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Health and Wellness: An Honors First-Year Experience Assignment in Response to the Pandemic

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Abstract: Responding to pervasive mental and physical stresses of the COVID-19 crisis, the author assigns first-year students various routine wellness practices for one hour each week along with requisite reflective writing exercises. Student expectations, experiences, and outcomes are presented.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; wellbeing; psychological stress; reflective learning; University of Montevallo (AL)—Honors Program

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As I planned my fall 2020 honors one-credit-hour, first-year-experience orientation course (HNRS 100) during the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt the need to imbed a health and wellness assignment for the incoming freshmen. At the National Collegiate Honors Council annual conference over the last several years, I have noticed an uptick in panels focusing on student mental health. These panels have offered unique suggestions that range from a dedicated technology-free meditation room implemented on campus to a weekly wellness Wednesday email that sends encouraging thoughts and uplifting quotations. In the inaugural Brief Ideas section of *Honors in Practice*, one article details a lecture series on college student mental health with supporting research on why such a focus is needed on our college campuses (Bischof, Hamilton, and Hernandez). Such extracurricular and inspirational options are vital to supporting our honors students outside of the classroom, but with the pandemic looming, I wanted a graded assignment focused on students' health and wellbeing to help them decrease stress during this difficult time

while also keeping them accountable. College was going to be tricky for these freshmen. They were juggling remote learning for some classes and in-person for others while living on campus, where they had to social distance, with limited student organizational activities and no athletic/fine arts events to attend. For this assignment, students were required each week to take at least one hour to complete the task I set for them and then write a reflection essay at the end of the semester. By prioritizing these types of activities in their first semester, my goal was to motivate them to spend time on their wellbeing while establishing strong, healthy patterns for the rest of college.

When researching what fourteen tasks to assign, I debated a variety of activities, e.g., watch a sunrise or sunset, unplug from devices, talk to a friend, play a game, complete a puzzle or crossword, color or paint or draw, and write a letter or email to a friend or family member. In the end, I decided on these tasks: sleep, exercise, organize your physical space, organize your electronic space, listen to upbeat music, stare at the clouds or stars, read for fun, stretch, engage with an animal, breathe, be grateful, explore nature, sit by water, and practice kindness. Each week I sent a reminder detailing their wellness task with a short blurb about the health benefits, as proven by scientific studies for each task; an explanation of my rationale; and tips to complete them. For several I also shared how I was incorporating the task into my own life. Some tasks were timed to fit with semester events, such as “read for fun,” which was included as a class activity the week they had an orientation to our campus library; others were to be completed with their peer mentor groups, such as “explore nature.” Some had a collaborative component, such as building an honors program “Good Vibes” Spotify playlist in conjunction with “listen to upbeat music,” and others had virtual options if a student was unable to complete them physically, such as “engage with an animal.”

Initially, some students resisted this assignment. One student bluntly wrote, “At first, these wellness activities seemed pointless,” but she continued doing them anyway and concluded that “as the semester continued I found myself looking forward to these periods of self-care.” Another commented, “When we first started, I felt that it wasn’t the most important assignment compared to my other classes and I would push it off until I felt that I just couldn’t anymore.” She described the assignment as “annoying” but admitted “the more that I did them, the more that I began to enjoy them. It put the fun into school for me.”

Even specific assignments that students did not enjoy often turned out to be useful: “There were some challenges I didn’t love, like reading for fun. I have trouble focusing on what I’m reading, so that created some frustration

for me. I'm still happy I tried, because it showed me what doesn't help me." A few students were honest about their partial completion of the assignment but still found benefits. One student wrote, "I can't pretend like I've been perfect and followed absolutely every week (I'm not really into animals, unfortunately), but I genuinely appreciate that you've built this into the curriculum, it's been really helpful."

While "read for fun" and "engage with an animal" might not have been the most popular, a few tasks stood out as clear winners. Based on their reflection essays, the two most popular tasks were "sleep" and "breathe." Aside from tasks that all humans necessarily undertake, each student found at least one or two from the fourteen that strongly resonated with them, and students often remarked that they repeated some tasks after completing the regularly scheduled activity. Many students started including the previous weeks' wellness tasks as part of their weekly routines to build a healthy lifestyle, even though this took some students by surprise: "After trying some tasks I actually incorporated them into my life regularly."

A few minor complaints aside, the reflection essays conveyed an outpouring of positive feedback. A common refrain was appreciation and gratitude: "These activities proved to be vital in the middle of a pandemic and are one of the main reasons why I got through the semester with good academic and mental status." Students appreciated not only reaping the benefits of these tasks but also knowing that a professor cared about them: "It's good to know that our professors not only care about our academic performance but also our well-being." They also appreciated not having to feel guilty for self-care: "I appreciate the creation of these tasks because it gave me an excuse to just think about myself and not stress." Taking away guilt for doing self-care tasks made it much easier for students to focus on themselves. As one student said, she was able to justify taking care of herself "because technically it was an assignment." Another wrote,

In college, even without a pandemic looming over us, so much stress is placed on us to succeed academically. While that's not necessarily a bad thing, making us feel guilty for taking the time for these small experiences can be harmful. These weekly activities really made me okay with not romanticizing burnout and allowing myself to still be a person and take time outside of study.

Quite a few of us in higher education still need to learn this lesson.

Instigating this assignment in their first-year-experience honors course not only had a positive impact on students during that semester but also set

a positive, habit-forming focus for their time at college. One student wrote, “It may be an interesting challenge for myself to attempt to continue these practices moving forward, but I think that starting the habits now of making sure that I’m taking care of my mental and emotional health is a vital part of keeping burnout away for as long as possible.” Many were optimistic about continuing such activities: “I really believe in the Wellness Activities from this semester and I will be implementing them into my life next semester and probably for the rest of my college career. It really helped open my eyes to the possibilities of relaxation and rejuvenation during times when I might feel the opposite of relaxed.”

While I was only planning on using this assignment during the pandemic, I will now be implementing it each fall, as some students requested:

I know these were put in place because COVID has put a lot of stress on everyone and sometimes it makes it hard to want to focus on yourself. I believe that these wellness activities should be continued even when everything goes back to normal. These are especially helpful to freshmen who are making most likely their longest trip away from home or even just being in a new environment.

Another student wrote, “I think that these activities should remain part of the class, because honors students (myself included) often prioritize academics over caring for themselves physically, mentally, or emotionally. We need a push to pay more attention to ourselves sometimes.” Don’t we all?

REFERENCE

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