

Promoting Student Well-Being through Wellness Week

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Research conducted during the outbreak of COVID-19 concluded the pandemic had a significant negative impact on the mental health of college students and proactive efforts were needed to support their well-being (Kecojevic et al., 2020). Students reported experiencing an increase in anxiety, feelings of loneliness, and depression (Lee et al., 2021). Following a conversation with undergraduate students in which they expressed overwhelm with courses, personal concerns, and feelings of isolation, course instructors determined a Wellness Week should be instituted.

How it Works

Wellness Week was a spontaneous decision that occurred at the end of the semester based on the conversations instructors had with students. Students in both the synchronous and asynchronous sections of the course were notified of the change via email and also provided with an updated course outline. During Wellness Week, there was no class or lab activities and instead, students were asked to carve out a little time each day to engage in a wellness activity. A Wellness Week document was created and posted in the learning management system with 25 choices of activities to complete. Activities ranged from creating an upbeat playlist or playing a board game to trying a new food. There was also an option to engage in a wellness activity of their choice. From the list, students were asked to select five to complete over the week. Using Flipgrid or a written response, students explained what activities they completed and provided a brief description of how they will continue to prioritize time on a daily or weekly basis to engage in personal wellness efforts as a pre-service teacher. For students who reflected using Flipgrid, the course instructors watched each video and provided video or written responses. Students completing the written format received a document that compiled all the reflections from the class, as well as an explanation of how the course instructor also participated. In addition, the instructors provided comprehensive feedback. The students described some important realizations regarding the importance of wellness. For example,

- *I'm using my mindset to practice wellness. Being a teacher, there is a lot that is not necessarily time-dependent but intention and work-dependent. I'm going to be more intentional with my time, focusing better on the people I'm with (students, friends, family, etc.). This will help me have better, less stressful interactions with others, and myself! Taking my time and focusing on doing things right will help me as a teacher ensure that I can maintain my wellness for myself, my family, and my students!*
- *I will be sure to find simple activities throughout the day I know will take stress off my shoulders. I can even make it a goal to take one "big" mental break a week or a few times a week and participate in a hike, fitness class, or another activity I know I enjoy.*

Results to Date

During Spring 2021, nine students in the synchronous class section and 14 students in the asynchronous class section participated in Wellness Week. Students had numerous positive comments about the experience and provided encouraging feedback to each other through

Flipgrid responses. As a result, the course instructors have continued to include a Wellness Day or Week into their courses. Also, the activity was slightly modified as an option for professional development during the remote delivery of our state-approved 40-hour induction program. Instead of being limited to a week, teacher participants were asked to complete 15 activities over the course of a month and asked to reflect.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

An initial concern while implementing the activity was the change in course topics with only a few weeks left in the semester. However, the students seemed to appreciate the break to focus efforts on other courses and spend time prioritizing their own well-being. Another consideration was the grading component and how does an instructor assign a grade to wellness efforts. Essentially it became a completion grade in that students received full credit if they participated and submitted a reflection. However, the three participants that did not participate did not receive credit, which seems counterintuitive to the purpose of the assignment to reduce stress. A recommendation would be to determine how wellness activities might be incorporated for a grade or consider allowing students who choose not to participate an opt-out option that has no impact on their grade. In addition, consideration of the activities should also showcase a variety of activities. Allowing undergraduate TA's to review the list provided additional options that were relevant to the students. Another consideration would be to include university activities such as gym classes, movies, or cultural events that would allow students to focus on their wellness while engaging with others of their university community.

Costs/Resources Needed

The resources needed to implement this innovative idea are time in the course schedule. As was mentioned, a week was dedicated in Spring 2021, but that has been reduced to a day for the current semester. Additionally, the assignment description and list of activities was created, as well as viewing or reading the student reflections and providing feedback. The time for this effort was minimal, only a few hours, and should not be considered a drawback.

References

- Kecojevic, A. Basch, C. H., Sullivan, M. & Davi, N. K. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on mental health of undergraduate students in New Jersey, cross-sectional study. *PLOS ONE*, 15(9), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239696>
- Lee, J. Solomon, M., Stead, T., Kwon, B., & Ganti, L. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of US college students. *BMC Psychology*, 9(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00598-3>