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Chapter 5

Holding Space and Grace: The Implementation of a Health and Wellness Statement in Graduate Courses

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ABSTRACT

A student's life is mentally demanding and time-consuming for any learner. U.S. culture values hard work, no excuses mantras, and discipline to achieve a graduate degree or the next promotion, and often it is a badge of honor to be overcommitted, stressed out, and exhausted. As mental and physical health issues arise, the implementation of a health and wellness statement for graduate students was utilized to open the proverbial door to hold space and grace for life's challenges and empower learners in an inclusive setting.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate school is mentally demanding and time-consuming for any adult learner. The pillars of higher education espouse a scholarly mindset fret with little leeway for excuses, late work, self-care, or days off. At the same time, graduate students are concurrently enrolled in courses, potentially hired as GTA, and generally, balance school, work, partnerships, families, and other life demands. Society and cultural values promote, if not glorify, no excuses mantras, “pulling yourself up by the bootstraps,” social media posts such as #nodaysoff, and the requisite discipline

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to achieve a graduate degree or the next promotion (Moss, 2021). Often, it is a badge of honor within most societies to report being overcommitted, stressed out, and exhausted (Rattrie et al., 2019). Although stress was not a new construct for graduate students, Liu and associates (2022) noted that “Pandemic-related stresses, including relocation, online learning, social distancing, and anxiety over health and economic risks are likely to persist as long-term stressors” (p. 1356). Existing mental and physical health issues were exacerbated when discussing the COVID-19 Pandemic; however, the potential implementation of a health and wellness statement for online graduate students opened the proverbial door to hold space and grace for life’s challenges and potentially empower learners in an inclusive setting (APA, 2021; Copeland et al., 2021; Chtourou et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2021; Lui et al., 2022; Matsumoto et al., 2022).

BACKGROUND

The concept behind our current health and wellness statement originated from a Twitter post authored by a Brown University professor of Sociology, Dr. Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve (2019). We were not only drawn to her work based on the need for students to know we see them as humans who need rest and the overall value of communication about mental and physical health, but we were enamored that the document discussed the self-care and potential vulnerability of the university instructor. Allowing our students to be human and make mistakes also gives us similar allowances. We have all had a time when our grading did not get done as it should have because “life happened.” There is no shame in that as long as we communicate with students and then get the grading done promptly once the situation has passed. Students are more willing to allow me to have a couple of extra days to comment on their assignments if I allow them similar grace. I have also found that grading is not more complicated, even with a more liberal policy. For each assignment, I may have one or two students that need a bit of extra time. They almost always have work submitted by the time I grade, assuming a one-week grading turnaround. After partnered discussions and revisions to consider all levels of our graduate and undergraduate learners, the original statement was slightly altered for our needs as instructors and our curriculum. The initial health and wellness statement was exclusively utilized in the fall of 2020 in a capstone graduate course to potentially ease tensions, provide comfort and act as a buffer for students that were also full-time educators in an online Master’s program. With the combined effects of Covid and a post-pandemic world, awareness of our health and wellness as college educators forced us to reevaluate our self-care and boundaries and reflect on our need for space and grace. Our health and wellness statement was edited for the second time, and it

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was fully integrated into all of our courses at the graduate and undergraduate levels in both face-to-face and online settings by the Spring 2021 semester.

The health and wellness statement we developed, utilizing Gonzales Van Cleves' (2019) original statement, varied between undergraduate and graduate levels to account for the ability to drop one daily grade in the undergraduate pre-service teacher education courses. Other supports were provided at the undergraduate level, such as morning meetings and other support mechanisms to model what research and best practice state regarding effective relationship building and pre-service teacher preparation to train effective future teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). At the graduate level, we felt that the overall statement and awareness it communicated to our students concerning their health and wellness, as well as ours, was more adequate for the adult learner.

Based on our data, graduate students responded favorably by implementing a health and wellness statement as an introduction to the course, along with the syllabus and other course materials. The statement was referred to in the opening email for several online sections regarding courses designed to help PK12 teachers primarily earn their Master's degrees. Additionally, the statement was embedded in two areas of the course syllabus; the importance of communication and grading/late policies. Students were asked to rate the importance of the statement as it pertained to their perception of support and open communication in the course. Qualitative data or open-ended spaces were left for students to leave additional comments or insights concerning their experiences as a student pertaining to the health and wellness statement. One graduate student stated, "it was nice to know that there was some recognition for the busy lives we lead. As a teacher, coach, parent, and a million other hats in my school, it gave me peace of mind to know I could reach out and communicate any issues or if I was going to be a day late on an assignment." "I feel like the professor understood the stress of balancing a job, kids, and school, plus anything else that popped up. It was nice to know this as we started back to school in a crazy Covid world with each day being different and unpredictable," was expressed by a graduate student in Spring 2021.

