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Effects of a well-being retreat on college students

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EFFECTS OF A WELL-BEING RETREAT ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Dedication

Dedicated to my loving and supportive parents, without whom none of this would have been possible. Thank you for believing in me, and always pushing me to be better. I am who I am today because of you.

Acknowledgments

Abstract

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EFFECTS OF A WELL-BEING RETREAT ON COLLEGE STUDENTS
2019-2020
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Mental health scores on college campuses often seem to be spiraling in a downward trend. College students frequently cite be more depressed and more anxious than the rest of the population, and they are also at a higher risk for suicide than other members of society (Beiter et al., 2016; Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014; Holland, 2016; Mey, 2015). Rowan University's recent Rowan Thrive initiative is a cross-campus collaboration that sets out to improve student's well-being through education and programming with a host of programs under its umbrella. One of these programs is the Recharge & Connect Retreat, a 3-day and 2-night retreat in Medford, New Jersey designed to get students connected to the people around them and teach them ways to manage their stress and anxiety when they return to campus. This program evaluation will take a look at the retreat, the outcomes that students had, and factors that students believed led to the success – or failure – of the retreat.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Well-Being Programming

Mental health has become an increasing issue on college campuses. Studies consistently show that college students rate poorly on mental health scales, often times lower than the rest of the population as a whole (Holland, 2016; Mey, 2015). Mental health issues are an epidemic that currently has no signs of slowing down (Beiter et al., 2016; Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014), and as college administrators we need to begin making moves to combat this illness. As it stands, mental health facilities at many college campuses are not equipped to handle the influx of students reporting these issues (Beiter et al., 2016; Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014). However, there are alternatives to just clinical answers. Emerging research shows that well-being programming can potentially curb the dangers of mental health problems (Hill et al., 2018; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Malkoc & Aslan, 2018; Rose et al., 2018), and one such initiative at Rowan University is the Rowan Thrive initiative. A cross-campus collaboration, Rowan Thrive is the face of a movement to improve the well-being of students on campus through a wide array of services and programs. It is in many ways Rowan University's primary way of communicating that it is concerned with the well-being of its students and programming for their needs. One of the programs that falls in this domain is the Recharge & Connect Retreat.

A collaboration between Campus Recreation, The Wellness Center, and the Student Center and Campus Activities, the Recharge & Connect Retreat aims to connect people to each other and the world around them through the use of structured

interactions, activities in nature, and reflection time designed to foster a sense of community and well-being. While there is evidence to show that programming like this works (Hill et al., 2018; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Malkoc & Aslan, 2018; Rose et al., 2018), no research has been done as of yet on how well-being programming affects the mental health of college students- a population that research shows needs more support.

Students who attend the retreat are taken to the YMCA of the Pines (formerly Camp Ockanickon) near Tabernacle, New Jersey for a weekend. They are asked to refrain from using their phones, and to be present as much as possible during the retreat. All meals are conducted together and daytime activities center around outdoor activities like hiking, horseback riding, and archery. Each of these have a corresponding talk regarding Mindfulness or ways to improve well-being. Anything directly related to the concept of Mindfulness or Well-Being is headed by professionals who have experience with counseling or wellness programming; in fact, this is the primary role of the co-sponsorship with the Wellness Center and Campus Recreation. A licensed counselor and the Recreation Center's Assistant Director of Fitness and Wellness give the retreat legitimacy and leadership with expertise on the topics discussed. There is intentional unstructured free time so that people can rest, journal/reflect, explore, or even nap when they have downtime. From top to bottom, the Recharge & Connect Retreat is designed to help students understand the concept of well-being, improve their level of well-being, and to give them ways to maintain it when they return from the retreat.

Goals and Research Questions

The evaluation of the Recharge & Connect Retreat has one objective; to find out if the Retreat meets its goals. Although the Retreat does not have a mission statement, its goals are clear: to improve the well-being of students who are in attendance by getting them away from technology and the stress of college, and to give them strategies to cope with the stressors of college life. Thus, the guiding questions of this program evaluation are fairly straightforward:

1. Do students who attend this retreat report improved measures of mental health?

2. If students do report improved mental health scores, do they feel equipped with ways to maintain this increased level of well-being?

Overview of Methodology

To get answers to these questions, I conducted an objectives-based program evaluation, trying to determine whether the retreat meets its goals and the degree to which it does (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). To determine if this is happening, each student who signs up will be required to complete a survey that explores how they rate their well-being before and after they attend the retreat. I intended to use the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale for our assessment (Fat et al., 2016), which is a 14 question Likert scale survey. After the retreat, students were asked to fill out a four question qualitative survey so that I can get a better understanding of how the retreat affected their level of well-being, and how they feel about being able to maintain their well-being as they return back to Rowan University. Understanding these four questions helps me see if

students feel equipped to maintain their level of well-being once they return from the retreat, and give them the opportunity to suggest improvements for the future.

The precise definition for well-being that I use for this study is the definition outlined by Rath and Harter (2010), which outlines five elements of well-being: Physical, Social, Financial, Career, and Community, all of which are shown to improve the quality of mental health that one person has. Rath and Harter showed that a person's level of well-being is heavily influenced by those five areas, and their research guided the direction of Rowan University's *Thrive* initiative. The Retreat is not meant to influence every section of well-being outlined, but it does focus on these areas they show in the literature: Physical, Social, and Community. The hope is that by engaging students in activities that increase proficiency in these areas, and by giving them ways to continue doing so, students will self-report better mental health ratings on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale.

