Happy Thanksgiving! There is much to be thankful for in this issue - the lessons we can learn from the research field to the strength within our community and willingness to tackle our challenges.

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Engaging the mind without engaging the heart is no education at all.
-Aristotle
Community Life Leverage Points

Building Community Through Discomfort

“Decades of research shows that one of the key ingredients for a sense of belonging is frequent interaction with diverse groups of peers. Such interactions not only allow students to learn from one another – they also improve student perceptions of the campus climate as a whole.” Writing on behalf of The Conversation, Shawna Shapiro (Middlebury) recently summarized her own review of the research on ‘sense of belonging.’

At St. Mark’s, even after only a few weeks on campus, nearly all Third Formers have close friends who are not from their home country and have close friends from a different racial or ethnic group than themselves.

Shapiro is careful to also note that it’s not just these interactions that build community, but working through discomfort, disagreement, and tension. “[Schools] also need to prepare students and ourselves to engage productively with the discomfort they will inevitably encounter as they interact with diverse peers and perspectives.”

(Source: Intercultural and Global Skills Survey, October 2019)
Compared with other schools, St. Mark’s students believe the school emphasizes building positive relationships across different backgrounds and learning to work well with others to complete tasks.

**School Safety Leverage Points**

**Student Perceptions of Safety are Complicated**

In August, the ACT Center for Equity in Learning surveyed over 16,000 students who took the ACT test in October 2018. This project responded to research indicating that students who feel unsafe in school are unable to perform to the best of their ability. The survey included questions on school climate as well as current and preferred safety measures.

On the ACT survey, female, Black and Hispanic students reported feeling less safe. Students in larger schools (>2,500) also reported feeling less safe than students in smaller schools (<500).

These same students, who felt least safe, were also most likely to oppose having special training for teachers or other staff to carry guns.
On average, SM students feel safe at school. Though White SM students rate their feelings of safety higher than Hispanic, Asian, and Multiracial students, our metric (the HSSSE survey) does not distinguish between physical and psychological safety. This is an area we are continuing to explore through our audit of Community and Equity programming this year.

Roughly 45% to 65% of responding students on the ACT survey reported that their school does not provide mental health services or they are unaware of them. In addition, of all safety measures asked about in the survey, students requested providing or increasing mental health services.

76% of SM students have an adult to talk to on a regular basis about what is going on in their lives; however, of these students, only 14% regularly talk with counselors/psychologists. Students are much more likely to talk to their parents or their advisor.

(Source: Independent School Health Check, Feb 2019)

(Source: High School Survey of Student Engagement, Weighted Averages from 2013-2019)
Social Media Leverage Points

Social Media Is Not Destroying a Generation

“Great claims require great evidence,” said Amy Orben as she conducted her research on the impacts of social media on teenagers. Two large research studies on this topic have just become available and the results are mixed - there are advantages to social media use as well as costs. The impacts appear to differ depending on who the user is.

In particular, the research indicates that depression is not a result of social media use, but that depressive symptoms predict increased usage (typically among teenage girls).

Researchers identify six effects of social media use. “Three concern positive indicators of well-being: eudaemonic happiness (having a sense of meaning), hedonic happiness (joy in the moment) and relationships. And three are negative: depression, anxiety and loneliness.” The largest effect is a positive benefit of developing stronger relationships.

According to last spring’s Independent School Health Check, 95% of St. Mark’s students engage in at least one social media platform, typically spending 1-2 hours per day on social media. Over 50% report that they have used the internet in a way that their “parents or school would not approve of,” and approximately one-third are typically on a social network while doing homework.
Wellness & Engagement Leverage Points

Redefining ‘At-Risk’ for Students in High-Achieving Schools

While it may seem odd to label students at schools like St. Mark’s as ‘at-risk,’ this is exactly what a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine has done upon finding that students in high-achieving schools show rates of problems higher than national norms and sometimes even higher than students in poverty.

“Luther’s studies have found that adolescents in high-achieving schools can suffer significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and delinquent behaviors, at least two to three times the national average.”

“It is particularly important for parents to (a) understand the level and seriousness of adjustment problems that researchers have recurrently documented in [high-achieving school settings] and (b) be vigilant in their own homes, starting from early childhood, against being overly invested in the child’s ‘resume-building’ (Gollner et al., 2018; Luthar and Kumar, 2018 Pekrun et al., 2019).”

Ensuring healthy and well-adjusted students involves building student engagement. Compared to other independent schools and other public schools, students at St. Mark’s are, on average, more cognitively, socially, and emotionally engaged within the school community.
Demographic Leverage Points

The Changing American Population

The National Association of Independent Schools recently presented a demographic outlook for high school enrollment. Of critical importance is that the birthrate in this country is below the replacement level (2.1 children for every woman) for majority demographic groups.

However, while the aggregate may be disconcerting, Hispanic and Black populations are increasing and NAIS argues that most population growth will come from immigration, increasingly from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia. Furthermore, “in 2017, children from racial and ethnic minority groups constituted the majority at every age from zero to 9.” These children will be approaching high school age starting this year.
At St. Mark’s, 32% of our current students are students of color, compared to only 13% students of color at other ISL schools and 20% students of color at other co-ed boarding schools (in the U.S.).
(Source: NAIS DASL Databook 2020)
St. Mark’s Office of Institutional Research Projects

Fall 2019 Research Projects
What’s planned for the Winter?

Advanced Curriculum Evaluation
Continue evaluation by presenting and discussing findings with Academic Council, faculty, and students and gathering relevant qualitative information about course experiences.

Alumni Survey
Redesign and/or create a new instrument to be administered to alumni this winter.

Institutional Climate & Inclusion Assessment
Results from our Spring 2018 administration have not been received, but are expected.

Admission Visit Evaluations
Continue to assess and facilitate communications with prospective parents and students informed by survey findings.

Application Review Criteria
Facilitate discussion with Admission team regarding review criteria and work to increase inter-rater reliability during the 2020 reading season.

NEASC Accreditation
Partner with relevant staff and faculty to prepare for the accreditation process in 2020-2021.

Assessment of Inclusivity & Multiculturalism
Continue to support and facilitate ten school committees as we complete an audit of the Community and Equity program at St. Mark’s.

The purpose of Leverage Points is to provide specialized research-based information to the St. Mark’s community. Articles report on strengths and weaknesses of our school, based on internal research projects, and opportunities and threats from external forces, based on policies, trends, and research from the field. Readers will become informed members of our school community and learn how their voice impacts school decision-making.

Do you have a project or a research interest in mind? Do you want to learn more about any of the current or planned projects? Email the Director of Institutional Research at sarahenterline@stmarksschool.org or come by Main Bldg 206.