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SUBJECT: A Primer for the Student Engagement Strategy

DATE: February 2025

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Colleagues:

Attached is a primer regarding MSU Denver's developing student engagement strategy. These cross-institutional efforts have been in progress since 2022 and include the efforts of the student wellness working group, the Student Affairs Strategic Plan, and the Student Success Launch and other individual contributors. This proposed strategy is a synthesis of the work of these three entities over time.

The attached information is intended to build a base-level foundation for understanding and to provide a broader community of professionals and students at MSU Denver the opportunity to contribute to the design of the final strategy and its associated interventions.

Moving forward, these ideas, concepts, and interventions will undergo a process of refinement and clarification that will begin immediately. The process involves students, faculty, staff and shared governance bodies and will depend on the collective collaboration of units across the University. The strategy aims to have a robust program developed and implemented by the fall semester of 2027 and is premised on identifying and aligning current efforts to enhance the overall student experience on the Auraria Campus and at MSU Denver.

The primer attached will first introduce the philosophical underpinnings of the engagement strategy and how we will conceptualize engagement at MSU Denver followed up with suggested foundational efforts between Spring 2025 and Fall 2027.

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Introduction

Colleges and universities are increasingly adopting the socio-ecological model to enhance student engagement. The socio-ecological model, originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their various environments, ranging from immediate settings like classrooms to broader contexts such as institutional policies and societal norms. In the context of higher education, this model helps institutions identify multiple layers of influence on student engagement, ranging from individual behaviors to community and societal factors. This primer explores how higher education institutions apply the socio-ecological model to promote holistic student engagement and improve retention and success rates.

Understanding the Socio-Ecological Model in Higher Education
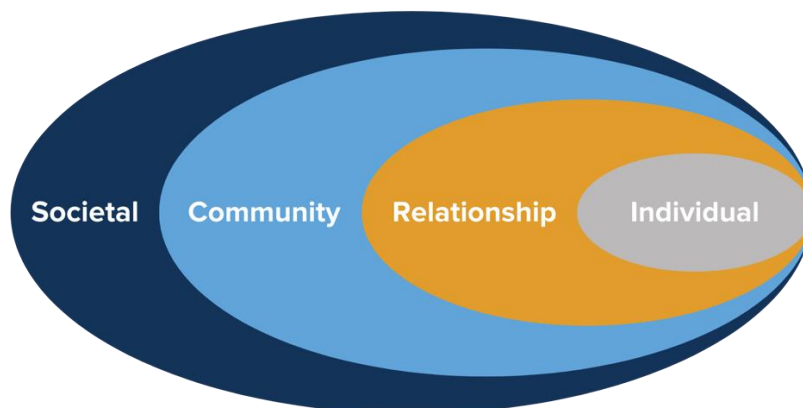
The foundational work on the socio-ecological model by Urie Bronfenbrenner was first extensively articulated in his 1979 book *The Ecology of Human Development*, published by Harvard University Press. This work laid out the framework of ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the complex interplay between an individual and the various environmental systems they interact with throughout their development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory is structured around four interconnected systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. These layers illustrate how environments, from immediate settings like family and school (microsystem) to broader

societal influences (macrosystem), shape human development in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship.

Individual Level: Personal factors such as a student's motivation, cognitive engagement, emotional resilience, and physical well-being.

Interpersonal Level: Relationships with peers, faculty, and staff that influence the student's perception of support and belonging.

Institutional/Community Level: Policies, campus culture, and administrative practices that shape the overall learning environment. Community partnerships and external influences that contribute to a supportive network for students.

Societal Level: Societal attitudes, policies, and economic factors that indirectly impact student engagement and institutional practices.

The model's holistic approach offers a framework for understanding student engagement as a dynamic process influenced by interactions across multiple levels, which provides higher education institutions a comprehensive strategy for designing interventions and programs tailored to student needs.

Applications of the Socio-Ecological Model in Student Engagement

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Colleges use the socio-ecological model to develop culturally responsive teaching practices, which address the unique needs of diverse student populations. For example, a study highlighted the importance of aligning teaching methods with students' cultural contexts to increase engagement and educational success for minority groups[1]. Culturally responsive-sustaining education is one application where institutions use the socio-ecological model to connect individual student engagement to broader cultural and community contexts, thereby enhancing inclusivity and academic outcomes.

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[1] Stein, K.C., Mauldin, C., Marciano, J.E. *et al*. Culturally responsive-sustaining education and student engagement: a call to integrate two fields for educational change. *Journal of Educational Change* (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-024-09510-3

Engagement through Relationship-Building

At the interpersonal level, the model emphasizes the role of strong relationships between students and faculty and students and staff in fostering engagement. Research has shown that positive student-faculty/staff relationships can lead to higher levels of cognitive and emotional engagement, as well as increased persistence and academic success. In response, College and Universities have implemented mentorship programs, experiences and peer-support networks to create supportive interpersonal environments that foster a sense of belonging and academic motivation.