The final major concept that needs to be understood is well-being, and what it means in this context. Although we generally hear of mental health when people have diagnosable conditions, the reality is that there is a lot more to understanding mental health than just psychological conditions and things you can be diagnosed with (Mey & Yin, 2015; Thornicroft & Patel, 2014; WHO, 2018). Being mentally healthy is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2019). Simply put, while anxiety and depression are diagnosable conditions related to poor mental health, it is possible to have low mental health scores that negatively affect someone's life without having a diagnosable condition (Mey & Yin, 2014). The good news is this; while well-being programming cannot treat

diagnosable conditions, evidence shows that improving one's ratings in well-being metrics can directly improve their mental health scores (Fat et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Malkoc & Aslan, 2018; Rath & Harter, 2010; Rose et al., 2018).

Limitations

There are a few limitations to conducting a study in this manner. Primarily, the sample size is small. The retreat is only open to 30 students, and even though they all have to fill out the surveys, there is still not a large sample size. In regards to the sample, there is also the issue that most students at Rowan are White; there are not many people of color or international students who attend this retreat. As such, this evaluation may not show me how such a program would influence different populations on college campuses. The final limitation is that I cannot control the weather during this weekend, and as most of the retreat is meant to be done in the wilderness I have no way of knowing how it can affect the student experience at the retreat. Students who spend the weekend inside a cabin because of rain may have a different experience than students who get the full experience as it is intended.

The final major limitation of this study is that there is a cost involved to attend the retreat. While it is not significant- only $30- that is still a barrier that excludes a number of college students. A number of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would be unable to pay that fee, and as such would not be represented by this study.

Structure of the Program Evaluation

Moving forward, I outline the relevant literature and what evidence is out there for well-being programming, and how it can improve mental health scores. I then discuss the methodology and rationale for why the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale was chosen, and how I use it to collect mental health data from students who participate. Lastly, I analyze the data to see if it can demonstrate whether or not the Recharge & Connect Retreat lives up to its goals.

Chapter 2

What is Well-Being?

Well-Being can be defined in a few different ways depending on who is using the term; there is no umbrella definition that everyone uses, but it generally refers to some similar underlying principles (Brown et al., 2014; Cole, 2006; Rath & Harter, 2010). These exact principles can include everything from physical health to a positive mental or emotional health, the act of being just being happy, or a state in which everything is well depending on where you look (Cole, 2006; Rath & Harter, 2010). Even in literature on the topic, the definition of well-being changes from article to article making it difficult to have one all-encompassing definition that adequately conveys every meaning of the word. To try and put it the most concisely, well-being as a general term refers to a positive outlook on one's emotional, mental, social, and physical status- essentially, it is all the aspects of the human experience at any one time (Brown et al., 2014; Cole, 2006; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2015: Rath & Harter, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

While there are disagreements as to the exact definition, I take a deeper look into the five elements of well-being outlined in the book *Well Being: The Five Essential Elements* by Rath and Harter (2010), as this book was instrumental to the development of the wellness retreat and much of the well-being programming being developed on Rowan's campus. Essentially, Rath and Harter compiled the data that Gallup had on well-being, and made a list of observations based on what they found. These elements are tangible things that any one person can strive to improve in, and people who cite

themselves as thriving in a certain element have higher well-being scores- leading to better emotional and mental health (Rath & Harter, 2010). Most of the elements they point out appear in other literature on the topic, with the main unique one being the idea of financial well-being (Brown et al., 2014; Cole, 2006; Mey and Yin, 2015; Rath & Harter, 2010). Although these elements come up in much of the well-being literature available, the book ties together existing literature and numerous studies performed by Gallup (Rath & Harter, 2010). The elements outlined by Rath and Harter are Career, Social, Financial, Physical, and Community (Rath & Harter, 2010). Essentially, these elements serve to be a currency of a life that matters (Rath & Harter, 2010). Doing well in these aspects greatly increases the likelihood that someone is living a fulfilled, well life (Rath & Harter, 2010). However, as the mission of the Retreat focuses on social, physical, and community well-being, I take a deeper look into how those factors can affect one's overall well-being.

Social Well-Being

When people look back on their lives, they often remember signature moments and events that shaped them and their stories. Interestingly, almost all the people Gallup survey mentioned that there was another person in the biggest memories of their lives (Rath & Harter, 2010). There is one undeniable truth about well-being; nobody is fully content being by themselves all the time. Establishing healthy relationships and fostering them over the course of a lifetime drastically affects how one rates their well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010).

Motivational speaker Jim Rohn once said, "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with" (Chua, 2018 ¶ 1). Research shows that this holds a significant amount of truth; the people one spends time with matters when it comes to one's well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010; Tamminen et al., 2016). Humans are social creatures and because we are so empathetic, our emotions can transfer from person to person (Rath & Harter, 2010). As such, whom someone spend most of their time with can have massive effects on the person's well-being; if the people around someone are expressing positive emotions, that person will as well (Rath & Harter, 2010; Sandberg et al., 2013; Tamminen et al., 2016). A 2016 study performed on college athletes showed that emotions spread from one athlete to another and could carry a number of different connotations depending on whether they were positive or negative (Tamminen et al., 2016). This idea can be incredibly impactful on college campuses, because it shows that helping students build positive support systems can help improve their mental health and, hopefully, their resilience.

