

Changes in Perceived Wellness in First-Year Engineering Students

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Abstract

This Complete Research Paper presents changes in data from a combined wellness, self-efficacy, and mindset survey for new students in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences (CEAS) at Western Michigan University (WMU) during their first semester. Correlations between individual survey factors and student retention and success are explored. The general structure of a first-year experience course focused on various dimensions of wellness is also described.

Two electronic surveys (start-of-semester and end-of-semester) were created in Qualtrics based on the Perceived Wellness Survey (PWS), the Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic (ICOPPE) wellness scale, mindset, and self-efficacy. The combined surveys were administered to new students to the CEAS who consented to participate during the Fall 2022 semester. Results showed limited statistical correlations between wellness survey items and student success, primarily between overall measures of wellness and retention to the second semester. Additional correlations were found between retention and self-efficacy. Students enrolled in the wellness-focused first-year experience course showed mixed outcomes – positive when measured by the PWS and generally negative when measured by the ICOPPE – relative to new students who did not take the course.

Background

WMU is a public, doctoral-granting institution in the Midwest with over 15,000 students. Initially funded by a grant through the National Science Foundation's STEP Program (STEM Talent Expansion Program), the CEAS at WMU offers two student success courses for first-year students entering at the Algebra II placement level. One course focuses on applications of Algebra II topics with the goals of helping students understand the importance of mathematics in their desired career and improving their mathematical knowledge. The second course, ENGR 2100, integrates concepts of study skills, career preparation, and student engagement to facilitate student success. Student feedback on ENGR 2100 has been generally very positive. However, the previous structure of ENGR 2100 had two significant limitations. The first was that ENGR 2100 does not count towards graduation. The second was that enrollment in ENGR 2100 was limited to students at the Algebra II placement level. Together, this means that students taking ENGR 2100 are not making as much progress towards their degree as other students in the college during their first semester and that students who might benefit from some of the topics in ENGR 2100 don't have access because they placed into a higher level of math.

Starting in Fall 2022, ENGR 2100 was revised to satisfy the requirements of a Personal Wellness course within the WMU Essential Studies Program, a rethinking of WMU's general education program. The approach of integrating wellness into first-year coursework has been discussed by other researchers (e.g., [1]). Eight student learning outcomes were identified for the course (***bolded and italic*** indicates significantly modified or new learning outcomes for Fall 2022):

- 1) Students will develop critical thinking, writing, technology, and research skills.
- 2) Students will demonstrate competency in accessing WMU resources and services and will make meaningful connections with faculty, staff, student leaders, and peers to facilitate success.
- 3) Students will understand the requirements to earn their bachelor's degree in CEAS.
- 4) *Students will be aware of neuroscience-based learning tools and will understand responsible personal, academic, and social behaviors needed to be a successful student.*
- 5) *Students will create a personalized wellness plan highlighting the importance of emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social, and spiritual wellness.*
- 6) Students will develop skills in academic research and technical writing.
- 7) *Students will develop a resume and elevator speech.*
- 8) *Students will understand the importance of financial planning.*

For the Fall 2022 semester, enrollment was still limited to students at the Algebra II placement level. The intention is to open enrollment up to all new students in the CEAS in future academic years. Responses on surveys of students in ENGR 2100 related to wellness topics were compared with first semester GPA and retention to the second semester to identify potential correlations.

A variety of wellness models and associated instruments for measuring their impact are available in the literature [2-7]. Modifications to ENGR 2100 focused on implementing the 'Eight Dimensions of Wellness' model [8,9] which has been adopted by WMU as its wellness approach. While all eight dimensions of wellness are present in ENGR 2100, they are not equally emphasized. Table 1 shows the portion of course activities (in-class discussions/activities and out-of-class assignments) that integrate each wellness dimension. Totals in Table 1 sum to over 100%, reflecting the fact that many activities incorporate more than one dimension of wellness. It should be noted that the degree to which specific wellness dimensions are independent vs. overlapping or confounding is an open question in the literature. Thus, the information in Table 1 is helpful in understanding the general structure of ENGR 2100 but necessarily in predicting the impact of ENGR 2100 on students' overall wellness or related considerations like academic success and retention.

Table 1: Portion of ENGR 2100 topics relating to each wellness dimension during the Fall 2022 semester.

Wellness Dimension	Portion of Related Course Activities
Emotional	35.0%
Environmental	12.6%
Financial	16.5%
Intellectual	95.1%
Occupational	82.5%
Physical	18.4%
Social	34.0%
Spiritual	13.6%

The first two weeks of ENGR 2100 focus on a general introduction to WMU systems and processes as well as discussions about creating a manageable schedule and prioritizing ones'

'Big Rocks' (highest priorities). This culminates in the creation of a personal wellness plan at the end of Week 2. Throughout the semester, students refer back to their plan as different topics are discussed, updating and modifying it, as appropriate. Students integrate their wellness knowledge in a presentation on the wellness topic of their choice at the end of the semester, supported by references gathered using library resources.

