

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

How can students-as-partners work address challenges to student, faculty, and staff mental health and well-being?

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Mental health has emerged as a critical area of attention in higher education, and educational research over the last 15 years has focused increasingly on emotions and well-being at all stages of education (Hill et al., 2021). While definitions of well-being vary, most are premised on “good quality of life” (Nair et al., 2018, p. 69). Within the last few years, we have experienced an intersection of several forces that undermine or threaten good quality of life. These include the uncertainties prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hews et al., 2022, U.S. Surgeon General, n.d.), climate change (Charlson et al., 2021), racism and social injustices (Williams & Etkins, 2021), the cost-of-living crisis (Montacute, 2023), and the lack of motivation and higher incidence of mental health issues associated with growing concerns about job prospects and income (Chowdhury et al., 2022).

This fifth iteration of Voices from the Field explores some of the ways in which students-as-partners work can address challenges to the mental health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. This focus, proposed by members of the *IJSaP* Editorial Board, both responds to the intersecting realities named above and remains true to the goal of this section of the journal, which is to offer a venue for a wide range of contributors to address important questions around and aspects of students-as-partners work without going through the intensive submission, peer-review, and revision processes. The prompt we included in the call for this iteration of Voices was: “In what ways can students-as-partners work address challenges to the

mental health and well-being of students, staff, and faculty posed by the current realities in the wider world (socio-political, environmental, economic, etc.) that affect higher education?"

We identified themes across contributions; although, as in previous iterations of Voices, there are multiple overlaps among the themes, and many contributions could go in more than one category. We invite consideration of overlaps and of differences across these broad groupings of contributors' reflections on students-as-partners work in relation to mental health and well-being. We have identified five themes:

1. **Direct benefits/benefits to the individual and the collective.** Contributors specify the following benefits of students-as-partners work: having space for authentic reflection, engaging in identity development, experiencing a sense of belonging, and generating timely and responsive resources. Contributors note that these benefits are especially important for equity-seeking groups.
2. **Professional skills/career development and connection to well-being.** The skills and capacities contributors describe developing through students-as-partners work that they link to well-being include: leadership approaches, executive functioning skills, confidence (even in the face of rejection) and career resilience, research and critical thinking skills, mentorship, and the use of AI (artificial intelligence) tools.
3. **Impact on the classroom and curriculum.** Contributors emphasize how students-as-partners work engages student voices and supports sustainability in curriculum; embraces an explicit focus on well-being, resilience, self-harm, substance use, and trauma experiences; and can foster trauma-informed practice.
4. **Contributions to structural changes to support well-being.** Contributors offer examples of and insights on how students-as-partners work can: overcome barriers; guide services offered, peer programming offered, and online well-being modules; dismantle traditional hierarchies; and advocate for change, create inclusive spaces, and reflect the complexity of the human condition.
5. **Affirmation of relationships.** Contributors detail the ways in which students-as-partners work confers benefits during the pandemic and post-pandemic, fosters communication and connections, nurtures peer relationships that support persistence, affords opportunities for mentorship, explores the role of peer relationships in creating change, encourages a sense of belonging and connectedness, and supports the sharing of whole selves.

We derived these themes from the 31 submissions received from a total of 54 authors. Most submissions were co-authored, with 29 authors identifying as academic staff/faculty, five
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as professional staff, and 20 as students. The countries in which the authors were writing, as identified by authors themselves, are Australia, Canada, China, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Sweden, and the United States. Along with their submissions, academic staff/faculty tended to refer to roles they hold that are especially relevant to the focus of this iteration of Voices, such as civilian faculty at a military academy, associate dean of education, registered nurse, and director of teaching and learning. Students tended to note identities and experiences that they felt are relevant to mental health and well-being, including: first-generation student; queer student of color; student living with generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder; members of equity-seeking groups who identify as racialized individuals; first-generation Mexican-American woman; and Afro-latinx, Queer, from Southeast Houston Texas, fluent in Spanish and English. We invite readers to keep in mind the complex ways that intersections of roles and identities influence mental health and well-being.