In a similar way that emotions do, Rath and Harter (2010) show that Gallup's survey builds on the idea that habits can spread. For example, people are 61% more likely to smoke cigarettes if someone close to them is a smoker (Rath & Harter, 2010). This idea carries over into several other areas, even physical health. People who consistently rate highly in social and physical well-being have workout buddies, and they cite their social group as primary motivators to keep them working out and in shape (Rath & Harter, 2010). Put simply, the people that individuals spend time with have a drastic effect on who they are as people. A person surrounding themselves with people who have positive health habits can be one of the most important things they can do, because they

will be much more likely to take on those habits and grow in their well-being (Rath &

Harter, 2010).

This relationship between the people in one's life and performance in other areas

was shown in another study that looked at troubled marriages. Researchers found that

couples who have high rates of negative interaction show lower rates of work

satisfaction, and poor marriage quality affects work satisfaction for women who work full

time as well (Sandberg et al, 2013). The study may have implications for college students

because it shows that spending quality time with people who are negative or create stress

can increase depression levels over time (Sandberg et al, 2013). Having positive

relationships is one of the keys to staving off depression, which is a lesson that can

potentially carry over to students who are not married.

Physical Well-Being

It is no secret that exercise and paying attention to what you eat is good for the

human body. Everyone knows of the physical benefits of exercising; things like improved

cardiovascular health and an improved physique are common reasons people work out,

but the reality is that exercise benefits the human body far beyond just physical benefits

in ways that many people do not even realize (Bassuk et al, 2013; Brown et al., 2014;

Rath & Harter, 2010; Taylor et al, 1985). Benefits to taking care of one's body can be

things from improved energy levels throughout the day to a significant boost in cognitive

ability immediately after exercise (Bassuk et al, 2013; Rath & Harter, 2010). This is not

limited just to rigorous exercise, either- although the effects of aerobic exercise are best

understood, there are benefits to doing more stationary exercises like lifting weights as well (Bassuk et al, 2013).

The benefits of exercise are not just limited to athletes, or people who go to the gym. Again, exercise does not have to be rigorous for someone to see benefits from it. Even the atmosphere that someone is exercising in can influence how it affects them; a study done in 2014 examined the effects that regular walks in nature can have on a number of areas including physical health and stress levels (Brown et al., 2014). Although the exercise was not rigorous, exercising *at all* slightly improved physical scores and exercising in nature also contributed to a slight increase in mental health scores (Brown et al., 2014). A few studies have corroborated that even minimal exercise helps, showing that as little as 20 minutes of exercise a day can increase how someone reports their happiness, stress levels, and overall mental health (Brown et al., 2014; Rath & Harter, 2010).

Taking care of one's self physically extends beyond simply exercising. While it is great, it is not enough. There is another very important part of being physically well that is often overlooked: what one eats. The food that someone puts in their body can have impacts on your mood and energy levels in a few surprising ways (Blanchflower et al., 2013; McMartin et al., 2013). In Canada, a study by McMartin and colleagues examined the diets of schoolchildren and how it potentially affected their mental health (McMartin et al., 2013). It showed that a 10% increase in diet quality on their scale correlated with a roughly 10% drop in negative mental health metrics like worry, sadness, or unhappiness (McMartin et al., 2013). The scale they used looked at the nutrient intake, energy intake, and daily servings of vegetables and fruit, and the results made it abundantly clear that a

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diet that rates highly on those metrics had a correlation with better mental health scores (McMartin et al., 2013). The number of fruits and vegetables may be a key here- another study showed that the difference between eating a small and large amount of fruit and vegetables correlates with a massive jump in life satisfaction rating (Blanchflower et al., 2013). Essentially, they saw a correlation with increased happiness in people who eat a lot of fruit and vegetables; while it may not be everything, having a varied diet with a lot of fruit and vegetables seems to be very important for mental health (Blanchflower et al., 2013; McMartin et al., 2013).

As the literature shows, teaching students how to take care of their own bodies is a significant contributor to maintaining their wellness. Physical exercise is important, but potentially even more important is teaching students how their diet can affect their mental and emotional health. Encouraging physical activity- even if it is just walking- and encouraging students to eat healthier, more varied diets are achievable goals for college administrators, and can potentially benefit students in significant ways.

Community Well-Being

According to Rath and Harter (2010), community well-being is not something that people identify when they first think of well-being. However, having a thriving community well-being can be the difference between a good life and a great life (Rath & Harter, 2010). It starts with the basics- having a thriving community well-being begins with your basic human needs being met; things like having access to food, shelter, water, and medical care (Rath & Harter, 2010). In developing countries, people commonly cite struggling in this area because they lack access to things that people from more

developed countries take for granted (Wiseman & Brasher, 2008). It extends beyond basic human needs into making sure that you have a safe environment; people are not likely to have a thriving community if they are frequently worried about drive by shootings in their neighborhood; feeling safe in their community also played a large role (Rath & Harter, 2010). Finally, a big aspect of community well-being is being in a community that suits the person in it, and that they can pay back or be more connected to the community through volunteerism and engaging in social offerings (Rath & Harter, 2010).

VicHealth, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, (2005) identifies four key social and economic determining factors towards mental health. They are: freedom from violence, freedom from discrimination, social inclusion and connectedness, and economic participation and security (VicHealth, 2005). This shows that community well-being really ties together several other well-being factors, because having a community that helps someone build those factors makes it easier to thrive in those areas (Rath & Harter, 2010). Where a person lives and the government that they are living under has a potentially huge influence on how they feel about their community, but it is also incredibly difficult to leave one that someone has become established in.