Institutional Policies and Campus Culture

The socio-ecological model also guides the development of institutional policies that create an engaging campus environment. For example, colleges are increasingly implementing inclusive curricula, wrap-around student support services, and flexible learning options to address the diverse needs of their student bodies. These initiatives are aimed at reducing structural barriers to engagement, such as those faced by first-generation students or students from marginalized communities.

Community and Societal Engagement

Beyond the campus, higher education institutions are forging partnerships with community organizations to extend the support network for students. This level of engagement connects students to opportunities for civic engagement, alumni-support, internships, and service-learning, which have been shown to enhance both academic and social integration. Additionally, there are significant opportunities through community collaboration to lift up and center MSU Denver's HSI identity. By leveraging community partnerships, colleges create a broader ecosystem that promotes student success and aligns with the principles of the socio-ecological model.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its benefits, implementing the socio-ecological model in higher education poses challenges. One issue is the need for comprehensive data to understand the unique contexts of various student groups. Additionally, institutions must navigate the complexities of aligning policies and practices across different levels of the model, which requires coordination between departments, administrative bodies, and external partners. However, when applied effectively, the socio-ecological model provides a robust framework for promoting equity and inclusivity in student engagement efforts.
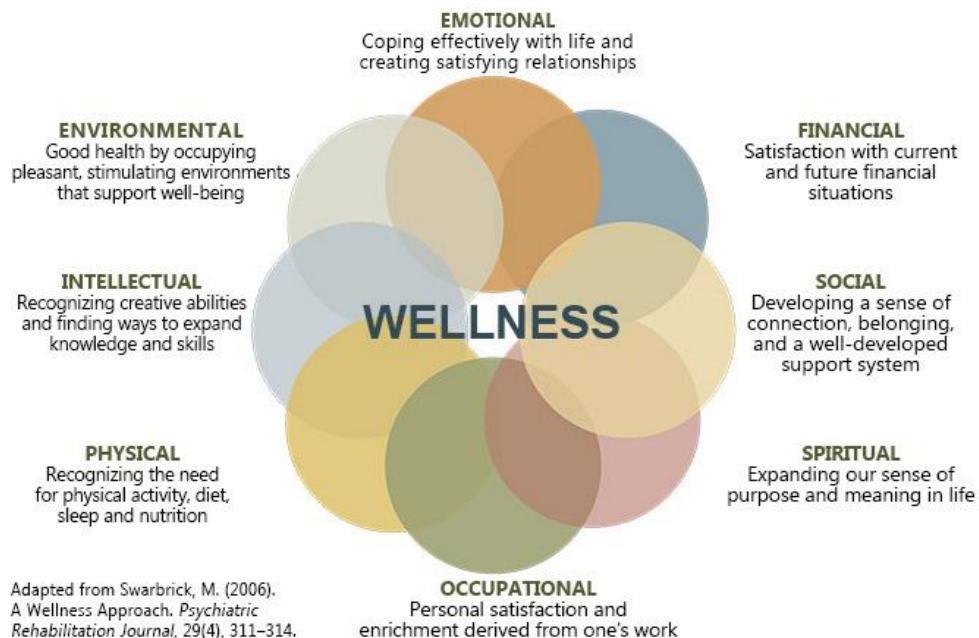
Conclusion

The socio-ecological model offers a nuanced understanding of student engagement in

higher education, accounting for the interplay between individual, relational, institutional, community, and societal factors. By adopting this model, MSU Denver can design more comprehensive strategies to support student success, retention, and overall well-being.

Colleges and universities are employing the socio-ecological model not only to enhance student engagement but also to promote holistic well-being through a multidimensional approach to wellness. The following section explores how MSU Denver may integrate the eight dimensions of wellness—physical, emotional, social, intellectual, environmental, spiritual, occupational, and financial—within the socio-ecological framework to foster a supportive campus environment that addresses students' diverse needs.

Integrating Socio-Ecological Model and the Eight Domains of Wellness

Integrating the socio-ecological model with the eight dimensions of wellness provides a robust framework for promoting holistic student health and engagement. This approach allows institutions to address wellness at multiple levels, ensuring that students receive support that is both comprehensive and personalized. The interconnected nature of the socio-ecological model and wellness domains ensures that changes at one level (e.g., individual counseling services) are reinforced by broader institutional policies and community support, creating a synergistic effect on student well-being. The Eight Domains of Wellness with the Socio-Ecological Model

EMOTIONAL
Coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships

ENVIRONMENTAL
Good health by occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support well-being

FINANCIAL
Satisfaction with current and future financial situations

INTELLECTUAL
Recognizing creative abilities and finding ways to expand knowledge and skills

WELLNESS

SOCIAL
Developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support system

PHYSICAL
Recognizing the need for physical activity, diet, sleep and nutrition

SPIRITUAL
Expanding our sense of purpose and meaning in life

OCCUPATIONAL
Personal satisfaction and enrichment derived from one's work

Adapted from Swarbrick, M. (2006). A Wellness Approach. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 29(4), 311–314.

At its core, our student engagement strategy is student wellness. The socio-ecological multilevel structure aligns well with the eight domains of wellness, as each domain can be addressed at various levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal. Colleges and universities, like Northwestern University and the College of William & Mary, have successfully used this integrated approach to develop comprehensive wellness and engagement programs.

