

## **Combating Student Loneliness and Isolation at NEOMED**

The Ohio Program for Campus Safety and Mental Health (OPCSMH) recognizes the importance of combating student isolation and loneliness, particularly during the holiday season. In November, the OPCSMH launched a social media campaign titled “Connect. Communicate. Care” to promote awareness of the importance of social belonging and connectedness for students, staff, and faculty. We are delighted to continue spreading awareness about student isolation and loneliness in the December 2024 edition of The Campus Connection.

[HE Professionals identified ten ways higher education institutions](#) (HEI) can work to combat student loneliness. HEIs are encouraged to combat student loneliness in the following ways;

- 1). Facilitate Connections
- 2). Foster Inclusive Spaces
- 3). Provide Mental Health Resources
- 4). Leverage Technology
- 5). Address Specific Needs
- 6). Partner with External Organizations
- 7). Conduct Research and Evaluation
- 8). Promote Open Communication
- 9). Invest in Staff Training
- 10). Build a Culture of Inclusion

The OPCSMH interviewed CV Garcia, Assistant Director of Inclusion and Engagement, to learn some of the ways the Office of Academic Affairs and Students Services is working to combat student loneliness and isolation at Northeast Ohio Medical University. Below, you will learn more about how the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services at NEOMED works to facilitate connections, foster inclusive spaces, provide mental health resources, address specific needs, and partner with external organizations.

## **Facilitate Connections**

It is important for IHEs to be intentional about building opportunities for students to connect with one another to build communities and support systems. Garcia shared the importance of student involvement to promote ownership when developing programs and initiatives. At NEOMED, students are encouraged to spearhead new student organizations where they will, in turn, have access to funding. For example, NEOMED students voiced interest in forming a group where individuals can meet once per month to practice their Spanish-speaking skills. She discussed ways campus organizations infuse off-campus outings, such as meeting for dinner at a local Mexican restaurant and placing their orders in Spanish! Garcia emphasized that it is essential for students to have ownership of their student organizations while simultaneously feeling supported by faculty and staff. Faculty and staff can support student organizations by attending events, assisting with advertising, and providing support in event set-up and tear-down.

## **Foster Inclusive Spaces**

Students who feel welcome and included are often more likely to engage in social events and opportunities to build connections. Garcia shared that one of the ways NEOMED strives to assist students in feeling represented is through a flag display. Sixty-one flags representing the home countries of NEOMED students, staff, and faculty can be found in the atrium. Garcia shared that the NEOMED community is encouraged to submit requests for new flag additions, and three new flags will be added this year! Additionally, the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services hosted a Multicultural Festival on campus this fall. 300 members of the NEOMED community RSVP'd to attend this lively event. The Multicultural Festival allowed students to share food and traditions from their cultures. The event included salsa dancing, poetry, singing, and much more.

## **Providing Mental Health Resources**

Colleges and universities are urged to encourage help-seeking behaviors. Garcia shared her journey of becoming familiar with a wide range of available resources within and surrounding NEOMED to help support students. She also discussed the importance of seeking mental health and suicide prevention training. For example, she shared how QPR training assisted her in understanding how and when to refer students to mental health supports and services. Furthermore, Garcia discussed ways in which the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services disseminates mental health resources. She fosters intra-campus relationships to capitalize on making mental health promotion and suicide prevention resources and education available for students. For example, in October, the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services, Counseling Services, and The Ohio

Program for Campus Safety and Mental Health collaboratively tabled an event for Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

### **Address Specific Needs**

Because social isolation and loneliness are unique to each student, strategies to address these experiences should vary to address students' specific needs. Garcia accentuated the importance of being thoughtful and intentional when planning student events. She noted that students have varying social preferences, such as introverted students who may not prefer to attend a large event. Garcia shared the range of social activities offered at NEOMED this year, including the President's push-up challenge, candle making, mandalas, and coffee and conversation.

### **Partner with External Organizations**

Additionally, Garcia shared the value of not only building intra-campus relationships, but also developing and strengthening relationships with external organizations. She highlighted the potential for Ohio campuses to unite with the common goal of promoting mental health and preventing suicide. More specifically, she discussed the importance of identifying organizations and centers designed to meet the unique needs of certain student populations. When identifying unique student needs, providing students with specific resources is important. For example, Garcia shared her appreciation for Kent State University's LGBTQ Center, which has helped provide resources to support LGBTQIA+ students. Garcia also shared her efforts working with the organization Safe Space Training to assist in fostering an affirming campus.

In conclusion, Garcia reminds us that creating a supportive campus environment is a collective effort and shared responsibility. She states that cultivating a sense of belongingness on campus starts with faculty and staff. She highlights the importance of actions such as greeting others, creating a welcoming environment, and practicing empathy.