Environment is not the only facet of community well-being- as mentioned before, people being connected to the community is also very important. Research on volunteerism is very clear, and very eye opening; giving back to one's community can be very fulfilling, help build connections, and establish a sense of contributing to the greater good (Son & Wilson, 2012; Rath & Harter, 2010). Many volunteer organizations that struggle to find recruits frequently cite the psychological benefits of doing volunteer

work; Son and Wilson (2012) conducted a study on almost a decade of research on volunteers, and found that those who spent the most time volunteering had higher rates of social well-being as well as eudaimonic well-being (essentially, perception of fulfilment of life). Through volunteer work in their communities, people grow in both their social connectedness and their fulfillment in what they are doing (Son & Wilson, 2012; Rath & Harter, 2010). The good news is this: Rath and Harter (2010) believe that it does not have to be altruistic. People becoming involved because it is a personal subject to them is very common, and very beneficial still for their mental health; working with or starting fundraisers for friends or family with cancer, degenerative disorders, or any other number of significant negative life events can still benefit someone's social connectedness to their communities and sense of fulfillment (Rath & Harter, 2010).

The idea of community well-being is important for colleges to understand, because how upper administration conducts business can have potentially huge impacts on college students and their well-being. Making sure that their campus is safe and inclusive for all students should be a top priority, but it also supports popular student retention theories. For example, having a community where students find a place and connect to campus is key to retaining them; things like student clubs, learning communities, or Greek life get students involved (Astin, 1999). If educators view the time that students have as a resource, they should want students to spend it on things that keep them on campus- therefore, fostering an environment that encourages students to connect to campus and be involved is crucial to keeping them (Astin, 1999).

Mental Health on College Campuses

Many people think that simply not having a diagnosable condition is enough to be mentally healthy, but the truth is that this is not the entire case (Mey & Yin, 2015; Thornicroft & Patel, 2014; WHO, 2018). There are several things that can go into how scientists perceive one's mental health. Things like how well someone performs at their job, how they react to stress, and how they contribute to their community can all be seen as a part of what contributes to the term mental health (Mey and Yin, 2014). As defined by the World Health Organization, mental health is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2018).

The mental health of students on college campuses has been shown to be lower than that of the regular population, and speculation is that this is for a variety of reasons (Holland, 2016; Mey, 2015). Common influences include things like social isolation, rapid environment changes, rapid social change, and an individual's daily social functioning (Mey, 2016). This was seen at a study at a Malaysian University; while a university was undergoing rapid changes with the structure of the administration and mission of the university, researchers studied the effects that such a rapid change had on the student body. An alarmingly large number of undergraduate students surveyed rated themselves with high feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, self-hatred, and reported trouble expressing thoughts and feelings. This also manifested in physical ways; students who were high in anxiety and depression showed symptoms like fatigue, exhaustion, and muscle soreness, all of which are incredibly dangerous to the academic and social well-being of college students (Mey, 2015). As a whole, undergraduate students scored lower on the mental health test than the rest of the campus community before *and* after the

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change, indicating that they are filled with worry and tension. Because of this, researchers recommended the university improve the counseling and support services on campus, saying that the burden of poor mental health and well-being could help students develop a healthier lifestyle.

This study has been supported numerous times in related literature. The truth is that mental health is an epidemic at college campuses all around the United States, if not the entire world (Beiter et al., 2016; Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014). According to a study done by the American College Health Association, 17% of college students reported being diagnosed or treated for anxiety in 2016 (Davidson, 2016). In another study done over four years at Franciscan University, the counseling center saw a 231% increase in yearly visits and a 173% increase in yearly clients; more students were coming, and they were coming more frequently for support (Beiter et al., 2016). This study showed a few trends in the kinds of students who are at risk, pointing out that young women and transfer students are more likely to have high levels of stress and seek counselling (Beiter et al., 2016). Most alarmingly, these studies show that around 10% of college students seriously considered suicide within the previous year (Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014). All the statistics point to this: college students are struggling with mental health at rates that have never been seen before, and campus wellness centers are becoming overloaded with the number of students who need support (Beiter et al., 2016; Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014).

At the core, college campuses are places for extreme growth and learning, but this can come at a cost for individuals who do not have coping skills or a support system to prepare them for the stresses that college can put on an individual (Holland, 2016; Mey,

2015). Alarmingly, while college students report higher rates of mental health problems and pursue counseling at increasing rates, they are still less likely to seek help with their issues (Beiter et al., 2016; Holland, 2016). So, while it has been shown that universities should bolster their mental health services because of increasing demands, the next step is overcoming the stigma that surrounds seeking help for mental health issues. Students in particular do not see mental health services with the same sense of urgency that they will see a doctor who can fix them physically (Holland, 2016). Helping students identify this need, and helping improve the mental healthcare on campuses must be a priority if the mental health epidemic is going to be addressed (Beiter et al., 2016; Davidson, 2016; Henriques, 2014; Holland, 2016; Mey, 2015).

Well-Being Programming

Although well-being is a relatively new topic, it is exploding in regard to what is happening on college campuses around the nation. As schools recognize how valuable the concept is for student retention, they are working to implement programs on their campuses. These can be everything from outdoor programs to programs designed for LGBTQ+ students, but they all have one thing in common: if they are led by research and intentional in design, it appears that they work (Hill et al., 2018; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Malkoc & Aslan, 2018; Rose et al., 2018). Across the gambit of different types of programs, participants see increases in a few major emotional and mental health factors (Hill et al., 2018; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Malkoc & Aslan, 2018; Rose et al., 2018). Depending on the study, things like reduced fear, increased self-efficacy, and helping develop coping stressors all pointed to an increased level of mental health and well-being (Hill et al., 2018; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Malkoc & Aslan, 2018; Rose et al., 2018).