DIRECT BENEFITS/BENEFITS TO THE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE

I am a Canadian information and media studies faculty member. My teaching and research revolve primarily around community engaged learning (CEL), a unique form of experiential learning in which students work collaboratively with community partners for mutually beneficial outcomes. These experiences can be remarkably emotional. Students express joy, distress, optimism, and frustration with the “wicked” problems of contemporary society, which can both positively and negatively impact their well-being. Although in-depth and authentic reflection forms the bedrock of CEL endeavours, exercises are often administered by instructors for students to complete. Instead, I believe we need to commit to a students-as-partners approach to reflection undertakings. To this end, in my 4th-year CEL course, we sit around a table as partners in small groups, talking through our community-oriented experiences as whole individuals and without predetermined outcomes. In these discussions, we proactively invite stories of discontent to collectively work through challenging emotions and experiences.

—Sandra Smeltzer, academic staff/faculty, Western University, Canada
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Transitioning from student to academic as an ethnic minority early career researcher is physically and mentally challenging. Surviving academia is an additional struggle beyond simply getting there. Imposter syndrome and a limited recipe for success intensify these difficulties during this transition. To navigate this competitive and often isolating environment, it becomes crucial to explore “side hustles” that can refocus my aspirations for survival. My involvement in students-as-partners work during university not only contributed to my identity development as a learner, but also as a navigator of both academia and life. Financial difficulties, job insecurity, and being part of a minority

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group in society amplifies the pressure on my mental health and well-being. Thus, partnerships serve a greater purpose than collaboration alone. They provide the opportunity to foster a deeper connection to my identity and my place in the institutional community and society, acting as a safeguard for my mental health and well-being.

—Kiu Sum, academic staff/faculty, Solent University, United Kingdom
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Imagine yourself inside an iridescent bubble; it surrounds you like a silky, warm cocoon, shifting gently as you move. Comforting, grounded energy flows through your body in soft waves. You are safe inside it. Protected. (This visualization is my preparation for tomorrow's staff meeting. It will take place in a center for teaching and learning, in an R1 university). I am a cisgender, hearing impaired, queer Black woman facilitating students-as-partners work with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women and men. We use data feminism to elevate emotion and embodiment. To examine and challenge power. We embrace experiential ways of knowing. Imagine yourself inside an iridescent bubble. You are protected. Safe. By making our work visible—but not too visible—we create spaces where full personhood and voice are an invited and necessary precondition for knowledge co-creation and our collective well-being. Imagine yourself inside an iridescent bubble. You are protected. Safe.

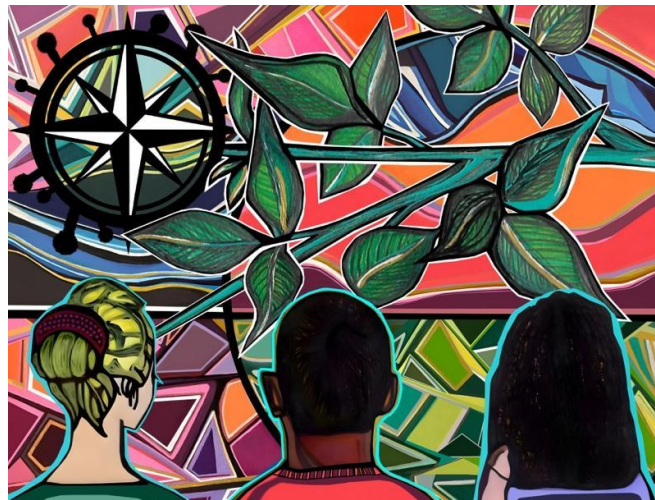
—Heather M. Wright, academic staff/faculty and Monica Obregon, student,
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Originating from the Maslow hierarchy, belonging is an outcome of good inclusive practice. It is ensuring feelings of being safe, being able to express yourself, and feeling a genuine part of the organisation (Verlinden, 2022). As a mature-aged student, studying online from a regional area, I found the students-as-partners (SaP) program at my university addressed my feelings of not belonging. With many now studying online, the opportunity to be able to work within SaP increased my feeling of belongingness and afforded me the opportunity to create relationships that being regional and studying online did not allow me to foster. Stress is shown to be significantly lower when there is a sense of belonging (Civitci, 2015). With this in mind, the importance of encouraging SaP programs to flourish will further add to the sense of belonging felt by online and remote students.