Methods

All domestic first-year and new transfer students in CEAS during the Fall 2022 semester were invited to complete a start-of-semester and end-of-semester survey related to wellness, mindset, and self-efficacy. Students in ENGR 2100 were offered extra credit for participating and all respondents were entered into a drawing for an Amazon gift card. The survey was administered using Qualtrics and informed consent was gathered electronically prior to students being able to view the survey questions. The survey questions were gathered from the Perceived Wellness Survey (PWS) [10,11], the Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic instrument (ICOPPE) [12,13], and the concept of mindset [14]. Two additional self-efficacy questions were also included ('I am confident I will graduate from college' and 'I am confident I will graduate from WMU'). Responses for the PWS, mindset, and self-efficacy were on a Likert scale from 1-6. ICOPPE questions used a Likert scale of 0-10.

The Perceived Wellness Model (and the accompanying survey) is based on the idea that separate individuals, "...process and interpret information from internal and external sources in highly variable ways" [10]. In other words, two people placed in similar circumstances could have very different perceptions of the positive or negative aspects of their situation. The model integrates six components of wellness: physical, social, psychological, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. These dimensions are not unique to the Perceived Wellness Model, though their specific definitions often vary somewhat between theories. Adams and co-workers developed the Perceived Wellness Survey to assess wellness within the construct of the Perceived Wellness Model [10,11]. The researchers found that while the Perceived Wellness Survey purports to measure individual wellness dimensions, the result of the assessment appears to be a uni-dimensional wellness assessment. This finding was supported by subsequent analysis by Harari et al. The Perceived Wellness Survey (PWS) has been demonstrated to be a psychometrically sound wellness-assessment instrument that is relatively short (36 items), is freely available, and is based on a theory (the Perceived Wellness Model) that focuses on five of the eight wellness dimensions (the theory does not include financial, environmental, or occupational and has an additional psychological component).

The 'missing' dimensions of the PWS is assessed in the current work using the Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic instrument (ICOPPE), a 7-item survey focusing on where respondents perceive themselves to be now in each domain, where they were in the past, and where they expect to be in the future. Combined, the two instruments allow a comprehensive assessment of student wellness. It should be noted that the full ICOPPE results are averages of respondents' views about each wellness dimension in their past, present, and future. Only present and future responses were included in the current survey, consistent with the ICOPPE 'short-form' [13].

The start-of-semester survey was open through the first three weeks of the semester and the end-of-semester survey was open through the last two weeks of the semester plus several days beyond the end of final exams. The survey questions are shown in Appendix A.

Data from the start-of-semester and end-of-semester survey administrations were combined with demographics, enrollment, and academic performance data for respondents. One-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was performed between both Fall 2022 GPA and Spring 2023 enrollment with each of the various factors (survey responses and demographic data). Per previous analysis of the PWS [10,15], a single wellness average (the ‘Wellness Composite’) was calculated for each respondent. An average value is calculated for each of the PWS domains by summing all appropriate questions and dividing by the number of questions related to that domain or subscale (see Appendix A). The Wellness Composite is then calculated as:

$$\text{Wellness Magnitude} = \sum(\text{All Subscale Averages}) \quad \text{eq. 1}$$

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\text{Wellness Magnitude}}{6} \quad \text{eq. 2}$$

$$\text{Subscale Deviation (for each subscale)} = (\text{Subscale Average} - \bar{x})^2 \quad \text{eq. 3}$$

$$\text{Variance} = \frac{\sum(\text{All Subscale Deviations})}{5} \quad \text{eq. 4}$$

$$\text{Wellness Balance} = \sqrt{\text{Variance}} + 1.25 \quad \text{eq. 5}$$

$$\text{Wellness Composite} = \frac{\text{Wellness Magnitude}}{\text{Wellness Balance}} \quad \text{eq. 6}$$

Based on the above calculations, values for the Wellness Composite can range from 4.8 (ratings of 6 on all reverse-scored items and ratings of 1 on all regularly-scored items) to 28.8 (ratings of 6 on all regularly-scored items and ratings of 1 on all reverse-scored items). A mathematical average of the Wellness Composite range is 16.8. Previous work by Adams *et al.* [16] found an average Wellness Composite of about 15.3 for individuals working at two manufacturing plants and about 16.5 for both college students enrolled in a health education course and corporate administrative employees.

Values from the ICOPPE survey are intended to be treated as representing each of the individual wellness domains rather than an overall average [13]. Responses related to a student’s present conception of their wellness and future anticipation of their wellness in each domain (along with their perceived overall wellness) are averaged. Questions related to the student’s past wellness were not included in order to reduce the overall length of the survey. Average values for each factor on the ICOPPE range from 0 to 10.