Most importantly for understanding the Retreat, some research has been done into outdoor programs and what they can do for students (Hill et al., 2018; Lathrop et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2018). Research on outdoor orientation programs indicate that they impact students heavily, improving their academic development, personal development, and integration on campus (Lathrop et al., 2012), as well as increased resilience well-being scores (Hill et al., 2018). Something that Lathrop and their colleagues (2012) cited as one of the biggest impacts was the growth in social connectedness to campus; the orientation program had given incoming students the opportunity to network with people on campus, built community through team building activities, and taught them new skills like canoeing and how to live outdoors (Lathrop et al., 2012).

The students who participated in outdoor orientation programs saw increased scores in social competence, time management, achievement motivation, and, most significantly, self-confidence (Lathrop et al., 2012). Many saw improved scores in various community connectedness or well-being measures, whether it be to their friends or to their community at school (Hill et al., 2018; Lathrop et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2018). All of this is in large part because while traditional orientation programs only seek to provide information to students, outdoor orientation programs exist to help incoming freshmen get the chance to really connect with peers who will be on campus and ease the transition into college (Hill et al., 2018). It is no wonder, with this focus on building community and relationships, that these types of programs see such impact on things that can correlate with a positive sense of well-being.

Fortunately, not all research on outdoor programs is just orientations. Although mid-semester trips to boost levels of well-being are less common, there is research that

shows how outdoor programs can benefit students outside of just orientations. Outdoor and experiential learning prepares students for things they may face outside of the classroom and builds them holistically in a few different ways (Esentas et al., 2017; Gama & Fernandez, 2009). According to Gama and Fernandez (2009), experiential education- defined as education that takes place outdoors and with a social component, typically without the aid of a third party like a teacher- improved students' academic skills as well as levels of emotional intelligence, social interaction, and physical skills. The answers they got to their surveys showed that students grew more connected with the people they were with, and grew a deeper appreciation for the communities that they visited (Gama & Fernandez, 2009)- all pointing to improvements in Rath and Harter's (2010) elements of well-being.

Esentsas, Ozbey, and Guzel (2017) studied the effects that an outdoor leadership program had on young women, and saw growth in a few areas that were not just leadership. When interviewing students, they frequently heard that the young women grew in acculturation, responsibility, empathy, communication, openness to others, self-confidence, teamwork, friendship, and awareness (Esentsas et al., 2017). This study did not directly address well-being, but benefits in social well-being are clearly there- the young women reference growth in a few areas that address social and community well-being. Understanding teamwork and establishing friendships are important parts of someone's social well-being, and being able to address prejudices and become more cultured directly impacts how someone perceives their own community well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010). None of these things were said to be developed in leadership training- they were mostly frequently cited as developed in team building exercises, in small

groups and time spent together, and in unstructured time where the young women got to

get to know each other organically (Esentsas et al., 2017).

Outcomes like this can potentially translate to the Recharge & Connect Retreat. It

includes many of the things that these students do at outdoor orientations and leadership

retreats, but with the explicit intention of growing students' levels of well-being. If the

research that has been done on outdoor learning and experiential education is correct,

students who participate in the Retreat may come back with significant growth in several

areas that positively affect well-being.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Purpose Statement

The following methodology details how I evaluated the Recharge & Connect Retreat. Guided by previous literature, I want to understand how programming like the Recharge & Connect Retreat affects students positively or negatively. With the direction that mental health scores on college campuses are trending, such a program can potentially have a huge impact on students who attend. This is especially important here at Rowan. In recent months, this university has come under fire from students who believe that the university is not invested in the well-being of his students. The reality is that while we know that mental health on college campuses around the nation is dropping, there is not much research as of now that shows whether or how programming like this can solve this problem. It is my hope that evaluating this retreat offers as close to a binary answer to that question as possible; I hope that at the end of this evaluation, I can confidently say "Yes, it does," or "No, it does not".

Research Questions Based on Literature and Context

Literature on this topic suggests that well-being programming improves mental health scores, but this topic has never been studied with college students on a college campus. As such, there are a few main questions:

1. Do students who attend this retreat see higher mental health scores after attending?

2. Do students who attend this retreat feel that they have been equipped with strategies to improve their mental health scores?

3. In what ways can the Recharge & Connect Retreat be improved?

Methodological Approach and Design

While there are a number of ways I can examine the Retreat, only one of them directly answers most of the questions that I have: the pretest - posttest design. Traditionally, a pretest- posttest design is used when stakeholders want to know how the program affected the people who went through it (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). It is a very basic, albeit straightforward way of collecting data and conducting an evaluation. I am using it for a few reasons:

1. It is very easy to collect data; students get their first Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (a scale that I will explain in further detail later) when they pay to sign up for the retreat, and they are asked to fill out the posttest before they leave upon returning to Glassboro.

2. It should be the most straightforward way that I can directly see the impact of the retreat on the students who go. By following the one-group, descriptive design I will have direct data that can show stakeholders the immediate effects of the retreat (Linfield & Posavac, 2019).

The primary issue with pretest/posttest design is the threat to internal validity. Essentially, I seek to ensure the changes we see in the results of the pretest and posttest are the result of the retreat and not from outside influences (Linfield & Posavac, 2019).

We can avoid most of these issues with the speed of the pretest to posttest; a significant number of issues arise with pretest and posttest being far apart in time from each other (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). We avoid issues of maturation, attrition, and history by having only a few weeks between the pretest and posttest. By making the time between the tests as short as possible, I can try to alleviate many of these issues.

