Mind Matters Town Hall

Modeled on the successful Public Sphere Pedagogy program at Chico State, the Mind Matters Town Hall program at Cal State LA incorporates the wellness focus of the President William A. Covino’s Mind Matters (http://www.calstatela.edu/mindmatters) initiative to involve first year students in problem solving to improve mental health and wellness for the campus community. In their “Introduction to Higher Education” (IHE) classes students study a “problem” (or need) related to the well being of college students. At a 3-hour Town Hall meeting of 250 – 400 participants they work with students from other sections of IHE classes to develop action plans for “students helping students” and the Cal State LA campus community on issues of health and wellness.

Town Hall instructors sign up for their students to attend a one-day, 3-hour Town Hall meeting. At the meeting students work in groups of 8 to 10 with a table coach (former Town Hall participants, Student Life staff, administrators, faculty) to move through a sequence of decision making activities to create their action plans. The Town Hall is a competition in which students vote on each other’s action plans. Students share their action plans with other table groups and 4 plans are selected as “semi finalists” to present their ideas to the entire room. From the four semi-finalists a champion of the day is chosen. In some cases students have furthered their sense of civic learning by actually implementing their action plans. One group created a mental health awareness walk and another group work on an app (still under construction). See the following video: https://youtu.be/B6B42gikPVk

Student Success
This kind of experiential learning has been proven to help students adjust to university life. In the Town Hall program at CSU Chico:
• For every year since the inception of the Town Hall program, there was a 5-7% increase in continuation (staying in school into their second year in college) among those who attended a Town Hall Meeting;
• This reached a 91% continuation rate in 2010-11. Among students of color, continuation is 6-9% higher among students in the Town Hall, culminating in a 93% continuation rate in 2010-11.

Civic Learning practice that is relevant for college students and the campus community
• Town halls give students real world practice of civic learning skills: deliberation, decision making, problem solving, group collaboration and group leadership, communication.
• Problem-solving skills are a protective factor for mental wellness. Ability to apply a problem-solving framework in one’s personal life, the work place, or for social change contributes to mental health.

Why do Town Halls work so well to support students’ transition to university life?
• Through social interactions with their peers and interactions with faculty that level a professor’s authority, Town Halls help students to feel a sense of belonging and overcome alienation.
• Students have a more positive perception of the campus community.
• Town halls help students to develop a stronger sense of confidence about themselves as college students.

Further Information
• Cal State LA Town Hall materials: https://goo.gl/V399J1
• Town Hall and Public Sphere Pedagogy programs at Chico State: http://www.csuchico.edu/fye/thm/index.shtml
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