HOPE University Classroom Pilot Brief

This brief provides an overview of the implementation and outcomes of San Diego State University's first HOPE* Classroom Pilot, highlighting the use of HOPE-aligned activities to support student well-being, connection, and engagement.

*Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences

Who We Are

The Social Policy Institute (SPI) is a nonprofit affiliate of the School of Social Work at San Diego State University (SDSU). Our mission is to bridge academia with government, business, and the community to increase individual, family, and community well-being. Our successes show that we are quickly becoming a dynamic catalyst for helping public systems improve community wellness by connecting academic knowledge with community wisdom through training, technical assistance, program design, research, advocacy, and collaboration.

SPI is a regional leader in promoting HOPE as a foundational framework to strengthen prevention and well-being efforts across systems. We are actively working to expand the application of the HOPE framework across the lifespan—integrating it into projects that support youth, young adults, the workforce, and older adults. We have begun incorporating HOPE into our grant applications and contracts to ensure its principles are embedded into the design, implementation, and evaluation of our work.

In 2023, we launched the SDSU HOPE-Informed University initiative to embed the HOPE framework throughout the campus community. This brief provides an overview of our first **SDSU HOPE Pilot**, in which an SDSU faculty member integrated the framework into her classroom during the 2024–2025 academic year.

Background and Context

A framework developed by Dr. Robert Sege, Director of the HOPE National Resource Center at Tufts University, HOPE (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences) emphasizes the critical role of positive childhood experiences in promoting long-term health and well-being. Originally focused on early childhood, HOPE highlights four building blocks that foster resilience and healthy development: nurturing **relationships**, safe and equitable **environments**, **engagement** in community, and opportunities for **emotional growth**.[1]

While HOPE began with an early childhood lens, its foundational principles are applicable throughout the **entire lifespan**. Recognizing this, we are expanding its application to other populations, including college students, who also benefit from environments and relationships that support resilience, connection, and well-being. By integrating HOPE into higher education settings, we aim to promote thriving in young adulthood and beyond, reinforcing the lifelong value of positive experiences.

To explore this expanded application, we launched a classroom pilot project at San Diego State University. This pilot integrates HOPE activities and principles directly into the college classroom setting, creating opportunities for students to reflect on their own positive experiences and build supportive connections with peers and instructors. The goal is to assess how embedding HOPE into the academic environment can enhance student well-being, engagement, and sense of belonging. This pilot serves as a first step toward our broader vision of embedding the HOPE framework across the university and, ultimately, promoting positive experiences at every stage of life.

Project Overview

The SDSU HOPE Guide Team oversaw the pilot implementation of HOPE activities within a social work classroom during the 2024–2025 academic year. This pilot project represents the initial phase of a broader effort to infuse the principles of HOPE into academic spaces and student experiences at San Diego State University. The purpose of the classroom pilot was to explore how **intentional integration** of the HOPE framework can enhance student well-being and foster positive experiences -- particularly among future helping professionals. The pilot focused on reducing stress and burnout while **increasing engagement and relational connection** in the classroom.

Implementation

A Task Team was convened—including SDSU students, faculty, and community partners—to support the design and implementation of the HOPE Classroom Pilot. This collaborative team reviewed classroom research around the experiences of college age students in their classrooms and on campus. Then the team updated the HOPE Building Block definitions to adapt them to the University. They then developed a series of **HOPE-aligned activities** tailored for classroom use, with the goal of fostering positive experiences that strengthen student well-being and academic engagement. The activities were grounded in the four HOPE Building Blocks: Relationships, Environment, Social and Civic Engagement, and Emotional Growth. The following pages define each building block and describe the corresponding classroom activity implemented during the pilot.

Building Block 1: Relationships

Adapted Definition:

Relationships refer to the meaningful connections students develop with professors, peers, mentors, and people within and outside the educational environment. These connections are characterized by trust, respect, authenticity, and mutual support. Intentional relationships may provide students with emotional and academic strengthening that fosters a sense of belonging and motivation.

Activity:

Students were regularly paired (either by choice or assignment) to reflect on and share responses to a rotating "**HOPE Question of the Day**." These questions were designed to help students recognize their own strengths and explore how identity, lived experience, and personal values shape their academic journey.

Example questions included:
- What are you most proud of?
- What strengths helped you overcome challenges?
- How might your identities impact your strengths?

Building Block 2: Environment

Adapted Definition:
Environments refer to the physical and psychological conditions which influence students' learning experiences. A safe, stable, and nurturing environment promotes inclusivity, respect, psychological, and physical safety, which allows students to focus on learning without fear of judgment, discrimination, or harm.