A potential issue that I may run into is selection bias. Because participation in this program is voluntary, I cannot control who signs up. As such, students who attend are students who self-select for this kind of program. This can potentially be for a number of reasons, but if students who seek this out know that they will see benefits for doing it, it may be more difficult to determine the quality of the program (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). I did my best to be aware of this by having questions on the pretest that allowed students to self-identify. By offering this option, I can at least be aware of the people who will be statistically unreliable (Linfield & Posavac, 2019).

Data Collection Strategy

Everyone who pays for a ticket to go to the retreat are given a copy of the Warwick-Edinburgh Scale (Maheswaran et al., 2012; Ng Fat et al., 2017) with a few open-ended questions to complete before they leave for the retreat. These have to be turned in for someone to be on the van to go to the location. This initial test is the pretest, and will give me a starting point for our proxy variables (Linfield & Posavac, 2019).

After the retreat is over, students are given another copy of the Warwick-Edinburgh Scale, but with different open ended questions afterwards pertaining to their thoughts on the retreat, how they feel they will be able to continue their journey into

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well-being, and the ways they think it can be improved. This has to be turned in before they depart from the Chamberlain Student Center once returning to campus. This is the posttest, concluding the pretest - posttest cycle (Linfield & Posavac, 2019).

By requiring students to do these immediately before and after the retreat, I am hoping to get a 100% response rate from the students who attend. The retreat is open to 30 students, so while I am not sure how many will actually sign up, I am hoping for 25+ who attend the retreat. While a larger number would be ideal to avoid a Type II research error- where I cannot statistically show if the program is effective (Linfield & Posavac, 2019)- the number of participants is limited by the allotted budget given to the program.

To further help mitigate the risk of a Type II error associated with low participant numbers, I am using the shelf data that was collected last year for this retreat. The structure of the retreat was identical, and last year the same pretest and posttest were used. Although there were an even smaller number of students- less than 15- the extra participants are helpful, as my population size is so small. The limited number of participants was further mitigated by the use of a very statistically reliable tool, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Health Scale, that should still give this evaluation definitive results (Maheswaran et al., 2012; Ng Fat et al., 2017).

Population and Sample; How Sample Selected

Our population is the students who register for the Recharge & Connect Retreat. While I will not have any more information until people begin to register, there are a few assumptions I make about the students who register. Due to the cost of attending the retreat- $25- and the demographics of people who attend Rowan University, I assume that

students who register come from middle class or wealthier families and primarily be White.

Instrumentation

For this program evaluation, I am using the Warwick-Edinburgh Scale (Maheswaran et al., 2012). This mental health scale was chosen for the program because it has been shown to be responsive to mental health changes across a variety of demographics and populations, and is normally distributed across the population (Maheswaran et al., 2012; Ng Fat et al., 2017). As such, it is a solid tool for understanding the well-being of the students who attend this retreat.

The qualitative questions that I ask after the Scale are short answer, and are meant to help the lead team for the program understand 1) who was attending this retreat, and 2) what are potential ways that it can be improved. The latter question should offer valuable help to us when preparing for the following year, but the former is also beneficial. By getting some more insight into who these students are as people, we can potentially point out people who are self-selecting (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). These people can potentially skew the data, as their outcome may be more predetermined if they expect something out of the program or identify themselves as people who need it (Linfield & Posavac, 2019).

Data Analysis

To determine the outcomes of the programs, I am using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). I pair the tests that each person takes and then compare the statistical difference between the two tests- if the program has been effective, the scores on the second test are higher. This is where the pretest - posttest method is the most helpful; because of the pretest, it should be easy to see whether or not the program was immediately helpful (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). Using SPSS, I also examine what measures saw the most improvement, and which saw the least.

After finding the average score for the pre and posttests, I collect the average rates of change for each variable as a whole. I want this data so that I can, at a glance, show stakeholders the effects of the Recharge & Connect Retreat (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). Analyzing the data in this way should answer my first research question, which is the most important. I completed these same measures with the population from the previous year, and label that data separately to see if there were any major changes between the years or, more importantly, if the data from both years corroborates itself.

To analyze the qualitative answers, I chunk like answers with like answers. By doing this, I am able to see what mattered the most to people and if they have any recurring ideas for ways to improve the retreat, or ways that they thought it was lacking. I offer these questions so that participants can let their thoughts be known, and if any of the suggestions come up multiple times I can include them in recommendations for the future

Data Interpretation

To understand this data, I calculate the mean score of each survey question. I am doing this because it gives me the ability to directly visualize a difference between pre and post scores, and it makes that difference easy to visualize. I compare the posttest score to the pretest score and calculate the percentile difference between the scores. If the retreat had a positive effect, this percentage number should be high. If it is low, the percentile number will be smaller (or, if the retreat had adverse effects, this percentile number will be negative).

I am also dividing the data up by year. In the first year, 2019, the retreat had only 15 people, but the 2020 retreat registered over 25. These sample size differences could skew the data. The most important chart of this program evaluation is be the one visualizing last year's data (by rate of change) and this year's data. At a glance, I can see the influence on the retreat for both years.

To understand the qualitative data, I take the chunked answers and use them to discuss each question from the post retreat questionnaire. This section is a combination of quotes from students and summarizing of the answers that they give. Ideally, each question will have two or three main themes that appear that I can discuss.

