# SST Podcast S2 - Episode 3 - Bonnie Hemrick

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Welcome to Going Online with Oregon State University Ecampus.

I'm your host Eddie Rodriguez, the Student Engagement Program Manager with Oregon State Ecampus.

I'll be giving you the lowdown on resources and tools for online learners across the globe.

Ecampus serves more than 13,000 online learners each year through over 100 online degrees and programs.

Let's get into it.

Hi, everybody. Welcome to Going Online with Oregon State University Ecampus, bringing you another wonderful episode.

Today we have the opportunity to talk to a wonderful colleague who's doing some incredible work in sort of the space around mental health which, surprise, that is our topic for today.

So, I would like to just yeah kick things off by introducing Bonnie Hemrick so Bonnie if you don't mind would you like to begin by introducing yourself, maybe your title, what you do and just yeah a little bit about yourself and the work that you're doing.

[Bonnie] Yeah, absolutely thanks for having me. My name is Bonnie Hemrick and I use she/her pronouns and I currently serve as the director of mental health promotion with counseling psychological services for the Corvallis campus.

And, my path was a little bit different than the linear path that some people take so my undergraduate degree was in psychology with a focus on counseling but then I quickly learned that I'd burn out if I pursued that career.

So, instead I went to the working world to kind of explore what I might enjoy and I ended up in a lot of positions that focused on health or education and so that prompted me to go back to graduate school to pursue a master’s in public health with the focus of health behavior, health promotion.

And then when I saw a job posted for the coordinator of mental health promotion at OSU in 2016 I felt like it was just a perfect combination of my experience, expertise, and passion and I've been at OSU ever since.

[Eddie] Okay, wow so sounds like yeah you've kind of done a lot already which is awesome I'm just out of curiosity was there anything in specific to you if you feel comfortable sharing something that kind of brought you more closely into that kind of mental health space or health promotion? Is there anything that you're like oh this is why I want to do this?

[Bonnie] Like a lot of people in the mental health world it touched me personally. I have some family members that struggled with mental health when I was growing up and so I saw that counseling was really helpful for them and medication was really helpful for them and so I was interested in that world and saw it as a way to kind of make a positive influence in that space.

So, that was my first interest into mental health and then I was always the friend that people would come to for advice and to talk to and so I felt like that was kind of in my wheelhouse.

And so in my undergraduate career I did a volunteer stint with the crisis line and so I worked a crisis hotline for about four hours every week and then I also did an internship where I had a client who was a survivor of domestic abuse and so I worked with them as well.

And the challenge in that work is as an empath it's really difficult to be really ingrained in other people's stories and trauma and be able to kind of take care of yourself as well and so I found myself just being really impacted.

And some people are great about navigating that world and being able to take care of themselves and have strategies as to how they can be successful but that just wasn't really a world that I was going to be successful in and so I was more so in the proactive let's talk about education, let's talk about resources, and let's learn about how we can proactively get people connected where it's going to be most helpful to them as opposed to me being the person kind of digging into those stories.

[Eddie] Yeah, yeah no again appreciate you kind of sharing and explaining some of that. Especially like the aspect of that educational promotion piece I think that is yeah just really powerful because I think yeah being able to kind of just share what's out there and those resources for folks and who might be needing it is really important.

Just kind of now I guess yeah fast forwarding to your current role as director I'm curious turn a bit more like what does that kind of work entail now that you've kind of have had all this experience and now you're in this role like what does that sort of entail for you?

[Bonnie] So, I'm responsible for assessing the campus needs and the campus experience even broader than campus just kind of all of OSU and what we have available to students to support them in their mental health journey and so I do a lot of data collection.

Whether that be surveys, or focus groups, or just kind of anecdotal story sharing between people in our community so I can learn more about what our students are struggling with and what their needs are and then my job is to kind of be steeped in the research and promising practices and think about what things we can bring to campus and implement on our campus to be able to address those specific needs that our students have.

So, that's kind of my world and then I oversee a small team of folks very small but very mighty who help me in this work and push out suicide prevention campaigns, and events, and resources and then I also work within the counseling center space so I help out with also assessing kind of our clinical services and how those are operating and how students are finding those satisfactory or not.

