Real Students, Real Stories: An Orientation Video to Promote Student Mental Health and Well-Being

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Laura Santacrose, MPH
Assistant Director
Skorton Center for Health Initiatives at Cornell Health
Cornell University

Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, MA
Mental Health Promotion Program Director
Skorton Center for Health Initiatives at Cornell Health
Cornell University
Agenda

- Cornell’s public health approach to mental health
- Background on orientation video: *Real Students, Real Stories*
- View *Real Students, Real Stories*
- View additional clips from other senior leaders
- Video development process & how to steps to create something similar at your institution
- Q&A
Cornell’s Public Health Approach to Mental Health Promotion & Suicide Prevention

We believe that Orientation is a good place to start communicating our community values, including those that support student mental health and well-being.

Real Students, Real Stories is a playful, poignant, non-threatening way to get these messages across.
Historical Context

- Real Student, Real Stories (RSRS) was originally created in response to the 2009-2010 suicide cluster at Cornell University.

- RSRS was implemented during orientation from 2010 - 2015.

- During 2015 - 2017, Cornell experienced significant changes in senior leadership and RSRS was removed from orientation in 2016 - 2018.

- Revised RSRS was implemented in August 2019:
  - Filmed new President Martha E. Pollack.
  - Filmed additional students, faculty, and staff.
Cornell Campus Climate Data

- **Cornell University Spring 2017 PULSE Survey (n = 5,001)**
  - 86% of Cornell students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I have found a community at Cornell where I feel like I belong.”
    - Lower among students who identify as having a marginalized identity (race/ethnicity, gender identity)

- **Cornell University Spring 2019 CUE Survey (n = 3,857)**
  - 30% of Cornell students said they felt out of place or that they just didn’t fit in on campus often or very often.
    - This was higher among students who identify as having a marginalized identity (race/ethnicity, gender identity)
Greg Walton visited Cornell in March 2014 with his “The Social-Belonging Intervention: Getting the Message Right” paper and an invitation to join his College Transition Collaborative.

Recommendations from this brief social-belonging interventions include:

- If you feel like you don’t belong in a new school, you (and other people like you) are not alone; this is a common experience.
- If you feel this way, your experience will improve over time.
- Represent difficulties as both normal and temporary.
- Emphasize growth through sustained story telling and narratives about students’ experiences over time.

He and his CTC Team gave us specific feedback on how to improve our original RSRS.
Goals of Real Student, Real Stories (RSRS)

- To **build a sense of belonging** for incoming students when they arrive

- To spark dialogue among first-year and transfer students about the importance of prioritizing mental health and self-care, and cultivating resilience throughout one’s college career

- To **normalize the ups and downs** inherent in college life

- To demonstrate how students **employ a growth mindset** to navigate setbacks and **utilize campus resources** (e.g., normalize help-seeking behavior)

- To **introduce the concept of Cornell as a “Caring Community”** (e.g., watching out for each other and other pro-social bystander behaviors)
"Don’t panic if you don’t make friends initially. You will.” - Student

“It was so much easier after I got a tutor.” - Student

“You are not alone.” - Faculty member

“You’ve already demonstrated you belong at Cornell.” - President
Let’s now view *Real Students, Real Stories*

A warm welcome that lays the foundation that health & well-being is critical to academic and life success.
Thoughts?
Senior leaders of colleges and universities play an important role in supporting student’s mental health and well-being.
("I failed a class and I lived through it.")
“. . . learn to ask for help.”
“. . . wide variety of services and people who want to help you . . .”
Development of RSRS
Institutional Support

- Working with New Student Programs
- Working with campus partners and faculty
- Working with University Communications
- Working with the President’s office
- Fundraising for development costs
Participant Recruitment

**Student Participants**
- Campus tour guides
- Campus Admissions Ambassadors
- Resident Advisors
- Orientation Leaders
- Student Disability Services student organization
- Student leaders of groups
- Asked campus partners if they would recommend any students that they work with for the film project

**Faculty/Staff Participants**
- Faculty members who’s research is related to mental health and well-being, resilience, psychology, health communication, health technology, etc.
- Faculty members who serve on our Campus Coalition on Mental Health
- Faculty members who invite us to guest lecture in their academic classes
Questions used to interview students

- What do you do to manage your stress and take care of yourself?
- How did you find a sense of belonging at Cornell as a first-year student?
- Was there ever a time you needed help and, if so, who did you turn to or what resource did you use?
- Given there are so many opportunities at Cornell, how did you choose where and how to spend your time?
- What time management strategies work for you at Cornell?
- What’s your best advice for incoming students about getting enough sleep to succeed academically and enjoy life at Cornell?
- What do you wish you knew when you first got to Cornell that you know now?
- If you could do one thing over from your first year at Cornell, what would that be?
Questions used to interview faculty & staff

- What advice would you give incoming first-year and transfer students based on your own experience when you were a student and now as a faculty member at Cornell?

- What do you do to de-stress and take care of yourself?

- What was the funniest thing that happened to you in your first few weeks as a new faculty member at Cornell?

- Tell us about a mistake or set back and how you navigated that successfully?

- What’s your best advice for incoming students about getting enough sleep and managing their time to succeed academically and socially at Cornell?
Questions used to interview the University President

- What advice would you give incoming first-year and transfer students based on your own experience as a student, as a faculty member, and as the President of Cornell University?

- What was the best decision you ever made as a college student?

- Tell us about a mistake or set back and how you navigated that successfully?

- What do you do to de-stress; How do you take care of yourself? What about just for fun?

- How did you find your sense of belonging in college (Including how did you find things that you were passionate about?)

- Was there ever a time you needed help and, if so, who did you turn to?

- Did you ever get lower grades in college than you expected? If so, how did you feel?

- What words of wisdom do you have for new students at Cornell?
Working with a Production Company

- This project was funded by generous donations of Cornell alumni.

- We worked with the Cornell Interactive Theater Ensemble to help with the overall development, interviewing participants, and editing the film content.

- We worked with a local production company do to the filming, editing, and closed captioning.

- They were the production experts and we were the content experts.
  - We reviewed the new footage and transcripts together.
  - We provided guidance on the order and flow of content (editing process)
In-Person Delivery of
Real Students, Real Stories

- Worked with New Student Programs to have it be a required session during new student orientation in August and January
- Students are assigned based on their residence hall to a time session where Real Students, Real Stories is screened in-person with an introductory welcome and a concluding statement by a Cornell staff member
  - Variations in delivery have included:
    - Faculty and Staff jointly introduce the film
    - Staff introduce the film
    - Recent Cornell alumni currently working at Cornell introduce the film
- We refer to quotes and themes from RSRS when delivering our Thrive (don’t just survive) @ Cornell in-person resilience based program to first-year and transfer students throughout the fall semester
Questions? Comments?

Thank you!

Laura Santacrose, MPH (lbs65@cornell.edu)
Assistant Director
Skorton Center for Health Initiatives at Cornell Health
Cornell University

Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, MA (ct265@cornell.edu)
Mental Health Promotion Program Director
Skorton Center for Health Initiatives at Cornell Health
Cornell University
Sources:

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- **Teaching a Lay Theory Before College Narrows Achievement Gaps at Scale**  
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  *Authors: David S. Yeager, Gregory M. Walton, Shannon T. Brady, Ezgi N. Akcinar, David Paunesku, Laura Keane, Donald Kamentz, Gretchen Ritter, Angela Lee Duckworth, Robert Urstein, Eric M. Gomez, Hazel Rose Markus, Geoffrey L. Cohen, and Carol S. Dweck*