

Virtual Wellness and Learning Community Programming to Support Medical Student Wellbeing During COVID-19



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INTRODUCTION

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine (VUSM) transitioned to an all-virtual learning environment from March to June 2020.
- This raised concerns among school administrators and student leaders, as reduced interpersonal attachments are linked to poor physical, emotional, and mental health.¹
- The coronavirus pandemic and social distancing have been associated with stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, denial, anger, fear, insomnia, and decreased mental health.^{2,3}
- This is concerning, as medical students are already at high risk for depression, mental illness, and burnout.^{4,5} In fact, depression affects nearly one-third of medical students globally,⁵ with approximately 11% of medical students experiencing suicidal ideation.⁶
- The coronavirus pandemic has affected undergraduate medical education through a transition to online classes and the cancellation of clerkships and conferences, amongst other challenges. These changes may be of significant detriment to medical education.⁷
- Medical students are at high-risk for poor mental health and given the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on medical education, these students are at risk for mental health challenges during the pandemic.
- In an effort to promote medical student wellbeing, mental health, and community during the pandemic, a Virtual Wellness and Learning Communities (VWLC) program was established at VUSM.

VWLC PROGRAMMING

- VWLC consisted of hour-long virtual events that offered students the opportunity to socially engage with their peers online.
- Over 20 events were conducted from March to June 2020, including trivia nights, song and guitar performances, sketching, video editing tutorials, chess lessons, yoga, and personal investing tips.

METHODS

- An IRB-approved survey to assess VWLC program efficacy was created through the data collection tool, REDCap.
- The survey was sent to medical students in May and June 2020, approximately three months after both remote learning and VWLC programming commenced.
- The survey was sent to 65 VUSM medical students who attended a VWLC event, and 58 VUSM medical students who did not attend a VWLC event.
- Students on the Wellness Committee at VUSM were excluded.
- The response rate for students who attended a virtual event was 51% (33/65). The response rate for students who did not attend a virtual event was 34% (20/58).

RESULTS

- During the pandemic, 85% of respondents in both the VWLC group (28/33) and the control group (17/20) reported a decreased sense of connectivity with their peers (Table 1).

Table 1: Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Medical Student Sense of Connectivity to Peers

	Decreased	No Change	Increased
All Students, % (n)	85% (45/53)	8% (4/53)	8% (4/53)
Attended Virtual Event, % (n)	85% (28/33)	6% (2/33)	9% (3/33)
Did Not Attend Virtual Event, % (n)	85% (17/20)	10% (2/20)	5% (1/20)

- Forty-two percent of students in the VWLC group (14/33) reported a decrease in their wellness or mental health during the pandemic, while 35% of those in the control group (7/20) reported the same (Table 2).

Table 2: Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Medical Student Wellness or Mental Health

	Decreased	No Change	Increased
All Students, % (n)	40% (21/53)	51% (27/53)	9% (5/53)
Attended Virtual Event, % (n)	42% (14/33)	45% (15/33)	12% (4/33)
Did Not Attend Virtual Event, % (n)	35% (7/20)	60% (12/20)	5% (1/20)

RESULTS

- After attending a VWLC event, 79% (26/33) of students reported an increased sense of peer-connectivity, and 61% (20/33) reported improved wellness or mental health (Table 3).
- Of those that attended a virtual event, 55% (18/33) felt these events should continue post-pandemic.
- When asked how likely students were to attend another virtual event in the future, 73% (24/33) reported very likely.

Table 3: Effect of Virtual Wellness and Learning Communities Programming on Medical Student Sense of Connectivity to Peers and Wellness or Mental Health

Sense of Connectivity	Decreased	No Change	Increased
After Attendance at Virtual Event, % (n)	0% (0/33)	21% (7/33)	79% (26/33)
Wellness or Mental Health	Decreased	No Change	Increased
After Attendance at Virtual Event, % (n)	0% (0/33)	39% (13/33)	61% (20/33)

CONCLUSION

- Social distancing and virtual education measures in response to COVID-19 have worsened medical student sense of community, wellbeing, and mental health.
- Given the ongoing rise in coronavirus cases, it is likely that the need for social distancing and virtual education may continue throughout the foreseeable future.
- VWLC programming may be an effective strategy to promote medical student wellness and mental health during periods of social isolation.
- Medical schools across the country should consider implementation of virtual wellness and learning community programming into their mental health and wellness curricula to promote community, wellness, and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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