—Rachel Sinanan, student, Deakin University, Australia
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In my work as a sociology instructor and learning strategist, students are figured as partners as we recover from the pandemic and navigate a post-pandemic world. For many, the pandemic created and exacerbated mental health challenges, with the impact of illness falling disproportionately on the most marginalized. In taking the (post-) pandemic world as an object for study, my students and I have been able to co-analyze knowledge production and co-discover what our experiences underscore about how power operates in society. Through critical reflection, students have been invited to share their learning, challenges, and victories. I have modeled this reflection by sharing my own mental-health challenges living with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. In partnership, our creation of a repository of stories has been a powerful tool for students to express themselves and create community; they have reported that sharing has made them feel less isolated and more supported and hopeful.

Figure 1. Three learners facing a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors



—Chris Cachia, academic staff/faculty, Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada
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As a Students' Union sabbatical officer, I find working with students as partners is essential. The focus on student voice means that decisions are driven by the diverse experiences, needs, and perspectives of students. Prioritising community building through collaboration between staff colleagues and students aims to create a campus culture, promotes a sense of belonging, and contributes to improved mental health and well-being. A students-as-partners approach also provides a platform for students to advocate for change on issues that impact the mental health and well-being of all. This could include the enhancement of support resources, promotion of initiatives, and raising of awareness about socio-political and environmental issues affecting mental

health. For example, student-led concepts, such as the creation of more green spaces, can provide opportunities for both students and staff to connect with nature, which has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health (Hartig et al., 2014).

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PROFESSIONAL SKILLS/CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND CONNECTION TO WELL-BEING

In the advanced course focused on French for the professions that I have recently taught at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), students are valued partners in teaching their peers the value of respect and dignity in the workplace. They are assigned a fictitious professional identity that they need to develop as they create their resumé, draft a cover letter for a specific position, and prepare to interview for that position. The pool of assigned identities includes: professional roles from a variety of French-speaking countries; life experience in urban and rural settings; gender, race, disability; and various levels of education. Some examples comprise a Muslim elementary teacher from France, a Haitian security guard (woman), an LGBTQ journalist from Senegal, and a disabled plumber from Benin. This collaborative activity reflects our contribution to USAFA's commitment to create leaders of character who lift up others by valuing human dignity and recognizing the inherent worth of everyone.

—*Florina Matu, academic staff/faculty, U.S. Air Force Academy, United States*
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In our view, student-as-partners work involves providing opportunities for students to develop skills that are needed for them to be successful in their studies and chosen careers. Considering this, on my module I use reflective learning logs to help students develop and demonstrate how they are developing these skills during their studies. This approach has been useful to most students, especially given the dynamic profile of students on my module—international, first-generation, part-time, etc. The skills students are required to focus on are chosen from the results of students' polls and literature. Skills such as stress and time management and teamwork help students develop appropriate coping mechanisms that help them manage their workload and the conflicting deadlines that their studies throw at them. Students on the module work together to develop these skills and are encouraged to share resources and practices on the module page.

—*Josephine Van-Ess, academic staff/faculty, Tsholo Molefe, student, and Marlene Gadzirayi, student, University of Sussex, United Kingdom*
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We are students with Chinese backgrounds studying in the psychology department of Sino-American University. In China, under the influence of the Confucian idea of respecting teachers and emphasizing education, the student-faculty partnership is rare (here “faculty” indicates professor, teacher, and staff). However, during our college years, we met professors who changed our attitude. We think the cooperation between teachers and students has improved us to a great extent. Being on an equal footing with professors has made us more confident in sharing our thoughts, which has improved our leadership skills, organizational skills, and public speaking skills. Because of these positive changes, we believe that the student-faculty partnership is very beneficial, and we hope this kind of teacher-student collaboration project can be promoted to more universities in China, from which more students (and also professors and teachers) would gain a great amount.

