCs began in Fall 2014. It was my first semester as an undergraduate student at BGSU, and I was a member of the HLC. Honors programs are known for their ability to engage undergraduate students with research opportunities (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). The HLC program provides students the option to complete an honors project, typically in their junior or senior year. Due to the scientific nature of my major (Dietetics), I knew my project would most likely be research-based; however, I did not know very much about research aside from the basic statistics that I learned in high school. I knew it was important to incorporate research into my life and make connections with faculty, staff, and students involved in research on campus if I wanted to truly understand the research process.

Early in my freshman year (Fall 2014-Spring 2015), as I was sitting in my "Introduction to Dietetics" class, the professor mentioned a Freshman Health Study (Ludy, Crum, et al., 2018; Leone et al., 2015) being conducted on campus. The researchers were searching for first-year students to serve as participants in the study—this was my chance! I signed up for the Freshman Health Study later that evening. As a participant, I encountered the introduction to research that I was seeking—I saw behind the scenes of conducting research, experienced different testing protocols, and witnessed the different types of questionnaires that investigators utilize. In addition, I met the lead researchers, one of whom, Dr. Ludy, later became my professor, mentor, and research advisor.

During my sophomore year (Fall 2015-Spring 2016), when Dr. Ludy was recruiting students who wanted to help with data collection for the Freshman Health Study, I eagerly volunteered with the idea that I would gain invaluable research experience. This involvement provided me with the opportunity to work with first-semester students in introductory courses. I learned many skills as a research assistant that I still utilize today in my own research. At an early stage, these skills included data collection and presentation of information to other students. The more research exposure I gained, the more skills I acquired that could be used towards my project. My experience working with Dr. Ludy influenced my choice in reaching out to her to be my advisor for my honors project. Dr. Ludy's acceptance of my request was the gateway to beginning my honors project. Once I had my advisor, it was time to create a project plan. Given that I was once a first-year college student and that I had been a research assistant working with first-semester

college students, I had the idea to conduct a study looking at BGSU's first-year students. I wanted to evaluate mental health markers, such as academic and perceived stress, in BGSU's first-year student population due to the prevalence of mental health risk factors in college-aged students.

With this in mind, during my junior year (Fall 2016-Spring 2017) I added mental health risk questionnaires (Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Kohn et al., 1990) to pre-existing physical health assessments and online questionnaires within the HWAY LC. The health assessments were conducted at the beginning and the end of the fall semester to examine if students' health changed over the course of their first semester at college. Physical health assessments consisted of body composition as well as fitness tests (cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, flexibility, and muscular endurance). The online questionnaires covered topics related to dietary habits, mental health risk factors, and sleep. The results from Fall 2016 demonstrated that as mental health risk factors like academic and perceived stress increased, other risk factors such as sleep and academic performance were also impacted (Ludy, Tan, et al., 2018; Mansperger et al., 2017). These findings became the foundation that showed our LC team there was a need for class activities that address mental health and further research within the HWAY LC.

In the Fall 2016 semester, I was also provided the opportunity to be a co-author and co-presenter for a research poster at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' Food and Nutrition Conference and Expo (FNCE) (Tomko et al., 2016). As the largest food and nutrition conference in the United States, FNCE is attended by more than 10,000 dietitians, food policy makers, and other nutrition professionals who gather to discuss important topics and/or issues that affect the nation's health. I could not have been more appreciative for that initial opportunity. The experience added valuable poster-making and presentation skills to my repertoire that became useful in my academic and professional endeavors. This trend continued into future years and evolved as I presented my own honors project (Mansperger et al., 2017) and masters project (Mansperger et al., 2020) at FNCE as well as projects with other members of the LC team at the National Learning Communities Conference (NLCC) in Fall 2017, 2018, and 2019 (Ludy et al., 2019; Ludy, Morgan, et al., 2018; Ludy et al., 2017).

Completion of an honors project within an honors program is known to foster students' personal/professional enrichment and growth (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). Not only did the honors program do this for me, but my participation and engagement within the HWAY LC did as well. My energy and enthusiasm for learning continued to flourish with every opportunity and presentation that came my way. Many of the presentations I worked on were in collaboration with other faculty members and students at BGSU. This aligns with published evidence that joint efforts among faculty and students create increased academic motivation and sense of belonging for students (Bowers et al., 2020). I truly believe this partnership

and learning from one another enhanced the format of the LC for the better. Figure 2 outlines a list of project presentations from BGSU students and our LC team that utilized data from the HWAY LC.