Activity:
To cultivate a positive learning environment, the instructor intentionally **acknowledged students** by name when they raised their hands or contributed to class discussions—reinforcing each student's value and presence in the space.

Building Block 3: Social and Civic Engagement

Adapted Definition:
Engagement refers to the involvement of students in meaningful, active learning experiences that connect academic content to real-world applications. This includes opportunities for discussion, collaboration, hands-on activities, and critical thinking that make learning relevant and motivating.

Activity:
Students participated in **article reviews, class discussions, and small group work** focused on the benefits and barriers of volunteering and internship experiences. These conversations helped bridge coursework with fieldwork and professional development.

Building Block 4: Emotional Growth

Adapted Definition:

Emotional growth encompasses the development of skills that enable students to manage their emotions, build resilience and empathy through engagement with peers, and self-reflection. This growth supports students' ability to persevere and effectively cope with academic and personal challenges, while maintaining a balanced approach to learning and life.

Activity:

Each class session began with a **5-minute period of self-reflection** using a think/pair/share model. This gave students the opportunity to privately process their thoughts and emotions before sharing with others, helping normalize reflection and develop connection.
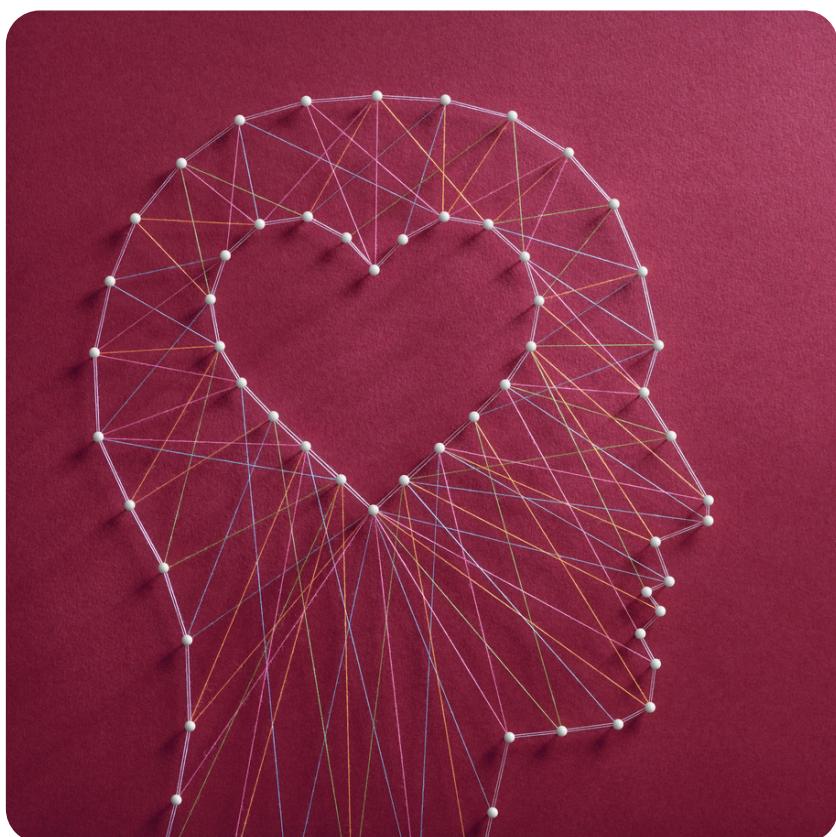
Implementation Timeline

The HOPE Classroom Pilot followed a structured timeline aligned with the 2024/2025 academic calendar.

- **October 2024:** Students received HOPE Introductory training and completed the pre-survey

- **November 2024 – April 2025:** HOPE activities implemented during every class period

    - **January/February 2025:** Mid-year survey administered

    - **April 2025:** Post-survey administered

    - **May 2025:** Survey results shared and discussed with the class

- **December 2025:** Final report development
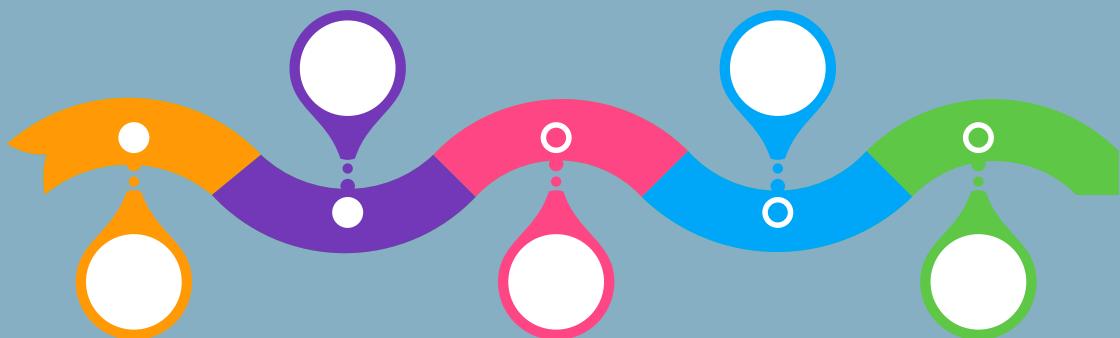
Outcomes & Findings