—Zou Wei, student, Lu Kehan, student, Yang Han, student, and Hou Sixun, student, with Amrita Kaur, academic staff/faculty, Wenzhou-Kean University, China

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Student-staff partnerships have the opportunity to transform the future lives of our students, supporting them in learning to navigate a challenging world whilst mitigating its effect on their well-being. As the student-staff partnership officer at Oxford Brookes University, I work with a number of students employed as curriculum consultants. In this role, I have seen firsthand how working in partnership with students can create ownership, inspire confidence, and develop resilience towards outside challenges, facilitating a sense of perspective and readiness. Our students cite problem-solving, communication techniques, critical thinking, and professional confidence as key skills and attributes they have developed during our partnership program. Ultimately, being trusted to contribute, having their opinions respected, and seeing their recommendations taken on board has proved to our students that they can approach challenges head on and come out the other side.

—Elizabeth Mullenger, professional staff, Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom
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Working as professors and senior lecturers at one of Sweden’s larger universities in a faculty representing undergraduate and master-level programmes for the health and social care professions, including police work and criminology, we have a unique firsthand experience of how important and valuable students-as-partners approaches really are. Our Vertically Integrated Projects (VIP) address research questions focusing on health and ill health, social injustice and vulnerability, and access to equal health. Not only have we experienced the time and effort students put into their VIP projects when

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the research questions are relevant for their coming professions and address current societal challenges, we have also seen how students, when truly invited into a research group and an authentic research experience, provide insights from a completely different perspective, widening all our horizons. From all their efforts, students gain knowledge, confidence, self-esteem, and supplemental academic research merits or CréMe, as we like to call them.

—*Elisabeth Carlson, Petri Gudmundsoon, Karin Borgstrom, Maria Stollenwerk, Peter Hellman, and Marie Väfors Fritz, academic staff/faculty, Malmö University, Sweden*
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Students whose educational and personal development as 16–18-year-olds was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the associated isolation, and alternative assessments are having to adapt to the challenges of higher education. Our peer-assisted learning (PAL) scheme encourages engagement and aims to overcome the stigma of asking for help and struggling alone. PAL not only supports academic development but also has a social aspect. PAL attendees typically want to push boundaries and get the most from their degree. Often the same students attend each week, so friendships begin. Social connections and positivity are good for well-being. A STEM career has particular characteristics, being team oriented. PAL promotes collaboration and communication, which encourages social confidence and more articulate interactions with others, which boost well-being. For many, the industrial placement year within the degree is their first proper job, but the application process, including being rejected, is stressful. PAL leaders, having recent similar experiences, prepare students to be more resilient for this challenge.

—*Jonathan Cole, academic staff/faculty, and Caitlin Sands and Joshua Marsden, students, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom*
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Developments in generative artificial intelligence (AI), exemplified through ChatGPT, have led to concern about the use of these tools to bypass learning/commit academic misconduct. Our project, (AI)²ed: Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity, uses a students-as-partners approach to develop guidance on the ethical use of AI in higher education, including discipline-specific practice examples. Staff-student partnership plays an important role in academic integrity (through, e.g., maintaining fairness, setting expectations, building shared understanding, fostering trust, developing confidence, etc.) and is vital to this project in that, through this exchange, concerns are explored and addressed, not only mitigating the risks of cheating but also building critical AI literacy skills. Fear of the unknown is removed through collaboration that incorporates diverse perspectives and skills. As AI developments will impact everyone, pairing staff and

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student voices to produce our recommendations ensures transparency and fairness by considering the needs of both cohorts and applying ethical guidelines for use equally to both, improving well-being for all.

