Educator's Podium

Boosting Morale in an Optometry School
During a Pandemic

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Investing time and energy into the mental health of our students, faculty and staff is more important than ever. It is especially difficult to do so when we cannot chat between lectures, stand too close in the same room, or see someone smile behind his or mask. A study from the Boston University School of Public Health showed that the prevalence of depression symptoms in U.S. adults more than tripled to 27.8% as of mid-April compared to 8.5% before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Consider that these statistics were measured as the pandemic unfolded in the spring, and now we are heading into winter, when there is less daylight and less opportunity for outdoor activities. Much research has been done on the connection between student well-being and academic performance. Several studies of higher education and medical students have shown that students with higher levels of perceived stress have a greater risk for lower academic achievement.[2]

What We Can Do

Thinking of ways to boost morale while educating students virtually, or from behind multiple levels of personal protective equipment while socially distanced, can be challenging. While teaching a course on Zoom this summer, I found myself appreciating how the personalities of my students were gradually revealed in their little Zoom windows over the subsequent weeks. But by the time I felt as if I knew them better, the summer was over. Looking back, I wish we had spent more time in some get-to-know-you exercises early on because it may have fostered even livelier discussions in the long run.

Students need to feel like they belong and that they are part of a community. We all feel like this as human beings. This is a perfect time to use the cliché that “necessity breeds invention.” I spent some time thinking about ways to virtually foster relationships among students and staff, as well as how to build morale with so many limitations during the pandemic. I hope these lists help you to get your creative juices flowing.

Get-to-know-you ideas for virtual classrooms:

- Artifact or photo of your life exercise: I went through an artifact exercise as part of a leadership program with the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. Each person had two minutes (timed) in which to share an artifact that described something they were proud of. It was a really inspiring time of sharing, and we all felt we knew each other a bit more afterwards. Invite students to take a picture or show an artifact of something that represents their life or something of which they are proud.
- Names on virtual platform: Learning each person’s name really helps to personalize the experience. Consider having people change their screen names in the virtual platform to something interesting, such as listing their name and then their favorite food, musical group or

favorite trip destination.
- Experience-sharing: Pick one person each week to share how they relate to a certain topic, such as the first time they saw retinal pathology, something they've learned in the past week about patient communication, something they've learned about cultural competency, etc.
- Virtual chat: Use the chat function to your advantage. Sometimes, there are too many people to get through for sharing what they think. Introduce a topic such as sharing what they think is most important about making a patient feel comfortable, and then have them write their answers in the chat so everyone can see the responses. This will foster a sense of group teamwork.
- Be vulnerable: When leaders show vulnerability and authenticity, they bring trust to the group, and others feel as if this is a safe space. Sharing about a time of anxiety or embarrassment that happened to you early in your career and how you have improved can go a long way towards reassuring students.
- Theme of the day: Invite the group to decide on a certain theme for the next meeting. This can be holiday-related, with everyone bringing their favorite autumn drink to the meeting. Another option is a summer in winter theme to help beat the winter blues.
- Breakout rooms: Smaller groups can help people to get to know each other. If your virtual platform has breakout rooms, consider naming a leader for each small group, and before focusing on the subject matter, ask them to share one thing that they are thankful/excited about/etc.
- Stretch breaks: If your class runs more than an hour, definitely provide breaks, but also consider a group stretch break if you feel comfortable leading one. Or ask a student to pick a stretch and everyone can join in!
- Strategic homework: Assign projects that require students to work with each other outside of class, albeit virtually. This may mean case discussion, reporting on a certain element of eye exam procedures, doing a public health project, or submitting ideas for a poster presentation.

Ideas for fostering community, holiday spirit and fun outside of the classroom while maintaining masks and social distancing:

- Pumpkin or stocking decorating contest: Each staff member makes a pumpkin or stocking that represents another staff member (with rules set for appropriate themes).Team holiday tree decorating: Set up a tree centrally located so people can help to decorate and enjoy, socially distanced and taking turns, of course!
- Secret Santa: Exchange virtual e-gifts, or hold a virtual party in which gifts are sent ahead of time. Make sure to set a low cost limit to be inclusive of all involved.
- Thanksgiving or holiday "gratefulness tree": Staff write what they are thankful for on a large vinyl decal tree in a common area. Check Pinterest for some great examples!
- Employee/student recognition program: If you have a secure chatting/messaging system within your site, consider fostering a culture of recognizing each other for positive actions big and small, such as assisting an elderly patient, going the extra mile to help a patient get glasses, etc.
- Regular or spontaneous individual check-ins with each staff member to monitor stress levels: Create a culture where it's OK for someone to say they are feeling down that day.
- Comment board: Have a place (digital or in-person) for people to make suggestions. Follow-up at team meetings so people see follow-through in some way.
- Regular staff meetings: These virtual meetings can be used to discuss the small things that can add up, and to share outcomes so people can see the impact they have in their daily jobs.
- Unmasked faculty and staff pictures: In our school clinics, it can be difficult to identify doctors and students behind the masks. Consider putting up a board that shows pictures so that new student interns and patients will be able to see who's who.
- Holiday food pantry contributions or gift card drive as a service project that requires teamwork: Check with your local food bank about its protocols during COVID-19.
- Virtual potluck in the clinical setting: We all miss potlucks! Avoid sharing common food items, but consider individually wrapped grab-and-go snacks. This allows people to enjoy the potluck

atmosphere in a virtual meeting in their own spaces.
Surprise gifts: Sometimes it's just fun to receive an unexpected token of appreciation. Some ideas: mask ear savers, personal-sized hand sanitizer, individually wrapped snacks from a local bakery, a favorite candy, a small gift card.

- The sincere appreciation e-mail: You don't need to spend money to show someone they are appreciated. A detailed e-mail telling a person what you specifically appreciate about him or her can make a day. A student will definitely appreciate a personal e-mail from a preceptor about how well he or she did with a patient or in a discussion that day.
- Online talent show: We have all held virtual town halls, but an online talent show could be fun, bring the community together, and highlight some exceptional (and brave!) individuals. This could be done live with Zoom polls for voting or by asking for video submissions and presenting them with live playbacks of their recordings.
- Set up a culture committee: A culture committee is made up of people from all parts of the organization who can advise leadership with well-formed ideas for improving the culture of the organization. Even if it's temporary, a culture committee during the pandemic could be dedicated to thinking about ways to help the organization to provide opportunities to spark camaraderie and personal interactions and nurture a sense of well-being, especially in a virtual setting.

Let's Continue Investing in Our Students and One Another

These lists are by no means comprehensive — many sources of ideas are available[3-8] — but hopefully what I've shared here provides some ideas for boosting morale. Before planning any event, be sure to consider the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's core principles of safety, which cover:

- Current infection rate in the community
- Location of your gathering (indoor vs. outdoor)
- Number of people at the event and whether social distancing is possible
- Duration of the event
- Social behaviors of attendees before and during the event

I want to note that mental health is an even more important issue than morale, and morale boosters do not replace the very real need for mental health resources. Morale boosters are only the tip of the pandemic iceberg on which we are standing. But they can go a long way in helping students not to feel alone, and can enhance our experience as educators when we foster community. This pandemic is dragging on, but it will end at some point. In the meantime, we will continue to be creative in our approaches, as I have already seen from so many faculty and administrators. This winter, creativity in addressing morale will pay off in tangible and intangible ways. Let's continue to go the extra mile to invest in one another and our students, and we will get through this together.

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