Each of the domains of wellness will help to focus experiences, programs and services across the institution. Through a process of aligning our current efforts under each domain and identifying gaps, we can ensure our promise of wrap-around support is realized.

Physical Wellness

At the individual and institutional levels, physical wellness is addressed through facilities and resources such as fitness centers, wellness coaching, nutrition counseling, and health-promoting campaigns. For example, Northwestern University's wellness programs encourage students to maintain physical activity, healthy eating, basic needs infrastructure and support and safe lifestyle choices, which are reinforced through workshops and on-campus resources.

Emotional and Social Wellness

Institutions often utilize the socio-ecological model to promote emotional and social wellness by establishing peer support networks, dynamic counseling services, and peer-led mentorship programs. At William & Mary, for instance, the socio-ecological model is used to create systems of support that connect students with mental health resources while also encouraging positive social interactions and emotional resilience.

Intellectual Wellness

Intellectual wellness is promoted through academic advising, research opportunities, and student-faculty engagement, which reflects the models focus on both individual and relational influences. Colleges design these initiatives to foster a sense of intellectual curiosity and academic purpose, linking personal growth to broader institutional goals.

Environmental Wellness

The socio-ecological framework also supports environmental wellness by creating campus environments that prioritize sustainability, green spaces, and healthy living conditions. This includes healthy and sustainable food infrastructure. Institutions engage students in community projects that contribute to environmental stewardship, thus connecting individual behavior to broader community well-being.

Spiritual Wellness

Programs focused on spiritual wellness are structured to recognize diverse student needs, offering meditation spaces, spiritual advising, and interfaith dialogues. These efforts are incorporated into the socio-ecological at the community level to foster inclusive environments that respect diverse beliefs and practices and allow students to hold space for different faith traditions, cultures, and spiritual practices.

Occupational and Financial Wellness

Colleges are increasingly recognizing the importance of occupational and financial wellness, providing career engagement, financial literacy workshops, and internship opportunities. These programs aim to prepare students for professional life while mitigating financial stress, which is an integral aspect of holistic well-being.

Conclusion

By leveraging the socio-ecological model alongside the eight dimensions of wellness, colleges and universities can create comprehensive wellness initiatives that address student needs at every level. This integrated model promotes not only academic success but also overall well-being, preparing students for a balanced and fulfilling life beyond college.

Foundational Efforts (MSU Denver)

The "foundational efforts" are the immediate lines of effort that will begin through working groups in the 2024-2025 academic year:

First 'Seven Weeks' Programming[2,3,4]

University-wide, establish a practice of dynamic and engaging experiences deployed during the first seven weeks of a student's first semester with MSU Denver that creates a "sticky" environment drawing people to campus and encouraging them to stay.

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[2] Boulton, C. A., Hughes, E., Kent, C., Smith, J. R., & Williams, H. T. P. (2019). Student engagement and wellbeing over time at a higher education institution. *PLOS ONE, 14*(11), e0225770. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225770

[3] Ashwin, P., & McVitty, D. (2015). Student engagement: What is it and why does it matter? *Teaching Insights*. https://teachinginsights.ocsld.org/student-engagement-what-is-it-and-why-does-it-matter/

[4] Ashwin, P., & McVitty, D. (2015). The meanings of student engagement: Implications for policies and practices. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European higher education area: Between critical reflections and future policies*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_23

Establish/Identify Institutional Traditions

Identify and establish meaning-making experiences across the student life cycle that create life-long connection with MSU Denver and the Auraria Campus.

Develop a Student Life Brand & Voice

Create an overall identity for the student life experience including a visual identity and tone for student communications.

Experiential Wayfinding

The development of a peer-to-peer intervention strategy and training experience that develops student leaders and peer mentors from across the institution to have basic helping skills including QPR practices (question, persuade, refer – suicide prevention), institution resources and support programs, and trauma-informed support response mechanisms. This program, "Roadrunners Helping Roadrunners," could also be used as a mechanism to train, broadly faculty and staff from across the institution.

Engaged Pre-Orientation and Orientation Experience

Enhance pre-orientation/orientation with a transformative experience that students can engage in to meet their people and find foundational peer connection at MSU Denver and on the Auraria Campus.

Alumni Engagement

Develop mechanism for prospective and current students to engage with alumni for support and career related resources.

Timeline

Fall 2024

- Initial model developed between the student wellness strategy team, the Student Affairs Strategic Plan, and the Student Success Launch was distilled into this "primer" document to begin the process of getting feedback and finalizing the strategy by early 2025.
- During November, December 2024 and January 2025 the primer will be provided to various working groups across the institution including shared governance bodies and student groups. The goal will be to expand upon and clarify the strategy based on the feedback from those groups.

Spring 2025

- The strategy will be finalized in early 2025 and future working groups and lines of efforts clarified and deployed.

Fall 2025 – Spring 2026

- Foundational efforts of the plan begin to be deployed and aligned.

Fall 2026 – Spring 2027

- All programming/services aligned under the strategy with established working groups to monitor, assess, and enhance the overall strategy.

Fall 2027

- Final aspects of the strategy are launched including the residential curricula.