The Classroom Pilot Program was implemented during the entire school year with an undergraduate social work cohort. Surveys were developed for the fall, winter, and spring. Each survey consisted of the **Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)**, which is used to measure Compassion Satisfaction – the positive feelings and fulfillment you get from helping others effectively. Compassion Fatigue – the negative impact of caring for others, which included burnout (emotional exhaustion and frustration) and secondary traumatic stress (stress from exposure to others' trauma).

Participant Demographics

- **Participants:**
  - 12 Undergraduate Students
- **Gender:**
  - 75% Identified as Female
  - 25% Identified as Male
- **Age Range:**
  - 50% between 21-25
  - 50% 26 - 40 years old
- **Ethnic Representation:**
  - 42% White
  - 33% Hispanic
  - 17% Multiethnic
  - 8% Black
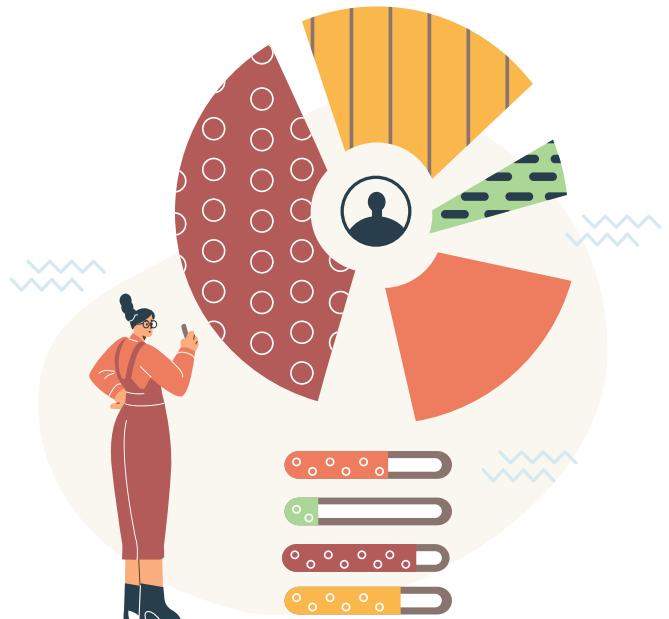
Professional Quality of Life
Key Findings

Undergraduate N=12

The Professional Quality of Life Scale was administered as a pre-survey in October 2024, a mid-year survey in January 2025, and a post survey in April 2025.

The comparative results show that from Fall 2024 to Spring 2025, Compassion Satisfaction increased by 16%, Burnout increased by 17%, and Secondary Trauma decreased by 17% (Appendix A).

The increase in burnout could indicate that the students were under some stress as the Spring semester was coming to end as many were faced with final exams, projects, and graduation. Secondary trauma decreased during the school year, which could indicate that student resilience was strengthened.
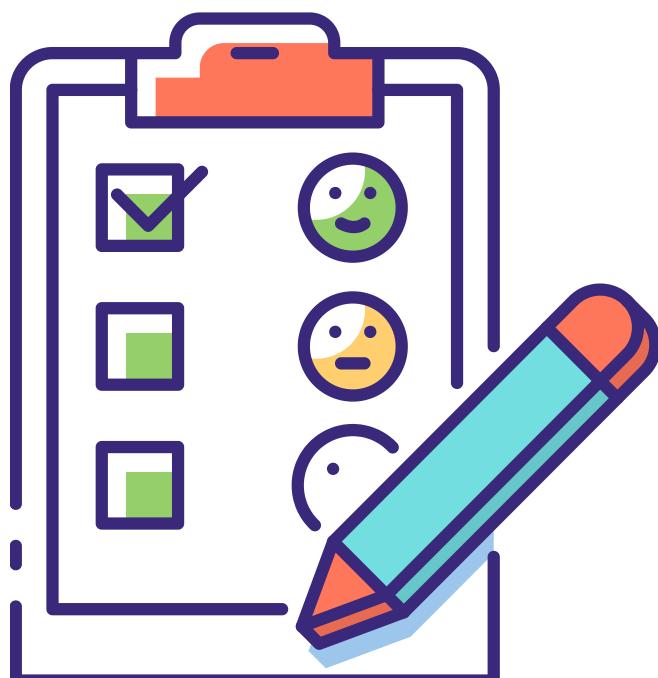
Key Findings

Student feedback from the HOPE program highlighted four central strengths that shaped their learning experience. These findings reflect the program's success in fostering connection, emotional growth, safety, and civic engagement—core elements of the HOPE framework.

