EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Research demonstrates that young college adults suffer high rates of stress, depression, and substance abuse. In addition to campus-wide prevention efforts, interventions to increase positive mental health provide a promising avenue to improve students' wellbeing and academic and social functioning.

- Human Development (HD) 205 is a college-level communication and life skills class that seeks to improve students' ability to be self-aware, manage difficult life situations, communicate effectively, and succeed in leadership roles. Ideally, students leave HD205 with higher levels of positive mental health, psychological flexibility and leadership skills. The overarching goal is to increase students' ability to become highly functioning, flourishing adults.

- End-of-semester evaluations during the 2012-2013 academic year indicate that compared to the beginning of the semester, HD205 students reported statistically significant increases in:
  - Leadership skills
  - Overall mental health, social and psychological well-being
  - Psychological flexibility

- Similarly, comparison of HD205 students with control group students not enrolled in HD205 indicate that HD205 students reported significantly greater changes in:
  - Overall mental health
  - Emotional and psychological well-being

- Recommendations are to use a control group and longitudinal design.

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**Figure 1. Main results: Effect size for mean score difference in scale scores from pretest to posttest for Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 HD205 students**

- Leadership skills: Fall 2012 HD205 (0.38), Spring 2013 HD205 (0.57)
- Overall Mental Health: Fall 2012 HD205 (0.19), Spring 2013 HD205 (0.21)
- Psychological Flexibility: Fall 2012 HD205 (0.12), Spring 2013 HD205 (0.11)
All students enrolled in Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semesters of HD205 were invited to participate in a pretest survey at the beginning of the semester and again in a posttest survey at the end of the semester. In Fall 2012, we collected 246 matched pretest and posttests, and in Spring 2013, we collected 239 matched pretest and posttests from HD205 students. In Fall 2012, we also collected 129 matched pretest and posttest from control group students not enrolled in HD205.

We used the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS) to measure leadership development. The SRLS has three subscales: Controversy with Civility, Consciousness of Self, and Change. We measured wellbeing using the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF). The MHC-SF also has 3 subscales: Social, Psychological, and Emotional Wellbeing. Finally, we used the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) to assess student’s psychological flexibility.

Is there a difference between HD205 students’ pretest scores and end-of-semester posttest scores?

We used paired t-tests to measure change in students’ mean scores from pretest, administered at the beginning of the semester, to posttest, administered at the end of the semester.

Leadership Skills
In Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, HD205 students’ leadership scores increased significantly in the overall SRLS leadership scale and in the three subscales: 1) Controversy with Civility (ability to navigate conflict); 2) Consciousness of Self (awareness of one’s beliefs and values; and 3) Change (comfort with and belief in the value of change to produce positive outcomes).

Mental Health
In Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, HD205 students’ overall mental health as well as social and psychological well-being increased significantly from pretest to posttest. We did not find a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores for emotional well-being.

Psychological Flexibility
In Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, HD205 students’ psychological flexibility increased significantly from pretest to posttest.

How big is the difference in scores from pretest to posttest?

Significance testing allows us to answer the question, “Does an intervention work?” Effect size allows us to answer the question, “How well does an intervention work?”

An effect size is any measure of the strength of a relationship between two variables or of the magnitude of difference between two groups. In the context of this report, an effect size describes the magnitude of the difference in pretest mean scores and posttest mean scores for HD205 students.

Figure 2. Effect size for mean score difference in leadership scores from pretest to posttest
Effect sizes for the outcomes lie between 0.11 and 0.62. A simple interpretation of these results is that depending on the outcome, the difference in pretest scores and posttest scores ranges from trivial \((d<.20)\), small \((d=.20\) and \(d<.50)\) to medium \((d=.50\) and \(d<.80)\) and large \((d>.80)\). When interpreting effect sizes, it is best not to solely rely on labels such as small, medium, and large. We should also take into account the context of the program as well as the practical importance of the change including relative cost and benefits of the effect.

**Is there a difference between HD205 students and control group students in the outcomes of interest?**

We conducted independent t-tests to determine any baseline differences between the two groups. Results showed that at baseline, control group students scored significantly higher on mental health, emotional well-being, and social well-being.

We conducted repeated measures ANOVA to compare change in leadership skills, mental health, and psychological flexibility in the two groups over the semester. After participating in the course, HD205 students scored significantly higher than control group on overall mental health, emotional well-being, and psychological well-being. We found no significant differences in any other measures. Control groups students experienced a significant decrease in emotional well-being.

**DISCUSSION**

The evidence suggests that HD205 students benefit greatly from the experience of the class, reporting improved mental well-being, psychological flexibility and leadership skills. On the whole, students in the Spring semester showed greater positive change than those in the Fall semester. This may be due to the fact that all Fall students were first-year students, while in Spring there was a mixture of classes.

We have also found new evidence in the form of a control group of WSU freshmen students with which to compare changes in the aforementioned outcomes. In all three wellbeing constructs, the control group indicated significantly higher baseline scores, but HD205 students scored higher after having participated in the course. In conducting these analyses, we found that non-HD205 students experienced a significant decrease in emotional well-being. The control group finding of a decrease in emotional well-being speaks to the turbulent life stage and difficult transition that freshman students are dealing with and suggests that participation in the course may help students navigate that time without a significant decrease in emotional well-being.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Use a more closely matched control group to strengthen the results of future evaluations.
2. Use a longitudinal design to determine if the effects of HD205 are sustained over time and explore long-term academic effects.

Year of program: 2012-2013

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