

Addressing Student Wellness Within Organizational Behavior Courses: Can Curriculum Infusion Be Done Effectively?

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Abstract. As student wellness initiatives have become increasingly important over the past few years, designing management courses to include curriculum infusion (CI) is prudent, but reports of its effectiveness vary. CI's effectiveness may improve when paired with evidenced-based pedagogical methods. For organizational behavior students, problem-based learning (PBL) seems most relevant. The current study used a quasi-experimental method to examine the effectiveness of CI when combined with PBL (CI-PBL) to increase student understanding of wellness topics and awareness of campus health initiatives, while effectively teaching course concepts. The CI-PBL approach demonstrated effectiveness across most outcomes. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: curriculum infusion, project-based learning, well-being, health, higher education, student wellness.

1. Introduction

Recently, a focus on student wellness has taken front stage as institutions of higher education grappled with how to manage COVID-19 on campus; however, interest in educating business students on the individual, professional, organizational, and societal impacts of wellness predate COVID (Hartley & Young 2019). Untreated mental and physical illness can negatively impact students' productivity, relationships, substance use, and academic success (Auerbach *et al.* 2018; Hunt & Eisenberg 2010). Many institutions of higher education place value on both educating students and supporting their wellness (Suhlmann *et al.* 2018). At the individual level, students' well-being has been shown to impact academic achievement (Geertshius 2018; Murray-Harvey 2010; Wintre *et al.* 2010) and a 2017 Chronicle of Higher Education survey showed that

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both college presidents and student affairs administrators considered student mental health their top concern (Rubley 2017).

Universities can support student wellness. At the organizational and societal level, for example, Knifsend (2020) demonstrates that high levels of student involvement in campus activities (i.e., 10+ hours a week of participation) increase feelings of belongingness and decrease feelings of loneliness and social anxiety. While there are many ways to support student well-being, including student health, counseling, and recreation centers, wellness programs in residence halls, and nutrition education in dining halls, supporting the well-being of college students has often been viewed as an issue for student services and/or student led initiatives rather than an issue to be addressed within students' courses (Houghton & Anderson 2017). A limitation of this view is that students must both be aware of, and self-select into, campus programs, initiatives, and services. Additionally, as many students may live, work, and/or have obligations off-campus, participating in on-campus activities for support may be challenging. Thus, using courses as a tool in student wellness efforts enables institutions to reach a broader range of students (White *et al.* 2010). One way to do this is by infusing the course curriculum with wellness information.

Within business management courses, instructors have the opportunity to play a central role in developing students' understanding of wellness initiatives, because "they sit at the convergence of theory, practice, and lifestyle, disseminating the results of recent research, interacting with business organizations and executives, and impact student lifestyle" (Hartley & Young 2019, p. 271). Course content can help promote active engagement with stress management, provide an entry point for campus resources, and better prepare students for business careers (King & Kabat-Farr 2022). Business courses that infuse wellness information can also play a role in reducing stigma about mental illness in business schools (Edwards *et al.* 2021), and enhance subjective well-being in students which can lead to higher levels of classroom engagement (Seijts *et al.* 2022). Addressing wellness issues also promotes student resilience, which can increase flexibility and adaptability to help students better transition into careers (Dunn & Fallah 2023).

2. Literature Review

Curriculum Infusion and Focus on Student Wellness

One way to incorporate student wellness efforts into student coursework is via curriculum infusion (CI). Curriculum infusion is an educational approach in which instructors use content from different subject areas to focus on a theme or topic (McBrien & Brandt 1997; Morrison & Oladunjoye 2002). Although some CI interventions may consist of as little as an instructor devoting a part of one class meeting to a guest speaker, interventions may take more integrated forms

such as infusing the topic throughout an entire course (Morrison & Oladnjoye 2002). Many curriculum infusion efforts in higher education have focused on the prevention of high-risk drinking and drug use (DeJong *et al.* 2007; Mitchell *et al.* 2012; Flynn & Carter 2016).