[Eddie] Yeah wow, especially that the data collection piece. I mean that's I mean I imagine that's a that's a big lift that's a lot of work and I know you know in a lot of spaces that's what kind of folks are wanting to see is what that data is saying and trying to really capture a lot of what is out there and sort of what what's being said and what those pressing issues are.

So, I which I guess maybe leads me to my next question is so based on maybe what you've been able to gather, what you just kind of finding out in some of that research, are you able to kind of share just any information around maybe what some of those unique challenges are for maybe for students or even just online students as well in terms of like that mental health? Like what are some things that you see that are coming up based in that data?

[Bonnie] What I've heard from online Learners is that they're juggling quite a few heavy responsibilities in addition to trying to be a successful student.

Many have full-time jobs, families, provide care for children or elderly family members among other roles and responsibilities that they hold and it's just a lot to balance and that can sometimes create an additional layer of stress to attending college that maybe some younger students who don't have the same competing responsibilities have to manage.

It can also be more difficult for online learners to find connection since classes are often asynchronous and it can be a challenge to find ways to informally connect and find the belonging that we all look for in life.

[Eddie] Yeah, that something also I feel like we've heard on our end over here at Ecampus is that yeah when you're just juggling so much and you're not really sure how to balance it all and find kind of that sort of being able to keep your head above water if you will.

That's certainly something that kind of comes up. I'm curious is that also something you see happening for the students who are on campus or is that would you say that's a little more unique to the online learning population?

[Bonnie] The students who on campus are also juggling a lot so many of them are concerned about finances and so they take on additional jobs. So, it's tough to kind of balance those job responsibilities and paying their bills and be able to, you know, have stable housing, and have food that is readily accessible to them.

So, they are managing similar challenges when it comes to finances and balancing responsibilities with jobs, and paying bills, and finding that belonging but may not have families yet, or may not have children yet, or may not be actively taking care of someone in their family so there are a little bit of differences in those ways but being a student in general is just challenging and inherently a stressful world and so navigating all of those is a very similar experience I would imagine depending on your situation but it's just, again, how many layers of competing obligations do we have to navigate?

[Eddie] Yeah, no and it can certainly be a lot you just reflecting on my own experiences too. You mentioned this term of like belonging and I know that's a term that I feel like is it's kind of brought up in a lot of different spaces and context and so I think yeah you're you see that issue of like you're managing a lot and then also maybe you're in a space where you just don't feel like you're a part of that community.

Whether you are on campus or online and so that is hard and something, again, from the Ecampus and looking at the online learner population that's another thing we've kind of seen also come up is like just that experience of isolation.

I'm curious from your perspective and just some of your data and research are you able to speak to any potential ways like faculty and students can work together to kind of combat some of those feelings of loneliness and sort of that isolation and kind of in some ways really addressing that belonging piece that you're bringing up?

[Bonnie] Yeah, absolutely my biggest suggestion would be to keep your eyes open for any and all opportunities to connect whatever that looks like. So, for example, if an instructor holds virtual office hours, attend them even if you're not currently struggling with the class material.

You can get to know that instructor personally and in a space that maybe is not class driven or academically driven and that can help you if you later down the line need some support and then that person can serve as a resource for you.

Many times also we've heard that virtual office hours can include other students who are also there to connect and get to know one another so that can be a really great space.

And then let's think about if you have a group project or a discussion board and you feel like you have things in common with another person or another student. Just extend an invitation for a virtual hangout utilizing the tools that we all learned during you know our isolation period of COVID.

They may want to need a friend just as much as you do and then another place that our students really find belonging is student organizations.

So, if that's something that's available, see if there are any of the ones that resonate with you and offer opportunities to virtually participate.

Many of our students do find some of their best friends in clubs and organizations and I was also one of those.

And then OSU has a calendar so it doesn't hurt to keep an eye on the calendar. There are many events that offer virtual participation or if you're within driving distance you may be able to join in person.