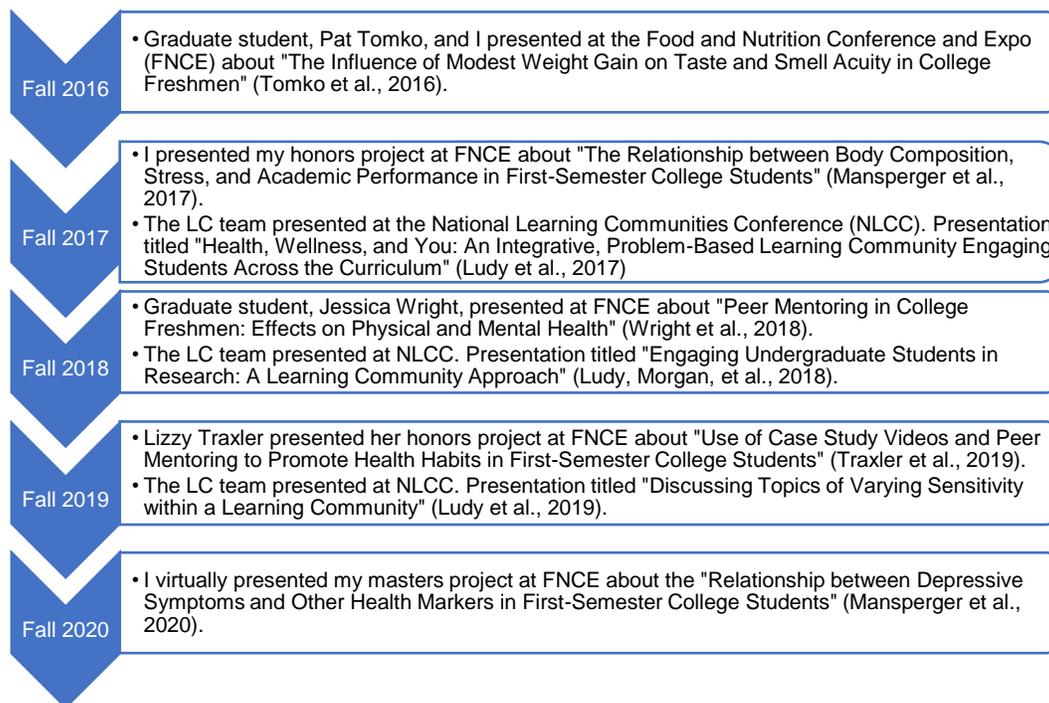


Figure 2. Project presentations by Bowling Green State University nutrition students and Health, Wellness, and You Learning Community team members.

Josie was involved in all research projects and presentations in the timeline above.

As seen in Figure 2, the HWAY LC has served as a vehicle for many student projects, including my own. In addition to the research projects and presentations I was involved in, the HWAY professors and student collaborators also presented research at other conferences/events. University-sponsored events consisted of the BGSU It's On Us Teach-In and the BGSU Diversity Symposium. The regional event included the Northwest Ohio Undergraduate Symposium for Research and Scholarship. Finally, information was adapted for even more audiences at the Ohio Nutrition and Dietetic Educators and Preceptors Conference, the Ohio Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Conference, and the WATER IN CRISIS: Student Research and Creative Work Display. The HWAY LC framework has allowed students, like me, to get involved with research to foster intellectual learning and creativity, engage in professional development and networking, and gain leadership skills. This is consistent with the professional literature, which shows that student

researchers exhibit immense professional growth through strengthened communication and teamwork skills (Stanford & Shattell, 2010).

Learning Community Involvement

In addition to my involvement as a research assistant with the LC, I also served as one of the peer mentors. During my senior year (Fall 2017-Spring 2018), optional peer mentoring was added to the HWAY LC due to the many benefits mentoring can have on undergraduate students. Mentoring is known to help support students' transition to college, aid in the development of professional and leadership skills, improve academic performance, and potentially result in completion of higher level or more advanced degrees (Crisp et al., 2017; Gutiérrez, 2012). The students who participated in HWAY LC peer mentoring sessions reported that they received answers to questions more quickly, felt less stressed, and were more likely to have someone to talk to than students who did not utilize the peer mentors (Wright et al., 2018). Due to this success, more formalized peer mentoring was added as a required component of the HWAY LC in Fall 2018.