Chapter 4

Findings

Before I discuss the results of the Recharge & Connect Retreat, I do have to outline the major issues that I ran into, which is primarily, COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic hit the United States and began to peak during the week of the retreat, leading to the cancellation of the 2020 Recharge & Connect Retreat. The only remaining set of data that I can look at is from last year. The remainder of this program evaluation is instead an examination of the 2019 Recharge & Connect Retreat, which used the same protocol as outlined in my methodology. This results in a much smaller pool of attendees, which still leaves a lot of questions about this type of programming. Only 15 people participated in the retreat in 2019 and while this data does look promising, more programs like this should be studied before assuming that similar overnight retreats have this kind of impact.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Scale that I used has 14 questions, covering a wide array of mental health measures from how interested one is in others to stress or depression levels. In every single measurement, scores in the posttest were higher, indicating that students were in a better place mentally after the retreat than they were before it. Table 1 shows the average scores for the pretest and posttest for each question.

Table 1

2019 Recharge & Connect Retreat Data

Item	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Difference	% difference
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	3.53	4.29	+0.76	21.53%
I've been feeling useful	3.53	4.29	+0.76	21.53%
I've been feeling relaxed	2.80	4.29	+1.49	53.21%
I've been feeling interested in other people	3.67	4.21	+0.54	14.71%
I've had energy to spare	2.53	3.42	+0.89	35.18%
I've been dealing with problems well	3.07	4.00	+0.93	30.42%
I've been thinking clearly	2.93	4.14	+1.21	41.30%
I've been feeling good about myself	2.93	4.29	+1.36	46.42%
I've been feeling close to other people	3.27	4.36	+1.09	33.46%
I've been feeling confident	3.00	4.21	+1.21	40.33%
I've been able to make up my own mind about a thing	3.33	4.14	+0.81	24.32%
I've been feeling loved	3.80	4.57	+0.77	20.26%
I've been interested in new things	3.67	4.71	+1.04	28.34%
I've been feeling cheerful	3.00	4.42	+1.42	47.33%

As can be seen from the data, every metric increased. Several even increased over a full point on the Likert Scale on average, with the lowest average increase being "I've been feeling interested in other people" at an average increased score of .54.

It is also worth noting that this program evaluation set out to look at the effects on student mental health, and the metrics relating to how the individual feels are the highest rated. The highest two increases are the measures "I've been feeling relaxed" and "I've been feeling cheerful", both of which are questions that directly ask about students' mental health in regards to anxiety and depression. Other major increases are seen in the answers to "I've been thinking clearly", "I've been feeling good about myself", and "I've been feeling confident." All of these directly tie into students' mental health and can potentially indicate that this kind of programming improves student mental health.

From the student attendee's perspective with the open-ended questions, there were only a handful of recurring themes. For the first open ended question, "Share with us one thing that you will remember about the trip as you go home," 10 people mentioned the connections that they made with other people. A quote from one student sums this up most succinctly; "[I will remember] the bond I formed with everyone in this group".

The second question, "What did you like most about this trip and how important was it for you?", there were three general answers. Many students referenced being in nature and away from stressors, the camp activities, and interacting with new people and making bonds. The answers to this question were much longer, and many students referenced one or more of these topics.

Students answered the question, "What have you gained from this experience?" with two general answers. Ten of the student answers centered around gaining new skills and the confidence to try new things, or gaining a better understanding of what mindfulness is or an understanding of how to manage stress better with mindfulness

practices. A few people mentioned understanding people better or making friends. All of the answers can be summed up by the following student response:

> I have gained more confidence in myself, learned how to push past my comfort zone (in a good way), gained appreciation for yoga as well as mindfulness, gained new friends, built a stronger relationship with someone I already knew a bit, and how to apply mindfulness/ discernment skills in everyday life.

Students had a very varied list of ways to improve the retreat. Three students did not answer the question or answered that everything was "perfect", and three students requested that the retreat be longer. Other improvements mentioned include: doing a retreat in the fall, doing the retreat when it is warmer outside, having more free time or giving more options for activities during the free time they had, and playing more games with each other in the cabin at night.

Lastly, student responses to the "additional feedback" prompt was incredibly positive, with over half of the 15 attendees thanking the facilitators for hosting the retreat. This was incredibly heartwarming to read, and many of these students referenced the retreat making a big impact in their lives, with three students mentioning that they feel better about handling stress at school, or that they have techniques to handle it. The constructive feedback that was given was three people wanted to interact with the lake by either fishing or boating, and one person mentioned wanting to cook instead of eating in the cafeteria every day. Lastly, two students mentioned wanting to take survival

lessons with the liaison from the camp (who is an avid, accomplished outdoorsman) that was provided.

All things considered, student reception was incredibly positive. The average score for every measure increased, and student feedback was incredibly positive and, in some cases, even heartwarming. This retreat clearly meant a lot to the students who attended, and for most of them seems to have made a big impact on their life at the time. There are still questions as to whether they were able to keep that up when they returned to campus, but the data shows that this group of students saw higher mental health scores, and that many of them did feel equipped with techniques to manage stress. I stress again that while this data is promising, a sample group of 15 students is not enough to make any concrete statements about the effects of this type of programming.

Chapter 5

Discussion

In short, this retreat saw incredible score increases for students. Every data point had a higher average in the post retreat survey by varying amounts, indicating that this retreat largely improved student mental health. However, there are a lot of questions about this set of data, and there is a lot of room left for research on this type of programming.

Research Question 1

Do students who attend this retreat see higher mental health scores after attending? This was the most straightforward to measure research question, and the answer is absolutely. As explained in Chapter 4, every single metric was scored higher, with scores related to mental health being the highest scoring. People who attended this retreat definitely saw higher mental health scores.