To better understand the current challenges of graduate students, we gathered student experiences, stories, and feedback and engaged in self-reflection to understand how a formal health and wellness statement potentially affected online graduate students. Does the use of said statement affect a student's ability to establish autonomy as they face personal and professional challenges and their need for space and grace regarding work-life balance and effective communication? Were graduate students more conditioned to share their needs or challenges after the Covid-19 Pandemic? Secondly, could utilizing a one-page health and wellness statement, combined with instructor experiences and reflections, student reactions, and research, lead to larger conversations with university faculty and staff to promote student mental health

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and wellness as a form of potential inclusion? Moreover, we posit that a health and wellness statement, integrated as a campus-wide document, could potentially open greater conversations at all levels regarding faculty and student work-life balance and various challenges in today's workforce.

Although our formal research is in its infancy, qualitative feedback from students regarding the statement and a noticeable increase in student communications (i.e., email) concerning their health and wellness evoked many questions, including How does implement a Health and Wellness Statement create a more inclusive and supportive online classroom environment? Was the health and wellness statement a factor in their increased communication, or what is an outcropping of the Covid-19 Pandemic?

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, AND PROBLEMS

The Health and Wellness Statement

Graduate Students

Based upon our experiences as both graduate students and now teaching faculty, it is our perception and experience that many students attend graduate school with the preconceived notion that they are to “keep their head down, do the work to jump through the hoop, to get the degree as they seek a pay raise.” Graduate education can become a very automated process where there is little discussion about the humanistic aspects of teaching or the exchange or relationship-building between teacher and student(s) and can be even more pronounced in online graduate settings (Baker, 2010; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Student-based communication can range from course basics on the method of delivery, course design, grading, assignment expectations, or, on occasion, very general communication about a student's work-life balance. Graduate education has continually programmed students to believe that they should operate as autonomous adults. Generally, there is little focus or discussion on the student's or instructor's health and wellness (Gray & Taie, 2015; Lever et al., 2017). We felt the lack of connection and support as graduate students, not including the meaningful outliers in our experiences that resulted in lifelong friendships with advisors or mentors. A common theme for graduate school can equate to a very isolating and even misunderstood place as students navigate a variety of constructs with minimal support (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Experiencing the isolation and the lack of support pre and post-Covid, and with support and insight, like those generated by Gonzales Van Cleves'

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(2019) statement, we were able to recognize school, work, and life demands and support students.

Undergraduate Students

In the spring of 2020, I took Gonzales Van Cleves' (2019) post and reworked it to reflect better the needs of my undergraduate classes and my students. The statement focuses on the wellness of students and avoiding the glorification of busyness. The statement I edited hit home for me immediately. As a school psychologist, I have been trained in relaxation techniques, stress management, and self-care. However, this was never encouraged as a practice in any of my classes until I was a doctoral student in a qualitative research class. Overall, when my professor suggested taking care of ourselves, we thought she was crazy. We weren't allowed to do that. We were encouraged to know about self-care and mental health and recommend it to others. Practicing self-care and being open about our struggles with our professor seemed absurd. After some relationship-building throughout the class and other activities in the doctoral program, I began to trust my professor. I let her know when I was struggling with my assignments. This lets me share with her some of the life concerns that were getting in the way of me being the student I thought I should be. She and I negotiated new deadlines and expectations so that I could work through the personal issues and progress on my dissertation. I felt seen and heard. I wanted to do this for my students as well. While I did allow a lot of flexibility with due dates and expectations with my students, once I put the wellness practices on paper and handed them out in class, all the students knew I was serious about self-care and not just about the product of their assignments.