In my first year as a graduate student (Fall 2018-Spring 2019), the LC team developed a new way of engaging in discussions with students about health-related topics. As a result of collaboration with an undergraduate honors student, animated case study videos were added to the course curriculum (Traxler et al., 2020; Traxler et al., 2019). The videos portrayed an innovative way to engage students in discussions focused on "hard to talk about" feelings, scenarios, and/or situations. These videos included topics such as assessing physical health, being overwhelmed, feeling depressed, feeling homesick, having unhealthy relationships, understanding how one sees their self-image, and practicing mindfulness. During class, students watched the videos and engaged in class discussions offering suggestions for the characters in the videos.

In addition to the animated case study videos, LC students were required to meet with a peer mentor at least two times during the Fall 2018 semester. As is consistent with the professional literature, regularly scheduled mentoring is important to build relationships and experiences as well as "develop social bonds that sustain a strong sense of community for both faculty and students" (Hessenauer & Law, 2017). To quantify how successful the peer mentor program was, the LC team collected student feedback forms at the end of each semester. When comparing the Fall 2017 LC to the Fall 2018 LC, I noticed that students felt more comfortable within the LC/on campus and seemed less stressed with frequent peer mentor meetings. Many of the students wrote on their feedback sheets that the peer mentors "created a positive and friendly environment," "made me feel appreciated," "shared good advice," "were there for me," and "were very easy to talk to." One student even wrote, "they did a good job of making me feel welcome and including me in class, they made me feel less alone in class and that I had more

friends.” The feedback our LC team received from students showed the power of peer mentors.

During my second year as a graduate student (Fall 2019-Spring 2020), programming for the LC continued to be adapted based on previous findings. Formalized peer mentoring was strengthened. Not only were the students required to meet at least two times per semester with their peer mentors, but additional activities involving the peer mentors occurred as well. The expansion included social activities for the LC students created/encouraged by the peer mentors. Students were required to attend at least one social per month (three socials total per semester), but could attend up to 16 per semester.

The feedback our team received from Fall 2019 was extremely positive and demonstrated how LCs can provide a sense of community and foster relationships among students. Students described how peer mentors “did a really good job with the socials,” “made sure everyone felt welcome,” “provided necessary help and resources,” “took the time to invest in our lives,” and “were fun and engaging.” One student wrote, “They really cared and wanted to make sure that if something wasn't going so well in your life, then they would try and help to the best of their abilities.” Another student wrote, “I was able to really connect with my peer mentor and [that] made me feel comfortable enough to open up (which I normally do not do).”

After receiving positive feedback from Fall 2019, our LC team wanted to make sure students had a supportive experience during Spring 2020 with the switch to remote learning due to the coronavirus. While this transition was challenging, the LC team and students adapted well. An online platform was utilized for classroom discussions and activities. Peer mentor meetings and social activities turned virtual as well (e.g., cooking classes, fitness classes, games, Netflix parties, painting, and yoga).

The Spring 2020 feedback provided by the LC students continued to show how beneficial the LC and the peer mentors were to them. Students liked “connecting with people that I knew, but had no classes with.” The feedback also specified the importance of “welcoming attitudes of the professors,” “consistency of communication,” “having a good time to talk to others and destress,” “making connections,” “peer mentors,” and “virtual socials.” One student wrote, “I really appreciate the different ways to connect with people” as a positive aspect during the remote learning period. Another student wrote, “I enjoyed that we could still connect as a class and one-on-one with our peer mentors. It brought some type of normalcy to this not so normal situation that we are all in.” Despite experiencing the switch from in-person classes/activities/socials to remote everything, students prevailed and made the most out of the situation.

According to the feedback, the new set-up for the HWAY LC course proved to be very successful and offered the opportunity for students in the LC to grow

closer than any of our past cohorts. This may be due to the fact that Fall 2019-Spring 2020 was also the first year that our LC became residential and proceeded for a full academic year as opposed to solely the fall semester. The students have thoroughly enjoyed having a peer mentor and tended to share personal struggles and successes with their mentor, showing how powerful the student-to-student relationships have been. In addition, many students attended multiple LC social activities beyond what was required for course credit, which suggests that this new approach really had an impact on these students' lives.

While the HWAY LC served as an opportunity for peer mentors to gain leadership experience, I believe the LC was also a vehicle for the enrolled students. Mentoring is known to help students learn how to be a better student, ask questions, develop new knowledge, and be self-directed learners (Dunn & Moore, 2020). The LC has allowed our students to build relationships, learn more about themselves, meet new people/faculty members, navigate college more easily, and try new activities and/or experiences. The activities inside and outside of the classroom have aided in reducing stress/anxiety and prepared students for a successful collegiate journey. Our hope is to continue to provide students with the resources and techniques that may help ease stress and ultimately help them succeed in college.

