

The Value of Wellness-Related Courses in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Background: General education curriculums provide students with knowledge and skills that empower them to engage in their communities and prepare them for life after graduation. Furthermore, colleges and universities can establish campus culture and express their values through their general education curriculum.

Aim: The aim of this article was to inspire faculty and administrators to reflect on the wellness culture present at their institution, specifically within their general education program.

Methods: The authors addressed the need for a campus-wide wellness-related general education course. Arguments against and benefits of such a course were presented, as were suggestions for future research.

Results: Wellness is a pertinent topic woven throughout our lives and the lives of our students. Attending college offers students newfound independence and autonomy, as well as an opportunity to develop positive lifelong habits. A wellness-related course reinforces the holistic, interdisciplinary approach to general education and teaches the importance of healthy behaviors.

Conclusion: Although concerns surrounding institutional resources exist when considering the creation of a new campus-wide requirement, the potential improvements in academic performance, student retention, and health behaviors outweigh the challenges.

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Wellness is defined as the active process of becoming more aware of and making choices towards a more successful existence (National Wellness Institute [NWI], n.d.). Some dimensions of wellness include social, emotional, spiritual, occupational, intellectual, and physical (National Wellness Institute [NWI], n.d.). Many institutions of higher education lack comprehensive, structured programs that include policies designed to support campus wellness (Flynn et al., 2018; Hill-Mey et al., 2015; Travia, Larcus, Andes, & Gomes, 2019). Moreover, in higher education, wellness is often fragmented into various departments based on program values and goals. Typically, initiatives implemented only target a singular behavior within one dimension of wellness. Offering a wellness course within the general education curriculum demonstrates an institution's commitment to holistically supporting the student by fostering a



culture of wellness across campus. This article addresses counter arguments to establishing a campus-wide wellness general education course and justifies the inclusion of a wellness-related general education course in higher education.

Benefits highlighted in this paper encompass students, alumni, faculty, staff, and institutions. Emphasis was placed on three broad evidence-based benefits of a wellness general education requirement for current students. Supporting students in their engagement with wellness-related content positively influences students' academic performance, quality of life, and overall wellness, including but not limited to physical and mental health (Pearman et al., 1997; Plotnikoff et al., 2015; Quartiroli & Maeda, 2016; Ruthig, Marrone, Hladkyj, & Robinson-Epp, 2011). Furthermore, this paper specifies campus-wide advantages gained from such a program. Establishing a wellness general education requirement can improve student retention, social connectedness, and health outcomes of community members, while also cultivating a wellness culture on campus (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Slavin, Schindler, & Chibnall, 2014).

Wellness cultures are vital for all members of the campus community. Today, at least 60% of adults in the United States (U.S.) have a chronic disease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Moreover, 40% of adults in the U.S. have two or more chronic diseases; many of which are preventable with changes made to lifestyle choices. Establishing a culture of wellness to support employee's healthy lifestyle choices and behaviors is one strategy that institutions can implement to improve employee health outcomes (Melnyk, Amaya, Szalacha, & Hoying, 2016). A culture of wellness could also benefit current students (Plotnikoff et al., 2015; Quartiroli & Maeda, 2016) and alumni (Pearman et al., 1997). The American College Health Association (ACHA) identified wellness-related health promotion initiatives in higher education as a critical factor for nationwide health improvement (ACHA, 2018b). The inclusion of a wellness-related general education course would increase conversations around and awareness of wellness for the entire campus.

The ACHA annually surveys college students through the National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) and collects data on student health and factors that impact academic performance. The most recent ACHA-NCHA determined that undergraduate students had difficulty eating properly, meeting the recommended levels of physical activity, and attaining the recommended hours of sleep (ACHA, 2020). In the same year, students reported that anxiety, depression, internet use (including computer games), relationship difficulties, sleep difficulties, and stress adversely affected their academic performance (ACHA, 2020). Similarly, Bruffaerts et al. (2018) reported that students who experienced mental health (which includes emotional and social wellness) problems during their transitional years of college demonstrated a drop in academic performance. In 2019, more undergraduate students reported feeling lonely, overwhelmed with responsibilities, and so depressed they had more difficulty functioning than in previous years (ACHA, 2016, 2018a, 2019a). It is readily apparent that the transitional years of college may be challenging for students to balance all dimensions of wellness. Supporting student wellness is not exclusively the responsibility of health services or the counseling center. Ferren and Kinch (2003) suggested that general education reform was rooted in faculty innovation and supported by administration; thus, offering a wellness-related general education course should be the cornerstone of a campus-wide wellness initiative.