Yeah, no I appreciate you sharing all that I think you bring up some good points like if the opportunity presents itself or maybe you're able to engage with your faculty. I think that there's a really good opportunity there that builds that connection.

I think one of the things that I see come up too is like I want to build a connection with faculty but I just don't know how and so most of them are offering those like virtual office hours and it's like neat to hear you say like hey you know take advantage of those like that's definitely one way where you can build that connection where you can potentially even meet other peers too because oftentimes, right if you're you know just in Canvas and you know working through those discussion board posts you might not have that interactive piece that where you're kind of even if it's through a screen you're not maybe visually seeing somebody so being able to take advantage of that I think that's a great point.

And the student clubs and organizations too. I think like there are a lot out there and maybe there's just a little bit of that awareness piece too of like where do I find this information? Where do I go? But, again, you know the fact that you bring it up as another great avenue for building that belonging piece is really neat.

Backtracking just a little bit too. We were kind of talking about how online learners and you know and even the on-campus student population are often having to juggle multiple responsibilities from work to you know the family piece to just the academics.

From your perspective, is there anything students can do, or you know even just whether it's like a strategy or anything you can speak to be able to kind of create that balance and avoid some of that burnout that sometimes happens?

[Bonnie] Yeah, I'll speak a little bit to the resources that are available because I do think that those resources will help you hone in on some things that are available to you or might work for you to try out.

So, online learners have access to e-campus success coaches who can help students define their goals for success and identify people and resources that might be helpful for them while they pursue their education.

I would also really highly recommend checking out resources from the academic success center. They provide a peer-to-peer perspective on strategies to be a successful student and can even work hand in hand with the students Ecampus success coach through their academic coaching program.

And, the academic success Center also has a really great website with resources on topics such as time management, tips to navigate remote online instruction, among many others that can help you be a successful student.

So, any or all of these resources can help you try out some strategies and just see what works best for you. That's great. I think the success coaching piece too, something that I think is a great service. I think something unique to Oregon State University Ecampus.

You know, that Ecampus students have that ability to connect one-on-one with somebody you know, a representative of the university and someone who can really speak to some of those like key issues that we're kind of bringing up around that kind of like not feeling like they belong or like having to juggle all these responsibilities.

You know, like the family piece is something that often comes up too that is like a concern for students is like gosh I have all these family responsibilities and I just don't know how to prioritize like my family responsibilities and the schoolwork and so I know success coaches have been able to kind of work with students on that one-on-one basis to kind of figure out some good ways to balance everything like that so really good shout out there.

And then the academic success center as well like that peer-to-peer aspect is awesome in being able to yeah connect with somebody on that on that level so really good points you're bringing up,

My next question is thinking about, again, continuing on this trend of like strategies and some ways like that self self-care, specifically. Are there anything things you can speak to you know for the online learners or just learners in general specific strategies of self-care that they can incorporate into their routine to help prioritize their like mental well-being?

[Bonnie] One key recommendation which is not going to be popular for me to say but it's true is just doing your best to get quality sleep.

While it may seem anecdotally to be a common practice for students to sacrifice sleep to meet deadlines or prepare for important exams, lack of sleep makes it much more difficult to retain and recall information and also regulate your emotions such as stress or anxiety.

Also, recognizing what it feels like in your body when you need to take a break. Are you feeling really antsy? Are you having a difficult time focusing or finding yourself rereading the same thing over and over again?

This may be a cue to yourself that you need to take a short break and give your eyes a break from a screen, take a quick walk, or a stretch, or make a nutritious snack to help fuel you.

And if you feel yourself struggling in a class, reach out for help sooner than later. Being proactive will help you to be able to more effectively manage stress and burnout as your class progresses.

[Eddie] Yeah, I feel like I could use that advice. I definitely feel like I catch myself not sleeping enough and you can definitely feel it like you're you know you come into you know your work environment or whatever it might be and it's just like you might be just struggling a little bit that day.