—*Loretta Goff, professional staff, and Tadhg Dennehy, student,
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IMPACT ON THE CLASSROOM AND CURRICULUM

Stress and poor mental health have been recognised as problematic in legal education and practice. Therefore, the well-being of law staff and students is a concern (Stevens & Jones, 2023). The importance of this topic for students became apparent during our partnership to incorporate education for sustainable development in the law curriculum. Our partnership included eight student volunteers who attended planning meetings, and they saw well-being as a particularly high priority. Students argued for a reorientation of the programme to explicitly incorporate aspects of well-being. Our final insight was that well-being is central to sustainable development (sustainable development goal 3) for individuals, society, and globally. This insight allowed us to see education for sustainable development and well-being as aligned, emphasising the value of a diverse community of inquiry in the curriculum review process. What were seen initially as divergent aims for staff (sustainability) and students (well-being), were in fact mutually reinforcing.

—*Fiona Boyle, academic staff/faculty, University of Cumbria, United Kingdom*
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Burnout has been named a public health crisis due to its far-reaching effects. Defined as a systems issue stemming from chronic workplace stress (World Health Organization, 2019), burnout often begins in academia, with many nursing students showing signs long before graduation. While newly revised curricula standards include resilience and well-being content, progress has been slow and often less than adequate. As I have spent the last (almost) 2 decades researching and teaching the concept of resilience as it pertains to nurses and nursing students, I have recognized the power in our learners as leaders. When I speak to student groups, I teach personal resilience and the building of resilient teams through the lens of “Engage. Educate. Empower. Emancipate.” This lens encourages students to take ownership of their personal well-being. Many have recognized the power of their voice, individually and collectively, to self-advocate and lead the transformation of the nursing profession. It’s a beautiful thing!

—*Teresa Maggard Stephens, academic staff/faculty, RN P.R.E.P., United States*
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As administrators and adjuncts for an online master's of social work, we use and promote trauma-informed teaching and learning (TITL) and see a connection between it and students-as-partners work. TITL entails applying a set of trauma-informed principles to teaching to reduce barriers to learning that may be caused by responses to trauma. One principle of TITL, collaboration and mutuality, entails empowering students to provide input and share decision-making. Instructors ask themselves: How can I encourage and use student feedback? [Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning: Considerations for Teaching Online](#) (Marquart et al., 2022) is a one-page resource that introduces the other principles. When teaching clinical courses, we recognize that students enroll for different reasons, including personal histories. We provide content warnings for optional course materials, allowing students to opt out when personal trauma histories may be activated. As another example, we ask students to provide feedback on assignment grading rubrics and instructions, including identifying barriers to completing the assignment as written, and then finalize the assignment together as a class.

—Matthea Marquart and Lia W. Marshall, academic staff/faculty,
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As a student partner, I support my faculty partner by providing detailed observation notes on their class from a student perspective. Together, we discuss how to promote inclusive pedagogical practices while considering the needs of the students. In the last class I worked with, we discussed triggering topics, such as suicide and alcohol use. Through the partnership, we wanted to prioritize the well-being of students by being conscientious about the language used and expectations held. Previously, the instructor found it challenging to prioritize/consider their mental health while working to teach the learning outcomes. Real-life experiences and traumas are a part of people, and hearing this from a student's perspective helped the instructor take this into account. We distributed a mid-semester survey that allowed students to share their current thoughts, which allowed adaptations to be made in the present semester. Destigmatizing these conversations positively impacted the experience for everyone.

—Kelsey Smart, student, Purdue University, United States
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As an English for Academic Purposes instructor of international cadets in a 4-year military service academy, I encounter many students who have served in areas of conflict and are being trained for future conflict. Electronic journal writing has not only been a means for students to respond and react to the war literature that they read, but also a way to compare often disturbing themes to their own experiences of conflict and how that might impact their mental health. Although this is a private conversation,

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students are invited to share their journals with the class. The first 5 to 10 minutes of each class are led by students who volunteer to share their feelings and lead a class discussion, where others have the opportunity to contribute to the conversation. Students then truly become partners in the learning and contribute to the direction of future lessons.

Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. PA#: USAFA-DF-2023-404

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING

The contexts of barriers to education faced by students, faculty, and staff are individual and unique. Hierarchical structures of academia pose barriers to success for both students and faculty. Students experiencing barriers to education need assistance from faculty, and faculty who experience barriers in their careers can be unable to actively assist students. Therefore, dynamic, collaborative solutions are required. As a first-generation, low-income, queer minority student with deep involvement in teaching and mentoring, I have experienced many educational barriers alongside solutions. As a student partner, I generate spaces to achieve mutual understanding. Student partners serve as liaisons between faculty and students, applying their innate, lived experiences and working knowledge to complement subject-matter expertise. This allows dynamic collaborations where understanding of barriers in academia is achieved and pathways for overcoming those barriers are generated that uplift and honor the experiences and identities of students, faculty, and staff.

—*Kal Holder, student, Purdue University, United States*
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This is a critical question that I ask myself frequently, first as a registered nurse and second as a personal tutor/head of subject and associate dean of education and student experience. The two main threats to a student's successful completion of a programme of study at university are student poverty and poor mental health. The student demographic has changed within the United Kingdom with respect to their outlook, and this is particularly the case for students who are on professional programmes. Students are no longer politicised; they simply wish to survive their time at university and move on to a better future. Students are seriously struggling with their mental health and poverty. We have to listen to them and let them guide the services we offer. Likewise, we should let them know that many members of faculty are struggling, or have

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struggled, with these things. We must work with our students to hear them and understand them. We cannot decide for them, or we will get this very wrong and negatively affect the success of universities.

—*Nicola Morrell-Scott, academic staff/faculty,
Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom*
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As researchers and learners, we bear the responsibility of balancing project creation and application. Eventually, we are tasked to carry out a presentation of results, while remaining mindful of our work's relevance to impacted communities. Success requires collaboration with passionate, curious individuals who are adamant about addressing the truths of our past, present, and future. As I rise into my last year of undergraduate studies at UT (The University of Texas) Austin, I notice that my identity as a Black and Queer member of the student body still is subjected to unnecessary hardships that often have ties to racial and social discrimination. These unique challenges impede my ability to authentically exist and succeed at UT Austin and in the world at large. However, I believe that working with a students-as-partners approach can create experiences and creative projects that reflect my story and the complexity of the human condition.

—*Jasmine Wright, student, The University of Texas at Austin, United States*
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Student sense of belonging has been a topic of ongoing conversation in the teaching and learning community, and for good reason. Belonging is associated with many positive outcomes, including increased student engagement, retention, and, importantly, mental health (Linden & Stuart, 2020; O'Keeffe, 2013). Students-as-partners work is integral in this area, as it aims to dismantle traditional hierarchies often present in education. By hearing and valuing students' perspectives, we are modelling that learning and educational spaces are bi-directional (rather than one prescribed by the instructor). This inherently fosters spaces of belonging, as the diverse voices from the various identities (e.g., culture, gender, sexual orientation) of students are included, respected, and used to inform the learning process. Our perspective is informed both by the literature and our own lived experiences as members of equity-seeking groups, where we have often felt isolated in spaces where our voices and beliefs have not been included.

—*Michael Wong, academic staff/faculty, and Ali Al-Humuzi, student,
McMaster University, Canada*
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I arrived at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) with a strong urge to feel connected to a community in higher education, particularly as a first-gen Hispanic woman. My first encounter with student-as-partners work happened when I met a professor who was also a Mexican woman, just like me. Her class often touched on the need for more equitable learning environments. Other courses similar to hers made me realize that facilitated discussions by faculty and staff from underrepresented groups allow for authentic conversations about students' positions in the world. Like me, underrepresented minority faculty have experienced distinctions of class and race. They have risen above these, and they have cultivated a fearlessness in addressing issues of privilege in higher education. As minority faculty and students, we use experiences of diminishment to advocate for change. Through our students-as-partners work, we're exploring how to create safe, inclusive spaces that support equity.