1. Connection through Relationships
- 83% of students reported experiencing a strong sense of connection to their peers and instructor during the program. This was fostered through:
    - Peer collaboration
    - Emotional support from classmates and instructor
    - Open and effective classroom communication

2. Emotional Growth
- 92% of Students highlighted personal growth in the following areas:
    - Freedom of expression
    - Empathy and emotional awareness
    - Opportunities for self-reflection
- These elements were repeatedly cited as foundational to the HOPE framework's emphasis on positive personal development.

3. Safe and Supportive Environment
- 67% of total responses indicated that the classroom felt like a safe space.
- Safety was characterized by:
    - Willingness to show vulnerability
    - Strong sense of belonging
    - Proximity and accessibility to support
    - Instructor efforts that reinforced trauma-informed principles
    - Emphasis on emotional support and psychological safety

Key Findings Cont.

4. Civic and Social Engagement

- 92% of Participants widely recognized the "Engagement" building block of HOPE within the course environment. Key indicators included:
    - Inclusion of guest speakers with relevant lived experiences or expertise
    - Instructor support and encouragement
    - Open dialogue that promoted exchange of ideas
    - Group work and interpersonal collaboration that built community and trust

Participant Feedback

The students were asked to respond to the following question, *Are the building blocks of HOPE important for a classroom setting?*

100% of students reported that the building blocks of HOPE are important for a classroom setting.

Students shared the following reasons as to why the building blocks are important:

"HOPE is especially important in fields like social work. These elements create a positive, supportive learning environment that promotes both academic success and personal development."

"Absolutely! It is essentially to have all these components within the classroom. Having relationships builds our network and support system within Social Work. The environment should be safe and welcoming to all students. All students should engage and be involved with discussions. All students will go through emotional growth at this point in our lives a lot could be changing, but we also go through a lot at our internships."

Lessons Learned

The implementation of the HOPE Pilot Program revealed several strengths that contributed to its overall success:

- **Adaptability of the HOPE Framework:** The HOPE model demonstrated strong flexibility, allowing the facilitator to adapt the application of the building blocks to meet the unique needs of the classroom environment.

- **Low-Resource Activity Design:** The program's activities were designed in a way that required minimal oversight, making them easy to implement without placing undue burden on the instructor or students. This contributed to smoother integration into existing course structure.

- **Time Efficiency:** The activities were not overly time-consuming, which helped maintain consistent student participation and allowed for meaningful engagement without disrupting academic schedules.

- **Student Engagement with HOPE Building Blocks:** Students actively engaged with the four HOPE building blocks (Relationships, Engagement, Environment, and Emotional Growth). Their reflections and participation indicated a genuine connection to the content and its relevance to their personal and academic lives.

- **Mid-Year Survey:** Implementing a mid-year survey with the undergraduate students proved helpful in identifying needs, gaps, and opportunities for deeper engagement before the program concluded.

Areas for Improvement

Compare Similar Classes
- For future HOPE classroom projects, an area for improvement is using an experimental design that compares two classes of the same academic level. Comparing similar class levels would help isolate the impact of the intervention and strengthen the validity of the findings.

Conclusion

The HOPE Pilot Program demonstrated measurable impacts in areas aligned with the HOPE framework: connection, emotional growth, safe environments, and civic engagement. Undergraduate participant feedback indicates that the program contributed positively to student well-being, classroom culture, and interpersonal development within the social work field placement course.

Recommendations

These next steps provide a roadmap for scaling the HOPE initiative and deepening its impact within the SDSU community and beyond. Building on the successes and lessons of the initial HOPE Pilot Program, the following recommendations are offered to support strategic growth, sustainability, and broader campus impact:

- **Expand Implementation Across SDSU:** Pilot the HOPE program in additional departments and student communities across the SDSU campus. Targeting diverse academic disciplines and student service areas will increase institutional reach.

- **Strengthen Campus Collaboration and Funding Opportunities:** Identify opportunities for ongoing partnerships and internal funding to embed HOPE principles in more departments.