The health and wellness statement allowed for conversations about my expectations. I could remind students of the health and wellness statement, or they could come to me with a piece of paper and say, "are you serious about this." The statement opened many conversations that likely would not have happened without the written statement. The health and wellness statement was on a separate piece of paper that was not contained in the syllabus. The wellness statement was intentionally placed on colored paper to draw attention. In addition to the health and wellness statement, I allowed undergraduate students two "skip slips." Students were allowed to skip two assignments during the semester without providing a reason. The "skip slips" would not be allowed for major assignments, and most students utilized the "skip slips" to drop their lowest two scores at the end of the semester. Reflectively, I felt this was a win because students still did the work and learned from the project but had some relief from dropping two low scores. To be honest, the dropping of two low scores did not significantly change the grade for most of the students. However, their ability to make that choice and gain autonomy as a learner provides some

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relief at busy times within the semester. I have had students cry as they thank me for allowing them to use the “skip slips.” If the slips are not used for replacing the lowest scores, many students use them when other classes become overwhelming. For example, one undergraduate student told me she had thirty paintings due this week in her painting class. She opted to paint with less guilt and stress by skipping my assignment. Although she did not complete the assignment, she was still in attendance for the face-to-face class and participated in the content, discussions, and classroom interactions. While the two skip slips add up to about 20 or 25 points in any semester, I cannot measure the perceived relief students feel making their own choices and gaining autonomy as learners. Moreover, students recognize and act on their need for balance and prioritize their needs.

As the education world begins to recover, “come up for air” and assess post-Covid 19, a great deal of research within education initially surfaced addressing academic delays in PK12 students. However, newer research is uncovering deficiencies in social and emotional well-being for both students and educators at all levels of education (Baker et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2021). If we learned nothing from the COVID pandemic, mental health and being supportive of others are key to human success, whether in class, in the community or at home. As professors, we both noted post-Covid health issues and began to reflect on our own need, as instructors, for a focus on health, wellness, and boundaries.

University Faculty

University faculty, like most professionals, are notorious for attempting to balance lives filled with constant pressures, and perhaps more so after the COVID-19 Pandemic (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). Faculty experience high-stress levels as they are obligated to teach, publish, and serve on multiple committees at various levels to gain tenure or remain on the tenure track, along with managing work expectations, time, and balancing life (Sorgen et al., 2020). Students assume that because university professors are professionals, they have magically developed and skillfully mastered a healthy and sustainable work-life balance. Maintaining balance and setting healthy work-life boundaries could be farther from the truth as faculty experience stress that leads to burnout and mental exhaustion, leading to higher attrition rates based on a recent study by The Chronicle of Higher Education (2020). Sorgen et al. (2020) expand on faculty stress and note that while all factors are not fully controlled by higher education administration, challenges such as “workload expectations, preparation time, and issues of interpersonal communication are controllable” (para. 21). We realized we were greatly failing after reflecting on work-life balance as tenured or tenure-track professors who consciously study self-care and strive to set healthy boundaries, journal in various contexts, and take

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mental health days. Gonzales Van Cleves' (2019) Twitter post essentially called us to "do what I say, not what I do," relating to the realistic aspects of our health and wellness journey and our need for openness and vulnerability with our students. Essentially, we felt that our students needed to understand that we were willing to discuss and engage in health and wellness practices but also model effective practices.

Graduate and undergraduate students, just like faculty, are trained to just "suck it up" and hoop jump through various facets of their school or career to achieve the next diploma, promotion, or recognition. The constant rise and grind mentality are creating stressed-out students and professors that are not recognizing the differences we may have. The "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality is very ableist. Not everyone has the hypothetical bootstraps to just power through. In fact, most of us do not. Carli Friedman and Jessica Awsumb (2019) state the following:

American dream individualism, or the idea that one can simply 'pull oneself up by the bootstraps,' relies both on a Protestant work ethic narrative wherein people have direct responsibility for their own outcomes, and a just-world theory wherein people are rewarded for noble actions. (p. 11)

As noted above, the bootstrap argument is not inclusive or supportive. Whether students are culturally, economically, or have differing abilities, it is critical for instructors to know and understand that differences bring strong advantages and important viewpoints to our classes. Implementing the health and wellness statement allows for assignment accommodations to support students who have a cold or lost sleep caring for a small child and students who need more time to process information due to neurodivergence or learning abilities. The health and wellness statement provided a level of equality to the functions of our class. It does not matter why a student needs additional time or to skip a minor assignment; it is important that they have the freedom and autonomy to do so while taking care of themselves. Allowing space, grace, and support is invaluable regarding educational relationship building.

