

Treat Yo'Self: An Innovative Approach to Teaching Work-Life Balance

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Need for Innovation

College students are facing a mental health crisis. The median age of onset for mental health disorders is between one's late teens and early 20s (Kessler et al., 2007). Students' stress levels significantly increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected their moods and wellness behaviors (Copeland et al., 2021). A survey conducted in Feb. 2021 found 32% of young adults ages 18 to 29 felt high psychological distress (compared to 21% of all U.S. adults) (Keeter, 2021). Depression also increased among college students during the pandemic, however, physical activity – which has been proven to help with depressive symptoms – decreased (Coughenour et al., 2020). Students are aware that mental health is a problem, with more American teenagers citing anxiety and depression (70%) as a major problem among their peers than other common youth issues such as bullying (55%), drug addiction (51%), and drinking alcohol (45%) (Horowitz & Graf, 2019).

One factor that increases stress among students is having a poor work-life balance (WLB) (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). Sprung and Rogers (2021) suggested that educational institutions, “assist students with low WLB, as they may be at a greater risk for anxiety and depression” (p. 780). Having a poor WLB has also been linked to poor mental health among professionals in agriculture including farmers (Kolstrup et al., 2013) and educators (Sorensen & McKim, 2014). As Rudolphi (2020) stated, the agricultural industry may not be able to eliminate some stressors, but it is important for those in agriculture to manage stress. Feeling connected to their universities during the pandemic also seemed to help lessen the risk of mental health issues among agricultural students (Ehmke et al., 2022). To assist undergraduate agricultural students prepare for their careers and feel connected to the university, the instructor created an experiential learning extra credit assignment.

How It Works

Students were given a surprise extra credit assignment during midterm week, a busy period of the semester. The assignment asked students to complete an activity for themselves within one week's time to receive an extra 20 points (out of 1000) for the class. It was explained that this assignment was meant to help students establish a healthy WLB. Examples of activities were described for the students including going on a hike, reading a book, or baking cookies. Students were required to take a picture of the activity they chose as proof of participation. They also wrote a short reflection piece describing what they did. They were not provided any further formatting guidelines for the reflections. Assignments were submitted to Blackboard.

Results to Date

This assignment was given to a combination of four agricultural communications and agricultural business courses at Missouri State University beginning Fall 2020. Fifty-six ($N = 56$) students chose to participate. Of these, 46.43% ($N = 26$) of students chose to do something outdoors, 37.50% ($N = 21$) spent time with family and/or friends, 32.14% ($N = 18$) spent time with a pet (cat, dog, horse) or livestock, and 19.64% ($N = 11$) traveled. Many students also

shared personal details about their lives as part of their reflections such as challenges they faced, significant relationships, momentous milestones accomplished, and hobbies they enjoy. This was especially helpful when trying to establish a more personalized relationship with students who were exclusively at-a-distance.

A portion of students ($N = 8$; 14.29%) also directly thanked the instructor for giving this assignment as part of their reflection. One student described being able to organize all their fishing gear the week before spring break, “due to this wonderful assignment... I have not quite had a teacher do anything like this before.” Another started their reflection with, “First off, I want to say thank you... [This assignment] made me realize maybe I should do more things for me.” They ended with, “Once again, thank you for the assignment. #LifeIsTooShort.” Another student, who had the same extra credit assignment in a course taught by the instructor the previous semester wrote, “Honestly, this was my favorite extra credit assignment in PR because not many professors think to consider it, and I am very glad that you chose to continue it in all of your classes this year! I like it because it forces me to step back and realize that it is okay and very necessary to take breaks, even though I fail to take them most of the time... [Taking time to read] gave me a little bit more calmness in my life this week, which I feel helped me a lot because it seems like my mind hasn't been able to shut off lately. Thank you for doing this assignment again, Dr. Opat!” Another wrote, “I don't do this for myself often, so it was very healing. Thank you for this. I haven't had one professor do this for their class and I have been here for almost six years. It really means a lot because we are only human and it's nice to have a break sometimes.”

Future Plans / Advice to Others

In the future, the instructor plans to avoid scheduling this extra credit opportunity near or during a school holiday. This exercise should force students to take a break during a time they are not necessarily planning to take one. This gives them tools to take breaks for themselves during busy times in their lives after graduation, when many will not get vacation days or holidays off right away. We would advise others who consider duplicating this assignment do the same.

We would also encourage others to introduce the assignment in a humorous or light-hearted way. The instructor usually posts a meme of two characters from the Parks and Recreation television show that says, “Treat Yo'self!” This way, students understand this is an exercise in relaxation and life balance rather than something for us to judge and grade. We also advise writing a personal response to each assignment using Blackboard's “Instructor Feedback” tool when grading. This could easily be accomplished by writing on hard-copy assignments as well. Be sure to mention something from the students' reflection or photo so they know you took time to learn more about them and show that you care.

Costs/ Resources Needed

Students will need access to a camera (or smart phone camera) and a device that connects to the internet (if the assignment will be turned in digitally). There is no additional cost associated with this innovative idea.

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