So, know 100% you know yeah it is a challenge though right too it's like how do you yeah kind of do that effectively and consistently when you're likely also having to you know just think about all these other responsibilities and so I think that's a good point though like you know listening to those cues of like even though you're probably juggling a lot, maybe that's just a moment for you to like really think about and reflect like okay I really just need to prioritize my sleep today or my feeling like listening to those body cues because I don't think we do that.

I definitely don't do that and so that's some really good insight.

[Bonnie] Yeah, it's hard because if you think about even running right like you can enjoy it as an activity but a certain point your body tells you like "hey, you need to take a break or you need to slow down, your heart rate's a little high" and you can try to push through but you're not going to be very effective at that because at a certain point your body's going to tell you this is too much.

And we don't think about that with our brain but our brain is essentially part of our body and it functions the same way the rest of our body functions and we need to listen to it, and pay attention to it, and take care of it.

[Eddie] Yeah, yeah you hear first folks, sleep more! Awesome, no that's yeah really good insight.

Kind of transitioning a little bit into some of the stuff we've been talking about and kind of in some ways jumping into maybe a bigger topic here.

Just kind of looking at mental health broadly I feel like you know in some ways it's still you know stigmatized or you know folks maybe don't feel comfortable opening up or you know we just don't know how to talk about it but I'm curious, again, looking at maybe some of the research you've done if you've come across it before I'm curious how can educators and institutions work to reduce some of that stigma associated with seeking mental health support?

Whether it's for the online learner or even just, again, students in general.

I would say overall one of the best ways to reduce stigma is vulnerability and story sharing.

So, one of the best ways is for educators and others within the institution to model that vulnerability and to reinforce the message that reaching out for support when needed is showing strength, not weakness. I know that a lot of people have that perception of if I need help or if I reach out for help it means I'm not strong enough but recognizing when you do need help or when you do need support and then having the strength to identify that and do something about it and reach out and get what you need is truly very strong and something to be lauded.

So, we all need a little help or support when we're not feeling our best as someone working in the field of mental health, even with all that I know about coping strategies I attend counseling sessions when I feel myself struggling and it helps get me back on track.

And, at OSU, we offer a training on recognizing and supporting students and distress so that we can really create a culture of care in which everyone in our system is able to have a safe, supportive conversation around mental health and be able to refer to resources when they might be helpful.

[Eddie] Yeah, yeah really what kind of you just said what there's a lot there that I really appreciate, and I think one of the things is that vulnerability. I feel like that although hard to probably do I know I you know struggle opening up but I think yeah being able to probably find a space or a community or you know whoever that person might be in your life or support network might be in your life where you can kind of open up and as you mentioned like the storytelling aspect help us move in a lot of ways and I think that's a really good point but also probably hard to do I imagine as well.

[Bonnie] Yeah, definitely and they say that you know it it's one thing to trauma dump, right like I'm just going to tell you all of the bad things that have happened to me or that are going on in my life but if you're sharing stories and vulnerabilities the goal is that you're trying to help that person find either hope, or strength, or here's how I got to the other side of it.

And you know advice giving is obviously going to be something that you want to check in with the person about and find out if that's what they're looking for. If they're really just looking for a listening ear in that moment but if you're able to kind of share anything that works for you if that person is open to it and looking for maybe some recommendations or even how that's looked for you in your life that can be a way that we can help people find what might work for them.

[Eddie] Yeah, I'm curious too you know yeah we think about yeah in some ways yeah addressing this bigger issue of this stigma behind like mental health and seeking to support. How also would somebody go about also just finding resources and stuff around like just mental health support if they're at that place where they feel comfortable enough to kind of reach out? Are there any specific you know things I know again you mentioned a couple here within the institution but as broadly speaking are there any specific things or you know or whether it's resources or just you know things students can search up or folks can search up for help?

[Bonnie] That's a really great question. There's a lot of information out there and not all of it is super great or super accurate so I tend to look toward National organizations and seeing what they have available as far as education goes.

One of the places is the National Alliance of mental illness tsunami. That's a great resource if you just want to learn more about mental illness. If you're interested and if it's something that resonates with folks there's a peer-to-peer National Organization called active minds and they have a lot of conversations around mental health and how to support others and around that vulnerability and stigma reduction piece.