—Dulce Alonso, student, *The University of Texas at Austin, United States*
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At Anglia Ruskin University, working with students as partners is key to our approach to de-stigmatising discussions of mental health and well-being and engaging our students in co-creating a positive well-being culture. Examples of which we are proud include:

1. Our Peer Well-being Mentor (PWN) scheme. Paid PWMs lead activities such as well-being drop-ins, international student meet-ups, and online chats to foster a sense of belonging and improved well-being among their cohorts.
2. We co-design projects with our Students' Union (SU) officers. For example, over the COVID-19 pandemic, the SU led the creation of over 30 student-staff well-being videos, and we collectively provided festive parcels for students who were alone.
3. Our Wellbeing Student Competitions engage students in planning awareness campaigns, with winning entries implemented.

Recent highlights include: a mindfulness Self-Care Corridor featuring plants and uplifting music; well-being resources in video, blog, and quiz formats; and meditation sessions in our outdoor Forest Pod.

—Claire Pike, academic staff/faculty, *Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom*
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To increase student well-being literacy, as a group of students and staff from across Warwick University, we developed the online [Understanding Well-Being module](#) that guides students to better understand what well-being is and how to support themselves and the community. We adopted a co-creative approach with students as equal contributors who were involved at every stage of the module's development and led on

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main decisions. It is only because of this approach that we produced a truly inclusive resource; co-creation meant that students' ideas, experiences, and necessities were at the module's core from its inception, shaping its content and form (from podcasts to reflective journals and infographics, suiting different learning styles). Co-creation yielded a resource truly *for* students, supporting them to explore well-being according to their needs. In 2 years, the optional module has been completed by 4,000 Warwick students, has been adopted by three UK Institutions, and has inspired its Danish counterpart, which is described in more detail by a University of Copenhagen article, "[New Online Course Can Help You Learn More About Mental Well-Being](#)."

—Elena Riva, academic staff/faculty, and Wiki Jegliska, student,
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AFFIRMATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

Good student-staff partnerships are essential to maintain well-being for both sides. Partnerships enable students to have a strong sense of security to focus on their learning and to take on new challenges. For staff, students are essentially the core of their professional identity. So, how can relationships between the two be strengthened? I believe that academic development units can play a vital role. From my positions as student, lecturer, and former academic developer, I find hope in that many institutions are increasingly providing opportunities for promoting student-staff communication, especially as one of the important lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience in which many students suffered from isolation. Institutions are increasingly opening regular tea/coffee time for casual conversations. My doctoral study on academic developers' professional identity found that it was not rare that through such opportunities, participants found research collaboration partners and experienced life-changing encounters.

—Yoko Mori, student, University of Otago, New Zealand
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As manager of learning support at Edith Cowan University, I oversee three peer-led academic skills programs. One program takes the form of facilitated group study sessions, whereas the other two focus on individual support for specific language and learning needs (one is for coursework students, and the other for higher degree by research candidates). These peer programs provide an accessible pathway for students to engage with learning support at university. In my experience, conversations between peer leaders and students in these programs are not just about academic success; they touch on juggling study alongside other life commitments, building confidence, self-care, and referrals to appropriate university support services when required. Students

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often reveal more about their personal challenges to peers in these settings than they might otherwise share with their teachers or other support staff. This can be the difference between a student choosing to withdraw from study and feeling like they belong.

—Andrew Kelly, academic staff/faculty, Edith Cowan University, Australia
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Each of us was at different points of our graduate studies when the pandemic struck. This period presented numerous unprecedented challenges that were unfamiliar to us. However, it was also a time when online communities flourished and allowed us to provide support to one another. The three of us created such a space by taking simple steps of communication: greetings, sharing experiences and research interests, respecting each other's thoughts, and showing vulnerability. During this time, we frequently scheduled virtual meetings to discuss how to maintain our well-being amidst the current circumstances. We each played a significant role in helping maintain our mental health and staying on track throughout our graduate studies. While we are now in different positions in academia (two faculty members and a doctoral student), we continue to foster our virtual community, which provides a sense of reassurance and motivation, reminding us that we are not alone in this experience.