Relevance

The Value of Collegiate Learning Communities for Students

LCs with peer mentors can help support students as they navigate the complexities of adjusting to college. Students are faced with numerous events that happen simultaneously throughout their college careers (Collette et al., 2018; Kennedy & Tuckman, 2013). Events may include—but are not limited to—coursework, internships, part-time jobs, sport teams, student organizations, and volunteering. Juggling multiple events at once has been associated with anxiety, depression, and stress (Sam et al., 2016). In addition to juggling multiple events, students are discovering themselves, recognizing how to manage culture and norms around their college campuses, rising to academic challenges and demands of college coursework, and learning how to navigate through the pressure of social, personal, and financial obstacles (Collette et al., 2018). Managing life as a college student can be daunting, tiresome, and stressful. Most college students are faced with some form of mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety, depression, sleep issues, and stress) during college regardless if they are in a LC or not (Lipson et al., 2019). Challenges in students' lives affect their success and well-being, including physical and mental health. Previous research indicates that stress can have a negative effect on students' grade point average, emotions, and overall well-being (Sam et al., 2016; Arsenio & Loria, 2014; Khan et al., 2013).

Students in LCs meet on a regular basis and are surrounded by the same group members each week. Developing the most fitting program materials and resources is key for student success (Hill & Risolo, 2018). With the help of peer mentors, LCs provide an opportunity for new relationships, experiences, and a sense of community between students and staff (Hessenauer & Law, 2017). In addition, peer mentors offer academic and social support to students that can lead to student success stories (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). LCs with peer mentors provide the perfect avenue for group stress-reduction interventions. Based on research findings among HWAY students, other LCs may want to consider implementing more wellness-related activities that focus on improving mindfulness, sleep, and stress reduction. This collaborative, student-centered approach may help other institutions with LCs better prepare the faculty and staff to aid in student stress reduction and transition to college.

Student Engagement as a Contributor to Skill Development

Long-term mentoring relationships provide individuals with the chance to learn and refine specific skills. I have learned many useful skills working as a researcher and with the HWAY LC that will serve me as a future healthcare practitioner. These skills have included collaborating with professionals, critical thinking, mentoring, planning and scheduling events, presenting to groups (peers and professional audiences in my related field and in the field of LCs), problem solving, and writing reports. I have established how to adapt myself and my message to the environment as well as have the ability to accept feedback. Knowing how to take that feedback, apply it, and make something better is valuable. Each year, I changed my performance to reach the LC students to the best of my ability. Improving body language, conversations or the questions I asked, communication styles, eye contact, and my personal interactions with the students are a few modifications I have made. The competencies I learned have allowed me to blossom into the prepared professional I am today.

In addition to acquiring useful skills, I have an increased desire to give back. Not only was I a peer mentor to students, but I have had many mentors myself. My mentors have guided and prepared me in more ways than I could have imagined as a colleague, peer mentor, presenter, research assistant, student, teaching assistant, and writer. Their leadership and direction have influenced me to want to pay it forward to others in my same position. As a future healthcare professional, I have the opportunity to give back to my profession by becoming a preceptor to students and interns. This will allow me to take the advice, feedback (both positive and negative), guidance, and skills I have received or learned along the way and teach others. I believe the circle of education is incredible: those that were once the students become teachers and the cycle continues.

Conclusions

The HWAY LC has existed in many forms over the years. While each form has been unique in its own way, the transition from a solely research-based health study to a health- and wellness-focused LC was necessary to reach the point we are at now. Faculty, research assistants, peer mentors, and enrolled students have all been key components in figuring out the best format for our LC. I believe that each group within our HWAY community, from students to faculty, has learned from one another. This has allowed all of us to grow in our own ways both personally and professionally, myself included.

Without student leadership, supporting mental health may not have become a priority for the HWAY LC. The addition of mental health questionnaires to the physical health assessments has shown our LC team how prevalent the mental health risk factors are in BGSU's first-semester college students. By identifying that poor markers of mental health can affect academic performance and other aspects of health (Mansperger et al., 2020; Mansperger et al., 2017), group interventions can be designed to help our students succeed in college and later in life. Although the scope may be different, student led initiatives in partnership with faculty are likely to strengthen any LC.

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