Research Question 2

Do students who attend this retreat feel that they have been equipped with strategies to improve their mental health scores? This question is a little more abstract to answer. While 10 students mentioned somewhere in their responses that they felt equipped with mindfulness and discernment strategies to help them manage stress, the tool used does not ask questions about what those strategies could be. So, while the majority of students reported that they feel equipped with tools, I did not collect an in-depth answer to see if they know what tools there are. This may be a question that a

researcher should follow up on some time after the retreat has passed, to see if students are still reporting the same answer.

Research Question 3

In what ways can the Recharge & Connect Retreat be improved? Ways that the Recharge & Connect Retreat can be improved are fairly straightforward. The biggest limitation to it is that is has a cost attached. While $25 is comparatively cheap for the experience that students would have received, the fee turned away students who would have been interested in attending. While tabling for this event, I could not help but notice the look on a few faces when I was telling students about the retreat, and the immediate disinterest when I mentioned the cost. The retreat is expensive per person, but as a whole is not an enormous cost for an organization. I believe that the co-sponsorship style funding of the retreat with the Rec Center, Wellness Center, and Student Center & Campus Activities is a promising foundation, and with the growth of Rowan Thrive this may be feasible in the foreseeable future.

Through reviewing responses, I also noticed that the unstructured free time may be valuable for this type of programming as it allows people the ability to form natural bonds with each other. This was highlighted by students as the most memorable part of the retreat, and the answers reflect that it was very valuable to students. The only request in regards to the free time was more options for things to do during this time. The location that we were at had many options for activities like fishing, and a few students requested access to them. This should be straightforward way to further capitalize on the free time.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

The biggest limitation was the abrupt cancellation of our 2020 retreat days before it was supposed to begin. That retreat had 30 students registered, which would have increased my population size by 200%. The reality is that while these scores are promising, 15 students seeing increased mental health scores from this one is not evidence that every retreat like this would do the same. It is my hope that someone takes the data collected this year and continues to examine this style of overnight retreat in 2021 with a larger sample size.

I also believe that the opportunity for single day programs like this could be an option, but this was also not something I found in my research. Before the retreat was cancelled, we had discussed the option of making it a single day experience. I think that this would be a great opportunity for students, but I also think it would be a great opportunity to study potential differences in these types of experiences. Having to reschedule the retreat to be a one-day experience also made me ask the question "How important is the overnight experience to student connectedness?" Do students who stay on overnight trips see improved scores because of the overnight addition? What if they don't? One day experiences are generally cheaper and easier logistically, and examining the differences could potentially open up programming opportunities for organizations that cannot commit to funding an overnight retreat, and are also an option that could be considered for future research.

Lastly, students should be followed up with some time after the retreat has concluded. A main question that I had going into this was whether or not students would

see longer term effects from this retreat, but that is a question I did not have the time to answer. To really understand the effects of programming like this, I believe that a researcher should follow up with a survey a few weeks or months after the event to gauge how their mental health scores still are, and if they successfully implemented some of the mindfulness techniques into their life. The long-term success of this style of programming relies on the answer to those questions, and I did not have time to research them.

Conclusion

The 2019 Recharge & Connect Retreat was a huge success for the people who attended. Students came to the retreat, made connections, tried new things, and learned holistic strategies for managing stress. Most importantly, they reported higher mental health scores after having attended the retreat. While the sample size is not large enough to make any sweeping statements about this kind of programming, data shows that the students who attended the 2019 Retreat had an incredible, memorable time and it showed in the way they answered the questions. With the epidemic of mental health issues facing colleges all around our country, programs like this could potentially be a way to program for the problem.

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Appendix

Consent and Instrument

I am inviting you to participate in a research survey entitled "Effects of the Recharge and Connect Wellbeing Retreat on College Students". We are inviting you because you have enrolled in the program as a willing participant. In order to participate in this survey, you must be 18 years or older.

The survey may take approximately five minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, do not respond to this paper survey. The number of subjects to be enrolled in the study will be 30.

The purpose of this research study is to understand how programs like this retreat can help with student mental health scores.

Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey.

There are no risks or discomforts associated with this survey. You may help us understand the mental health epidemic happening at schools around the United States, so please fill this out honestly and to the best of your ability.

Your response will be kept confidential. We will store the data in a secure computer file and the file will destroyed once the data has been published. Any part of the research that is published as part of this study will not include your individual information. If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact William McMillan at mcmill87@rowan.edu and MaryBeth Walpole at walpole@rowan.edu, but you do not have to give your personal identification.

Please cut and paste your survey below this line.

Version #: 1
Version Date: February 3rd, 2020

RowanUniversity
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Box 1.1 Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.
Please tick the box that best describes your experience of each over the **last 2 weeks**.

STATEMENTS	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling useful	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling interested in other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've had energy to spare	1	2	3	4	5
I've been dealing with problems well	1	2	3	4	5
I've been thinking clearly	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling good about myself	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling close to other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling confident	1	2	3	4	5
I've been able to make up my own mind about things	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling loved	1	2	3	4	5
I've been interested in new things	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling cheerful	1	2	3	4	5

2

Open Ended Post-Trip Questions

What is one thing that you will remember about the trip as you go home:

What did you like most about this trip, and why was it important for you?

What have you gained from this experience?

Do you have a suggestion to improve it?

Do you have additional feedback for the group leaders or suggestions for future events?

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