

PCC reacts to new study

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collaborations could extend past the social sphere and into education and fundraising.

An additional development is in the future planning of themes for court parties. Past themes have fallen into the heteronormative trap, a term used by Pankratz in which the costume suggestions fit into gender stereotypes. Heteronormative court parties, Pankratz suggested, have had themes like “CEOs and secretaries,” which are distinctly male/female and unfair to non-hetero students.

According to Pankratz, rules discouraging heteronormative party themes should promote a more open down the hill atmosphere.

Pankratz suggested that the reason there is a gap between inclusivity perception and reality is because only the representatives from social organizations participated in the survey. In actuality, many individual members of social organizations are not so inclusive of all orientation types.

“It’s important that every member of the fraternities and eating houses lives up to the higher standard of these organizations,” Pankratz said. “The leaders [of fraternities and eating houses] need to have honest conversations with their members to make the down the hill experience more welcoming.”

One way students can educate themselves on inclusivity is to take advantage of the Safe Space training program. Led by Becca Taylor, Assistant Dean of Students,

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the program promotes an hospitable environment for LGBTQIA students on campus.

Pankratz acknowledged that much of the change towards greater acceptance has to start with the students. As the campus-wide survey indicated, plenty of students still use derogatory words like “gay” and “fag.” Improvement of responsible language and actions to promote LGBTQIA culture, Pankratz said, is up to the willingness of the student body as a whole.

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Horses aid in opportunity for improved mental health

A unique kind of psychotherapy is available to Davidson students

Laura Chuckray

Editor Emerita

A contagious calm blankets the fields of Triple Play Farm and is sustained even as the enthusiastic dogs wag their way toward a visitor. Among the milieu of barnyard animals going about their business are Maisy and Moose, two miniature horses who, at that moment, are on free roam inside a red barn. Five considerably larger horses rhythmically chew away at their evening hay inside the stalls.

Davidson’s campus, about seven minutes down Concord Road, seems particularly distant.

A little over a year ago, Triple Play Farms began its partnership with Davidson’s Counseling Center to offer Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) to students. In a cozy wood-paneled meeting room attached to the barn, Trish Murray, Director of Davidson’s Student Counseling Center, and Kris Batchelor, owner and founder of Triple Play Farm, sat down to describe how horses can play a role in therapy.

Batchelor, who has been involved with animal-assisted therapy for over ten years, described the process as “a team approach.” Each session involves at minimum an equine facilitator, a licensed therapist, and a horse; sessions may be done on an individual basis or in a group, and in the case of the latter, the number of horses and equine facilitators may vary.

EFP, they clarify, is not necessarily about riding horses, unless doing so furthers the specific goals of a client. Sessions are tailored

to specific needs, including dealing with anxiety, low self esteem, family issues or recovering from trauma.

“Using horses in therapy hinges on the concept that they are prey animals, which informs their entire perspective on the world,” Batchelor said, calling horses, “1000-pound bio-feedback machines.” Because horses are innately concerned with their own safety, they perceive anxiety or nervousness. In order for a horse to relax and feel safe, someone participating in EFP learns to be calm and focused around the horse in order to establish trust.

Murray, who first heard of the farm through a colleague last January, said she had never been around horses before that point.

“I had a fear of horses because of their sheer size. I had no knowledge other than, ‘This is a big animal that could crush me like a bug.’”

But Murray vividly remembers the day that Batchelor invited her into the ring to interact with a horse. Batchelor said she got a call from her a few days later to say, ‘I’m still thinking about that.’

The hands-on or experiential component involved in EFP is one thing that sets it apart from a talk therapy session, which Murray said sometimes allows a client’s goals to be met more quickly.

“Something that might take two months in a talk therapy session could take two sessions with a horse,” she said.

Savannah Erwin ’14, a psychology major and recognizable leader on campus as President of Patterson Court Council (PCC) and Club Sports, participated in an EFP group session last fall called “Perfectly Imperfect.” The four students involved worked with Murray and two equine facilitators to focus on how to be okay with not being perfect.

“A lot of the social and academic pres-

ures at Davidson are to try your best, look your best, and do your best, and we are so afraid to let down our guise of perfection and admit that something—other than our workload—is too much to deal with on our own,” Erwin said. “I’ve struggled with depression for most of my life. But it took me a really long time to admit that I had depression and be okay with telling people about it.”

Erwin first heard about EFP when she was sitting at a booth for PCC at a fall activities fair, a booth coincidentally located next to the Counseling Center’s that Murray was heading.

The group was supposed to meet one afternoon a week for six weeks, but was extended to eight. “We wanted to do two more because we had so much fun, and felt that there was still more to learn,” Erwin said.

Batchelor and Murray emphasized each session is customized to the specific goals of a client. In regards to her group’s goals, Erwin recalled a few particularly interesting afternoons. For a session focused on combating criticism, one participant had to steer the horse through a series of obstacles, such as stepping over poles or leading the horse in a figure eight, while an equine facilitator acted as a source of verbal criticism and discouragement. The other group members had to affirm the one leading the horse.

In another session, each group member was assigned a handicap, with two unable to speak, one wearing earmuffs so as not to hear, and one who was blindfolded and unable to see. Only the member who could not see was allowed to touch the horse.

“I, as the person who couldn’t speak, was given a specific task to then communicate to the group, including the person who couldn’t hear,” Erwin said. Tasks included getting the horse to kick a giant soccer ball, to step over a jump and to prompt the horse

to put its foot in tire.

This final task particularly resonated with Erwin. In spite of a lot of strategic attempts at moving the tire and the horse, the group didn’t manage to complete it.

“We talked about why we weren’t able to get the horse to put its foot in the tire, how that made us feel, and that it was okay that we didn’t get the horse to step in the tire. We discussed about being able to accept that we didn’t meet the task, but that we tried our best and came up with some really creative ways,” she said.

Erwin found the group aspect of the experience to be particularly powerful in helping her identify with the struggles of other students, validating her experiences, and acting as a source of encouragement. The group session for the spring semester has focused on how to manage stress, which Murray said has been on the rise on Davidson’s campus.

“We’ve seen about a 25% increase in students utilizing our services from this calendar year compared to two years ago,” she said of the Counseling Center. This statistic could reflect a variety of factors, including a potentially increased awareness of available resources.

Murray still thinks more students could benefit from EFP, though she has found that students—particularly those already dealing with stress—are sometimes resistant to setting aside the time to come out to the farm.

Taking part in EFP was an initial sacrifice of time that Erwin thinks was worth it.

“Despite my busy schedule, it was really important for me to set aside the time to take part in this group and do something for myself. Triple Play Farm is a great venue for EFP because it is away from campus but you are with people who understand Davidson. It’s definitely worth the time to go and participate.”