Creating a culture of wellness encourages self-care by normalizing requests for help and creating supports for students and employees alike. A primary reason people do not seek help for mental health issues is the stigma surrounding the topic (Klein, 2018). If concerns are not addressed, unhealthy behaviors and unfavorable outcomes could continue to rise. One approach to eliminating stigma and tackling other impediments to wellness is cultivating a culture that focuses on prevention rather than intervention (Klein, 2018). An interdisciplinary group of higher

education organizations, the National Intramural-Recreation Sports Association (NIRSA), supports campus and general education reform by prioritizing wellness for students and employees (NIRSA, 2019). In a recent call to action, NIRSA (2019, p. 1) argued, “it is time to transcend reactive, siloed, programmatic approaches to health and establish foundational, proactive, well-being initiatives for the campus community.”

Institutional values are conveyed, and campus cultures are established through their general education curriculum (Awbrey, 2005), especially considering that general education programs make up approximately one-third of graduation requirements (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Newton (2000) asserts that general education should be student-centered and relevant to the 21st century, particularly in the effective citizen general education model. The purpose of this approach is to teach students how to live well, provide them with the skills to become productive members of society, and encourage them to engage in their communities (Newton, 2000). A wellness-related general education course is one way for an institution to express its values, foster a culture of wellness, and fulfill the expectations of the effective citizen model.

Counterargument to a Campus-Wide Wellness-Related General Education Course

A distinctive characteristic of higher education in the U.S. is the wide breadth of courses offered in general education curriculums (Wells, 2015). When considering a new general education course, the increased demand for institutional resources and high credit requirements in general education programs are often among the leading concerns for faculty and administration (Ferren & Kinch, 2003). The addition of such a course may require more faculty, classroom space, equipment, and materials. If full-time faculty are already at capacity for their faculty loads, institutions would be required to fund adjunct positions to fill the instructional gaps. Furthermore, to meet institutional outcomes, maintain academic rigor, and prepare students to engage in a modern society, contemporary general education curriculums are already inflated. Consequently, administrators, faculty, and students may oppose the addition of another general education requirement (Ferren & Kinch, 2003; Wells, 2015).

Evidence-Based Benefits of Wellness-Related Courses Offered in Higher Education

Due to the interdisciplinary nature and wide breadth of wellness, it is difficult to establish effective tools to measure the totality of its benefits (Cooke, Melchert, & Conner, 2016). This section organized the evidence-based benefits of a wellness-related course by population. It addresses the lasting effects of such a course on alumni and illuminates the advantages for campus members, including current students and the institution.

The today’s students are tomorrow’s leaders. Their beliefs, attitudes, and actions will influence their immediate environments and establish community culture, policies, and societal norms (Sparling, 2003). Sparling (2003) stated that college and university’s general education mission statements should incorporate the development of “well-educated and balanced persons who can maximize their potential, function at a high level, and be productive members of society” (p. 583). Students aware of the holistic nature of wellness and who have practiced wellness skills may be more likely to reach their goals (Sparling, 2003). A wellness-related course would help students be more intentional in their actions and encourage engagement in healthy-lifestyle choices when attending college, with the potential to extend into adulthood.

An early introduction to wellness paradigms is important for creating positive lifelong wellness practices. Researchers have suggested that adulthood wellness practices are rooted in the habits developed during the college years (Baldwin, Towler, Oliver, & Datta, 2017; Crossman, 2015; Pearman et al., 1997). Alumni that enrolled in courses with a wellness component demonstrated higher levels of health-related knowledge and were more likely to engage in healthy lifestyles after graduation (Pearman et al., 1997). Furthermore, these individuals reported improvements in their attitudes towards lifestyle choices that impact health and wellness (Pearman et al., 1997). Conversely, students engaging in unhealthy behaviors during the college years, such as binge drinking, lack of exercise, and poor diet, have an increased likelihood of serious health problems after graduation (Adams, Graves, & Adams, 2006; Baldwin et al., 2017, Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDade, & Adam, 2012).

Institutions that prioritize wellness not only improve the health and wellness of graduates, but they also yield immediate benefits for current students. In a systematic review of the literature, researchers determined that college offered interventions, such as wellness-related courses, improved students' physical and mental health, including diet, sleep, and exercise (Plotnikoff et al., 2015). Hager, George, LeCheminant, Bailey, and Vincent (2012) determined that students enrolled in a single semester wellness-related course increased physical activity by 12%, improved fitness levels by 2%, and reported healthier diets. There is also evidence supporting connections between wellness and overall health and quality of life (ACHA, 2019b; Baldwin et al., 2017; Click, Huang, & Kline, 2017; Ge et al., 2019; Quartiroli & Maeda, 2016) and academic performance (Gast, Michael, Eskridge, Hermann, & Turnage-Butterbaugh, 2019; Kovich & Simpson, 2019; Ruthig et al., 2011). Slavin et al. (2014) studied the impact of an integrated wellness curricular program on preclinical medical students and determined a decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress. Furthermore, wellness-related courses improved student perceptions of self-care, environmental awareness, emotional management (Wharf Higgins, Lauzon, Bratseth, & McLeod, 2010) and attitudes toward physical activity (Mack & Shaddox, 2004). Finally, Gast et al. (2019) found that a mandatory wellness course increased GPA more than one point for students on academic probation.

