

Therapaws: Student Led Dog Therapy Project

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Background

Existing evidence suggests dog therapy is an effective way to reduce stress and increase wellbeing. Drawing from academic literature, it has been used successfully in hospitals, classrooms, rehabilitation centers, psychiatric units, prisons, colleges, universities and workplaces. Interaction with companion animals induces relaxation and provides positive distraction from stresses. In the Australian context, Larcombe, Baik & Brooker (2015) have conducted research and workshops on pedagogical principles which are conducive to student wellbeing and mental health and the incidence of psychological distress and mental illness on Australian university campuses. The work of the Wellness for Law network is also of note as an undertaking of similarly styled initiatives in relation to psychological distress in Law Schools and the Legal Profession (Castan, 2017).

Aims

This study aims to test the hypothesis that students can act as effective change agents in the university by creating student-led initiatives supporting peer health and wellbeing. Within this hypothesis the study has three aims:

1. To contribute to creating a healthy learning environment for students by reducing stress and preventing the onset of psychological distress through Dog Therapy.
2. To facilitate peer-to-peer messages in relation to student support and connect students with student support information and initiatives such as counselling and psychological services, disability services, peer mentoring, student representation and more.
3. To create opportunities for students to act as change agents in the university and gain self-confidence, skills and experience relevant to their personal, professional and academic futures.

Method and Results

Our project incorporates dog therapy into student support events at key points in 2017 (Week 6, 9 and 13). The project was trialled last year in partnership with Delta Society Australia with over 500 students attending and nearly 2000 views on our event page. Data collection will include both qualitative and quantitative methods via online and written surveys, and writing on the interactive Health and Wellbeing Wall (a piece of canvas available at the sessions). Data will be included in the poster regarding the outcomes and effectiveness of the project. It emphasizes collaborations between staff and students, a holistic view of health and wellbeing, population and settings-based approach, and evidence informed and evidence gathering. Improving student wellbeing and the student experience and their success is one of our key goals moving forward.

References

- Castan, M. (2017). *Wellness Network for Law*. [online] Wellness Network for Law. Available at: <http://wellnessforlaw.com/> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2017].
- Larcombe, W., Baik, C., & Brooker, A. (2015). Teaching with student wellbeing in mind: A new initiative to support the mental health of university students. Paper presented at the Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) conference, Melbourne.