

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

H&W Tenet Not Only Transforms Students' Lives – It Can Lengthen Them

What percentage of UCO students are athletes? What percentage take physical education classes? (UCO students max out at four hours of PE classes counting toward graduation.) What percentage engage in intramurals or club sports? What percentage go regularly to our Wellness Center or somewhere else to engage in physical activity?

Combine all the categories above, then guess at the total amount of time students spend doing those things during their undergraduate years. What's the average per-student time spent across a 4-year degree? Would it be 4% of their waking hours total? More? Less?

More important, whatever the amount is for an individual student, is it enough to develop the habits of health and wellness that will make it less likely she will develop diabetes, less likely she will smoke or engage in other life-shortening activities, less likely she will suffer a reduced quality of life?

What if, as a result of something you did in class, some of your students' lives were extended by five years? Would that be rewarding?

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Spelman College recently made the decision to drop intercollegiate athletics and devote the money it had been spending on NCAA Division III sports to expanding its effort to help students be healthier and live longer:

“We say we are preparing them for their future lives, but when we think about our involvement in intercollegiate athletics or our activities in our physical education classes, those are not necessarily the things they’re going to do after graduation,” Tatum said in an interview with *Inside Higher Ed*. “We want them to live long and healthy lives so they can get the return on that investment they’ve made in higher education.... We really see this as a life-saving activity that we are engaging in.” (Spelman President Beverly Daniel Tatum, as quoted in Grasgreen, 2012)

Obviously, UCO is not going to drop its intercollegiate athletics programs, but we *are* better positioned than many universities to have the kind of impact Spelman’s president desires for students there. Thanks to Health and Wellness being one of our Central Six Tenets, we mindfully and intentionally build assignments, activities, and places meant to provide opportunities for students to reach a-ha moments about their health and the health of those they care about as well as the health of the community and the environment.

This is why UCO’s Transformative Learning approach, which provides the Central Six

Tenets as routes through which faculty can move assignments and Student Affairs professionals can move activities in service to student learning outcomes, is effective. There are processes and tools at UCO specifically designed to make it more likely students will come to a transformative realization about their health and their physical-mental-emotional futures.

Our typical-aged entering freshmen come to us as 18- or 19-year-olds, many of whom possess a “Superman” belief about themselves — they are bulletproof against mundane physical problems like developing premature wrinkles if they smoke, encountering bad circumstances if they drink too much, suffering decrements in performance if they skip sleep in order to party. We chalk this up to the callowness of youth, shrugging our shoulders and saying, “It comes with the territory for teenagers,” or, “They’ll grow out of it.”

The problem is, the supposed bulletproofing of youth is a sham. Habits set in college can wreak havoc later — or pay huge dividends.

Would you be more motivated to route an assignment through the Health and Wellness Tenet if you knew a certain percentage of students doing that assignment would live five years longer as a result?

Here’s an example:

- § You teach a journalism class. One of the assignments is to interview someone as an activity that will help students reach one of the course learning outcomes.
- § You decide to set up a demonstration interview to be conducted by a former student who is working in some facet of the journalism world now and whom you’re certain will do a good job demonstrating interviewing skills. (You’re clever. You know this tactic will be more engaging for students than if you conduct the interview.)
- § You then arrange for the interviewee to be someone whose life was changed after correcting course to compensate for prior poor decisions about health. (You have UCO colleagues in the Kinesiology and Health Studies and the Nursing Programs who can help with this.)
- § On that class day, your former student interviews a woman who lost her leg to diabetes. She tells an emotional story that has an effect on your students.
- § The last question you ask on the observation summary sheets students fill out as part of the assignment is, “If you had been asked to find someone for this interview, whom might you have asked? (If you can’t think of anyone, describe how you would find a good interview subject.) Then, supposing you will develop the interview into a feature-length piece for the ‘Special Online Features’ area of your local newspaper’s web presence, what will you write to make an emotional connection with your readers?” (Again, subversively clever instructor that you are, you have set things up to prompt at least some students to connect emotionally to health challenges of people they know personally. This can lead to a Health & Wellness a-ha moment that shows through in the student’s answer to the item on the observation summary sheet.)

§ Using UCO's H&W rubric, you see in three students' writings that they have definitely connected positive outcomes about their own health to changes they will make in their own lives after being "up close and personal" with someone whose poor lifestyle decisions created visible and irrevocable damage. You assess those three students as having achieved the "Integration" level on the H&W tenet.

In the above example, 1) you already have "interview observation" as one of the assignments in the class, 2) you tweak the assignment in the above manner because you realize how easily it adapts to the H&W tenet, 3) you enjoy reading the students' responses to the last item on their observation summary sheets, noting with satisfaction the impact you've had on the personal health decisions made by at least some of your students.

References

Grasgreen, A. (2012, November 1). Beyond sports. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved July 10, 2014, from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/11/01/spelman-eliminates-athletics-favor-campus-wide-wellness-initiative#sthash.7Gzaiz9g.tS08lkO6.dpbs>