Inversely, research shows low levels of wellness and specific unhealthy behaviors impair academic performance (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Kovich & Simpson, 2019; Ruthig et al., 2011). Unhealthy behaviors common to college-aged students that impact overall wellness include poor sleep habits, alcohol consumption, and tobacco use (An, Loes, & Trolan, 2017; Bushman, 2013; Howell, Jahrig, & Powell, 2004; Ruthig et al., 2011). In a survey of 30,084 undergraduate students, the ACHA concluded that 49.8% of students reported an average of less than seven hours of sleep per night, failing to meet the recommended seven to eight hours (ACHA, 2020; Bushman, 2013). This report also revealed that 23.6% of the respondents felt sleep difficulties impeded their academic performance (ACHA, 2020). Similarly, Howell et al. (2004), found that full time students who reported higher quality sleep performed better on academic measures when compared to those who reported low quality sleep. In addition to lack of sleep, a 2019 executive summary (ACHA, 2020) stated that 40.7% of students that drank alcohol, consumed five or more drinks in a sitting one or two times in the last two weeks, while 17.2% of respondents reported binge drinking three or more times. In the same survey, 33.4% of students used tobacco or other nicotine delivery products (ACHA, 2020). Studies show that both binge drinking and tobacco use are associated with lower GPA (An et al., 2017; Ruthig et al., 2011). Although there is limited research that directly links overall wellness to academic performance, these individual health-related behaviors combined indirectly demonstrate how low levels of wellness can weaken academic performance.

Beyond impacting the individual, including a wellness-related course in a general education curriculum can also benefit the institution. Although research directly examining the effects of a wellness-related course on student

retention is lacking, it could be theorized that the inclusion of such a course may lead to improved levels of student engagement and thus student retention. Social connectedness is a major determinant of student retention rates (Allen et al., 2008; Miller, 2011; Styron, 2010). Students who participated in integrated wellness curriculums reported higher levels of community cohesion, ergo, requiring a wellness-related course could improve levels of social connectedness across campus (Slavin et al., 2014). In addition to creating a sense of community, Tinto (2017) theorizes that student retention rates are influenced by a sense of belonging and perceptions of self-efficacy. Various researchers have reported that a wellness-related course improved perceptions of self-efficacy; therefore, it is imperative to include such a course in the general education curriculum (Lockwood & Wohl, 2012; Sidman, D'Abundo, & Bullard, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to highlight the evidence-based benefits of a wellness-related course within general education programs. There is ample research indicating that college student engagement in unhealthy behaviors results in low levels of overall wellness (ACHA, 2020; Ruthig et al., 2011). Students' transitional years in college offer an opportunity to develop healthy habits that could yield immediate benefits and last a lifetime (Baldwin et al., 2017; Crossman, 2015; Pearman et al., 1997). An institution's wellness culture represented in their general education curriculum could cultivate behavior change across campus, improve academic performance, and enhance social connectedness (Gast et al., 2019; Hager et al., 2012; Slavin et al., 2014). Future research should directly examine the influence of a wellness-related course within a general education curriculum on the wellness of students and graduates.

This article aimed to inspire general education reform for colleges and universities that hope to foster wellness cultures throughout their campus. Institutions that wish to do so are encouraged to create a wellness-related course within their general education curriculum. The course should utilize a holistic approach, teach behavior change theory, and provide experiential opportunities for students to implement SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based) goals and programs that encourage healthy habits (Crossman, 2016). Although general education reform may be challenging, faculty and administrators must recognize the value of adopting a wellness paradigm so that students may reach their fullest potential. This call to action is supported by professional organizations, such as NIRSA (2019), which proclaims that "by focusing on the whole—the whole person, the whole educational experience, the whole institution, the whole community—well-being becomes a multifaceted goal and a shared responsibility for the entire campus" (p. 1). Adding a wellness-related general education requirement proactively reinforces the institution's commitment to its citizenry by creating a culture that allows individuals to flourish and thrive.

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Author's Note

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