- **Train and Empower HOPE Facilitators:** Develop and implement a facilitator training model that equips staff, faculty, and student leaders with the tools to integrate the HOPE framework into classroom environments and student engagement spaces. This will help foster a consistent culture of emotional safety, growth, and civic connection across campus.

- **Standardize and Adapt Survey Tools:** Create a unified but flexible survey instrument tailored to the HOPE framework, with customizable elements for each cohort or department. This standardization will enhance data collection, evaluation, and replicability, while still honoring the unique needs of different student populations.

Acknowledgments

References

1. Burstein, D., Yang, C., Johnson, K., Linkenbach, J., & Sege, R. (2021). Transforming practice with hope (healthy outcomes from positive experiences). Maternal and child health journal. https://positiveexperience.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Transforming-practice-with-HOPE.pdf

2. B. Hudnall Stamm, 2009. Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Version 5 (ProQOL)./www.isu.edu/~bhstamm or www.proqol.org.

Appendix A: Professional Quality of Life Scales for Undergraduate Class (n = 12)

Undergraduate Class October 2024
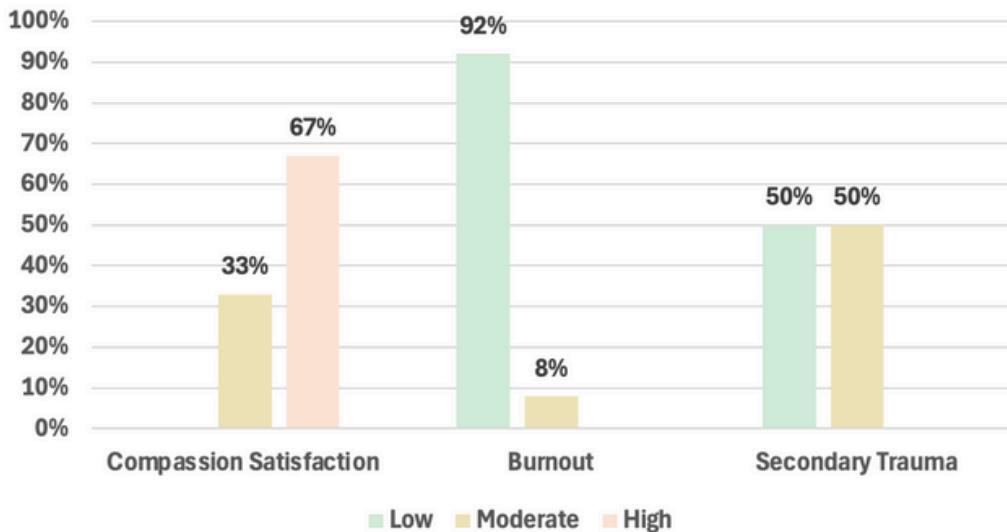
Undergraduate Class April 2025
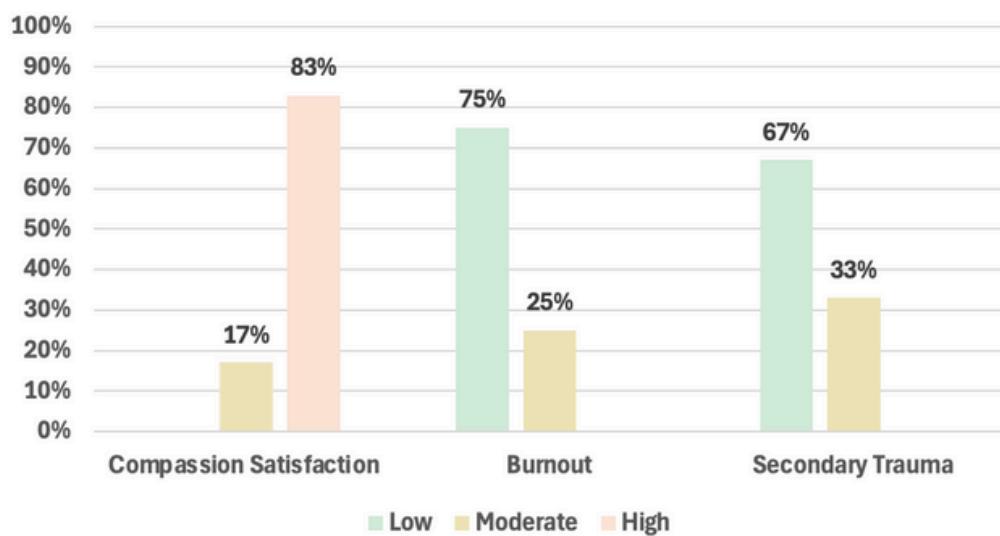
- Compassion Satisfaction increased by 16%
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