Emotional wellbeing of first year university students: The challenge of engaging the “whole person”.

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Engaging students at first year university level is viewed by these facilitators as a complex multidirectional task, necessary to enhance the overall wellbeing of students and to reduce university attrition rates. We are interested in methods of engaging the “whole person”, the cognitive, motivational and especially the affective aspects, that often create complex dilemmas for students facing their first university experience.

Our interest has arisen from the realisation that a large number of students appear prepared to disclose to us the wide range of personal problems and difficulties that they face while attempting to settle into university life. Many of these issues are extremely serious in nature, such as mental health problems, sexual assault and drug and alcohol crises. As grass root lecturers of these often fragile students, we feel strongly that we have a responsibility that goes beyond cognitive engagement. It must also include assistance with emotional stability, as early discouragement due to negative experiences can end an otherwise promising career.

We will initiate open discussion on the concept of engaging a student as a “whole person”. After a brief introduction and overview, we will open the following topics for discussion:

1. What issues and problems do first year students of the new millennium face?
2. What strategies can we use to identify students with problems?
3. What role should lecturers take after identifying these students? That is, how can we help?

We will facilitate discussion on Topic 1, by encouraging thought and ideas on:
   * Academic issues - expectations, lack of skills, level of difficulty, identifying resources
   * Health issues – drug/alcohol use & abuse, sexual assault, eating disorders, self harming behaviour, other mental health issues (depression, anxiety, etc)
   * Social issues - isolation, loneliness, living arrangements, lack social skills
   * Personal issues - family problems, bereavement, relationship difficulties
   * Financial issues - self funded? balancing work commitments, living expenses, fees etc.

Some suggested strategies as the basis for enhancing discussion on Topic 2 are:
   * Careful observation of patterns of attendance, meeting deadlines, maintaining grades
   * Identify withdrawn or unusually quiet behaviour
   * Identify students who have difficulty in communicating with lecturers
   * Direct and indirect information from other students
   * Engaging empathetic communication skills

Some helpful approaches listed to generate additional ideas and interaction about Topic 3:
   * Employ an open and interested approach – open door policy
   * Identify all possible sources of support for students
   * Establish direct communication/relationship with university Counsellor/Medical Officer
   * Establish strong relationship with Learning Skills Advisors
   * Encourage student involvement in university clubs (sporting, social etc)
   * Take a concerned and supportive approach to students with severe problems.

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