However, there have also been efforts to use CI to focus on additional areas of health and wellness such as mental health. As explained by Houghton & Anderson (2017), “addressing mental well-being as a content area within curricula is of intrinsic value—given its importance as a key societal concern. Through raising awareness, CI also increases the likelihood that students may be more effective at managing their own well-being and able to access appropriate support, where necessary—both for themselves and one another” (p. 18). In general, CI focuses on student health behaviors, with instructors creating projects in their subject areas that focus on wellness topics. However, while faculty have a good understanding of the importance of student wellness and are often eager to engage in discussions with students about wellness topics, they may lack knowledge about how to connect these discussions to the learning outcomes in their courses (Finley 2016). This disconnect may explain why curriculum infusion has not received much attention in terms of a pedagogical approach and the varying reports of its effectiveness.

Curriculum Infusion Effectiveness

Outcomes of CI projects have shown mixed results. For example, in a study of a CI project around college student alcohol use, Flynn and Carter (2016) found reduced misperceptions of college student alcohol use, but actual high-risk drinking behaviors were only lowered in men. Mitchell *et al.* (2012) found increased understanding of mental health issues among faculty, but no significant increase in referrals to the campus counseling center when implementing a class project on mental health. Yearwood and Riley (2010) found that nursing students participating in a CI project involving self-reflection about mental health identified a greater need to practice self-care. As it seems that the effectiveness of CI has been inconclusive thus far via the traditional methods, the uses of CI within specific instructional methods, like project-based learning (PBL), should be examined.

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning promotes student learning through projects and is an alternative approach to more traditional, teacher-led instruction (DeFillippi 2001). Students engaging in PBL complete projects in real-world contexts by which they gain knowledge and skills (e.g., teamwork, community engagement, personal care, etc.) via real-world applications which culminate in a final product (Cavanaugh 2004; Lipson *et al.* 2007). Additionally, students take an active, vs. passive, role in the development of learning materials, often working in teams to solve complex problems in real-world situations (Chu *et al.* 2017; Lipson *et al.*

2007). This may explain why students completing PBL projects report increases in engagement, positive attitudes toward PBL, and increases on student creativity, teamwork, and communication (Chu *et al.* 2017; Lipson *et al.* 2007).

Additionally, PBL is positively related to learning outcomes like entrepreneurial skills (Chemborisova *et al.*, 2019). A meta-analysis by Chen & Yang (2019) which analyzed data from 30 articles (12,585 students) demonstrated that PBL had a medium to large positive effect on student learning and performance over traditional instructional approaches. Due to its focus on developing applied skills via projects, it is particularly useful within business settings and for organizational behavior classrooms (Cho & Brown 2013; Danford 2006; Young & Legister 2018). For example, a recent study by Bhuwandeep *et al.* (2022) found that managerial students want more interactive, project-based classes.

Although the effectiveness of CI is inconclusive, the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) has received support (Amulla 2020). Thus, infusing student wellness information specifically within courses that use PBL may be an effective way to deliver student health information to organizational behavior students. For example, the project used in the current study asked students to engage in a semester-long project and conduct research on, collect data for, and present recommendations to the campus student wellness office about student health initiatives (i.e., student stress or a student health topic of their choice). As recommended by Hartley & Young (2019), the current study examines the effectiveness of CI within PBL from a comprehensive framework (i.e., across organizational, societal, personal, and professional outcomes).

In order to test the effectiveness of CI within a PBL project (CI-PBL) in disseminating organizational and societal campus health initiatives and concerns to business students, the current study hypothesizes the following:

H1: Organizational behavior students participating in CI-PBL will have a better understanding of the health needs of other students and campus health initiatives than students participating in a traditional class project.

In addition, as CI has often focused on student wellness, the current study attempts to test the effectiveness of CI within PBL on personal wellness benefits for organizational behavior students. In particular, student stress is one area where other approaches to well-being (e.g., direct practice and skill-building) has shown positive effects (Hamdani 2021).

H2: Organizational behavior students participating in CI-PBL will report lower levels of stress than students participating in a traditional class project.

Achieving Learning Objectives with CI-PBL

Whether the primary course learning objectives can still be effectively conveyed when using CI within a semester-long project is an area of concern. When creating learning objectives for a course that uses CI, both original course content and the infused material must be considered. The current study evaluates a wellness-based curriculum infusion project conducted within multiple sections of