So, there's a lot of really cool resources on the Active Minds website and at OSU we cultivate some resources that we can point people to and hopefully they find those helpful but the Counseling and Psychological Services online resources so like the resilience toolbox that we have is really open and available to anyone and hopefully people can find something that works for them in there.

There's no pay wall like other resources and we're not trying to sell you anything. We're just trying to say here are some things that are evidence-based and might help you out when you need it.

[Eddie] Yeah, no that's good to know. Yeah, especially yeah if someone's out there that yeah might not be part of an institution or anything like that knowing that there's also these national organizations that they can kind of potentially look at as an option for support I think is great.

But also I get the sense that maybe there isn't also a right or wrong answer to kind of go about this in terms of like when you're trying to find support and help which is also good.

So, I know we kind of covered a lot at this point, I'm curious to kind of look at just the work you've been doing up to this point and maybe kind of like honing in back in the you know at the institutional level like higher-ed setting.

Are there kind of any other things that you're working on that would be yeah beneficial maybe for some of our listeners to know that are kind of come-- maybe coming up in terms of just what the research is out there and what it's saying in terms of like kind of next steps or action items for folks to be kind of doing and taking on or considering?

[Bonnie] What I really appreciate is that the world of mental health is kind of recognizing that mental health is just not an individual challenge like if I am struggling it's not just because I don't have the right tools or I don't have the right coping.

We all exist within a system and so there are many things that impact us and that's peer-to-peer relationships, that's institutional norms, policies, procedures, academic environment, and so the way that I really appreciated the field moving is that we're looking at all of those components and how they influence individuals and specifically students in my work.

And so we're looking at what are we doing to potentially create harm or create stress where it's undue and unnecessary? And where can we change those policies or the way that we operate in the world and to make it a warmer, kinder, and more helpful environment for students?

And looking at what they need and so, for example, we're starting up a peer-to-peer program. It's a peer support network and you know we're going to have peer leaders who can lead conversations on what students are experiencing and where they may need some support in their daily life.

And having students as the lead is a very different experience than having a professional sitting in a room one-on-one and we're hoping that there really opens up not only the conversation but another avenue for students who might want support in their mental health but may not see themselves in the traditional therapy model.

[Eddie] Yeah, no I think that's a really powerful way to probably go about that and that's great that y'all are doing that because yeah being able again when we were thinking about earlier the topic around kind of vulnerability.

Yeah, maybe that if that traditional setting doesn't feel right being able to then be in that space in room where it's like kind of in some ways a lot of shared experiences perhaps if they're coming that from that peer-to-peer lens which I think yeah it can be really powerful so that that's awesome.

And then the other thing you were mentioning too or just kind of made a brief comment about is that that policy change too. I think there probably are a lot of policies out there and maybe not just unique to OSU as an institution but probably a lot other places as well where things need to maybe change and be reframed so great that you're yeah you're doing all that work.

So, yeah we're coming up to time here. Is there anything else you feel like you would be important to kind of share or that maybe that you kind of just want to put out there for our listeners around yeah just the topic of mental health?

[Bonnie] Sure, I think if there's one message that I could give the world it's that you know there's no one magic cure that works for everyone. There's a lot of research out there that says this is the answer or this will work for you and really mental health is such a personal thing.

So, when I talk to people about exploring avenues and exploring what works for them I truly mean it. What works for one person is not going to work for everyone and so really listening to how you feel when you engage in certain things and what makes you feel more relief or feel less stressed or feel like you get that rejuvenation or energy and really attuning to those things and you know mental health can really be anything from you know the typical stress management, to spending time in nature, to connecting with friends and family and loved ones, hanging out with your pets.

All of these things really impact how we feel and how we can go about our day and find that resilience to just get through what feels challenging.

[Eddie] Wonderful, well said Bonnie.

Thank you so much and appreciate your time and for all you listening out there hopefully you found this informative and helpful and we look forward to sharing more in the future.

Thanks again, Bonnie.

[Bonnie] Thank you for having me,

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