—Rachael A. Lewitzky, academic staff/faculty, George Brown College,
 Asia Majeed, student, and Sima Aghakhani, academic staff/faculty,
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The current realities in the wider world pose several challenges to the mental health and well-being of students, staff, and faculty in higher education. My thoughts come from the perspective of a 2nd-year biomedical health sciences student minoring in human rights studies. One factor increasing levels of stress and anxiety among students is the uncertainty of job prospects, academic relevance, and the future resulting from the rise of artificial intelligence. These technological advancements have students questioning whether their efforts in pursuing higher education will be usurped by a robot or web generator able to do the same tasks that took years of higher education to master. The student-as-partners relationship can help alleviate some of these pressures by offering students a platform for mentorship, community, and support from people in the field who may have already had these concerns and dealt with them along their careers.

—Hurshal Pol, student, Purdue University, United States
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In 2018, the University of Wolverhampton created the hybrid role of academic coach (AC) to act as a personal tutor to new entrants to higher education (HE). The AC and student partnership is developed through structured interactions including meetings and pre-assessment check-ins. ACs act as translators of the HE environment in the initial months before moving to a coaching and mentoring growth model (Dweck, 2000) that allows students to participate fully and with autonomy in future years of study. Students say:

- “My AC was very calm and supportive, especially in such a new environment, and that was a nice comfort. In a way, they felt more like another student at the campus.”
- “I enjoy the support given as it makes me feel more confident and happy with where I am at in university. My AC has encouraged me to self-evaluate my skills, and doing so has enabled me to improve.”

—Julie Hughes, academic staff/faculty, Jimmy Jennings, Matt Pearce, and Abi Spence, professional staff, University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom
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There are many ways students-as-partners approaches can work to address challenges to the mental health and well-being of students, staff, and faculty posed by the current realities that affect higher education:

- Students can advocate for more mental health resources on campus. This could include more funding for counseling and psychological services, more mental health professionals on staff, and more accessible mental health resources, such as online therapy and peer support groups.
- Students can form clubs and organizations that engage in activities that provide safe conditions for those facing challenges who can support each other through games or events.
- Students can educate their peers about mental health. This could include discussing mental health openly and honestly, challenging stigma, and providing information about mental health resources.

These represent only a few of the potential opportunities that exist.

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CONCLUSION

Poor mental health and well-being have increasingly become a focus in higher education, as both have been exacerbated over the last several years by the uncertainty, exhaustion, fear, and loss caused by the pandemic (Ezarik, 2022). Likewise, the proliferation of resources intended to address faculty burnout (Lederman, 2022) suggests that academic staff are experiencing many of the same phenomena (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). Furthermore, a range of other causes (e.g., gendered violence including sexual assault, health conditions, loss of loved ones, and divorce) contribute to strains on mental health and to poor well-being. There are also specific stressors, such as the rise of AI, which several contributors mention. As contributors detail, students-as-partners work can affirm and energize those who labor in higher education, and, as with so many other dimensions of higher education, can address the challenges posed by new developments, such as in generative AI (Tan, 2023).

Given both the ongoing and newly emerging challenges to mental health and well-being noted in our introduction and exemplified by contributions to this iteration of Voices from the Field, it is important to note that trauma-informed approaches have particularly powerful connections to student-faculty and student-staff partnership work (Cook-Sather, in press). Trauma-informed practice is not about pathologizing but rather about recognizing the impacts of experience on well-being (Imad, 2022). Like so many of the reflections and recommendations included here, and similar to the invitation to contribute to Voices from the Field in general, it is important to take a strengths-focused approach in students-as-partners work. Rather than ask, “What’s wrong with you?” the question should instead be, “What happened to you?” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, TIP 57 on Trauma-Informed Care). Moving from the first to the second question represents a paradigm shift toward trauma-informed care. As the contributions included here highlight, the response we invite and explore in students-as-partners work can contribute in positive ways to the mental health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff.

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