Putting it Together

An expectation for holding space and grace can potentially develop as faculty members realize that their students are human beings with real lives, real stress, and outside factors that follow students to the classroom, just like any adult. Graduate students need additional support as they can balance more intricate adult roles that encompass the lives of potential partners, children, and full-time jobs. The realization that graduate and undergraduate students need to be seen as human beings first and students second also begs the question of allowing ourselves, as faculty members, to be human. We, too, must strive for a great understanding of mental

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health breaks, lunchtime away from our desks, and the power to say no when our plates are overflowing. Although our research resulted in favorable responses to the use of a health and wellness statement as a means of providing a more inclusive classroom environment, we cannot account for student's communication regarding needed support during a semester as a sole factor regarding their ability to come forward and ask for help.

As an outcropping of the Covid-19 Pandemic, most adults become hyper-aware of their own needs, environment, and survival mechanisms - from physical to social aspects. Hobbs (2021) recent study engaged educators and librarians at all levels of education (PK12 through higher education) and reported on Zoom meetings as a form of social and emotional support during the Pandemic. Hobbs' research offers important evidence that "in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spirit of hope, optimism, and self-efficacy made the biggest contribution to coronavirus coping" (p. 132). Therefore, we cannot claim that using a health and wellness statement was the primary factor that created students' self-aware and openness concerning their mental and physical needs. We believe that our health and wellness statement merely provided the space and grace needed for students to know they were seen, supported, and had autonomy in our courses, and could be value in all classrooms.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Educators at all levels can benefit from a greater understanding of their own needs concerning health and wellness and not only share but impress upon their students an ethic of care. Health and wellness statements are one form of transmitting expectations for both the instructor and the students, as many would say that documents drive the process. Moreover, the ability of the instructor to discuss and model their need for space and grace as a human and advocate for self-awareness and self-care is vital as all parties move forward post-Covid 19. Institutions of higher education have many support mechanisms for all parties - from financials to physical and mental health. However, a more intimate and widely utilized tool, such as a health and wellness statement, could potentially set the tone and expectation for each course and the rest of the humanistic aspects of both students and instructors.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Numerous questions are unanswered concerning using a health and wellness statement as a support tool in face-to-face and online graduate courses. However, as noted by the research and our own experiences as college professors, the ongoing

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need for opening the doors to communication, embracing the humanistic aspects that underlie the world of both a professor and a student that are often unspoken, and the space and grace needed for all people foraging ahead is undeniable. There is a need for university faculty to become vulnerable and honest with themselves and their students that work-life balance is a fact of life that we cannot ignore, and it should be addressed. Faculty can model not only their health and wellness as a cornerstone for productivity and balance but also that they value it among their students and colleagues. There is a need for expanded exploration of a health and wellness statement in various contexts and at all levels of education.

Secondarily, we aim to share the project and student narratives in follow-up conversations with university faculty and staff to promote student mental health and self-care as a form of inclusion in the classroom. We believe a health and wellness statement as a campus-wide document could potentially open greater conversations at all levels regarding faculty and student work-life balance and various other challenges posed in today's workforce.

CONCLUSION

No magic formula exists, and no wand can be waived to achieve a healthy work-life balance. However, graduate students supported with meaningful tools, such as a health and wellness statement, are met with an understanding professor who values communication and work-life balance and models self-care and work-life balance. We need to know that students will respond as they need to. Utilizing a health and wellness statement in graduate coursework potentially supports and sets healthy boundaries for both the student and faculty and envelops a space of human care and concern, including space and grace for all that life, throws at us. Allowing each person to be human, make mistakes, and still progress in class, education, and life is critical to experience and model.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

COVID-19 Pandemic: The widely accepted terminology for the novel coronavirus elevated to a global pandemic in March 2020.

Health: A multi-dimensional state of being, which encompasses physical, psychological, social, intellectual, spiritual, and environmental health that indicate more than merely being absent of illness or disease.

PK12 Students: Individuals who are enrolled in early childhood education through 12th grade.

PK12 Teachers: Individuals who educate students at the pre-Kindergarten through the 12th-grade level.

SEL (Social and Emotional Learning): The practice of demonstrating appropriate social and emotional skills through the process of learning and individual growth.

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Wellness: A dynamic state of being that spans a continuum and requires one to actively become aware of the decision-making process that leads toward a more positive and balanced existence.