Results

The total beginner population invited to participate in the survey was 343. While both domestic first-year (or beginner) and new transfer students were invited to complete the wellness surveys, analysis will focus primarily on beginner students. The response rates for domestic beginner

	All Beginner	Start-of-Semester Survey				End-of-Semester Survey			
		Surveyed	Surveyed Beginner	Surveyed Beginner ENGR 2100	Surveyed Beginner non-ENGR 2100	Surveyed	Surveyed Beginner	Surveyed Beginner ENGR 2100	Surveyed Beginner non-ENGR 2100
Wellness Composite						++	++	++	
IC Overall						++	++	++	
IC Inter									
IC Comm									
IC Occ									
IC Phys									
IC Psy							++	++	
IC Econ									
Mindset									
Conf. Grad. College									
Conf. Grad. WMU						++	++	++	

The absolute values of Wellness Composite scores for beginner students in ENGR 2100 on the start- and end-of-semester surveys were 13.4 and 14.1, respectively. For beginner students not in ENGR 2100, the values were 13.5 and 13.5, respectively. All values are lower than those reported by Adams et al. for surveyed college students [16]. Thirty-two students responded to both the start-of-semester survey and the end-of-semester survey. Of these, 20 were enrolled in ENGR 2100. These 20 students had an average Wellness Composite score of 13.4 at the start of the semester and 13.9 at the end of the semester. The 12 students who completed both surveys and were not enrolled in ENGR 2100 had average Wellness Composite scores of 13.5 and 13.7, respectively.

Table 4 compares the changes in student responses to the various survey items for beginner students in ENGR 2100 and beginner students not enrolled in ENGR 2100. With the exception of the interpersonal factor, all responses on ICOPPE items decreased more/increased less for beginners in ENGR 2100 compared to other beginners. However, changes in the Wellness Composite score as well as scores on the self-efficacy and mindset items were more positive/less negative for beginners in ENGR 2100. The source of the apparent contradiction between the Wellness Composite results and those from the ICOPPE is not clear.

Table 4: Comparison of changes in the survey responses between the start-of-semester survey and end-of-semester survey for students enrolled in ENGR 2100 and beginner students not enrolled in ENGR 2100.

	Surveyed Beginner ENGR 2100	Surveyed Beginner non-ENGR 2100
N	20	12
Δ Wellness Composite	+ 0.56	+ 0.21
Δ IC Overall	- 0.50	+ 0.04
Δ IC Inter	+ 0.33	- 0.71

	Surveyed Beginner ENGR 2100	Surveyed Beginner non-ENGR 2100
Δ IC_Comm	- 0.58	- 0.38
Δ IC_Occ	- 1.05	- 0.42
Δ IC_Phys	- 0.40	+ 0.21
Δ IC_Psy	+ 0.03	+ 0.08
Δ IC_Econ	- 0.33	+ 0.08
Δ Mindset	+ 1.38	+ 1.33
Δ Conf. Grad. College	- 0.15	- 0.42
Δ Conf. Grad. WMU	- 0.30	- 0.42

Discussion

While high school GPA was found to be strongly correlated to first semester college GPA, few correlations were found between first semester GPA and the survey items. In contrast, several survey items were found to be correlated with second semester enrollment, specifically the Wellness Composite score from the PWS, the overall wellness rating from the ICOPPE, and a student's confidence in graduating from WMU. Previous work by the authors found correlations between second semester enrollment and confidence in graduating from WMU for first-year students in Fall 2020 but not for students in Fall 2019 [17]. When survey responses were compared to third semester enrollment (i.e., retention to the second year), confidence in graduating from WMU was positively correlated with retention for both cohorts. Additional work is required to determine if the current wellness and self-efficacy correlations will hold for retention to the second year for new Fall 2022 students or if other correlations will be discovered with longer-term retention.

Students enrolled in ENGR 2100 and completing the start-of-semester survey showed lower average Wellness Composite scores compared to beginner students not enrolled in ENGR 2100 (13.4 vs. 13.5). Data from the end-of-semester survey showed scores of 14.1 vs. 13.5 for students enrolled and not enrolled in ENGR 2100, respectively. Students enrolled in ENGR 2100 who completed both start- and end-of-semester surveys showed a larger average increase in Wellness Composite score compared to non-enrolled students (0.56 vs. 0.21). This data is encouraging with regards to the potential positive impact of ENGR 2100 on first-year engineering student wellness with two caveats. First, the number of beginners completing both surveys was small (N = 20 for ENGR 2100 and N = 12 for not enrolled in ENGR 2100), limiting the statistical significance of the comparisons. Second, similar comparisons between scores on ICOPPE survey items showed a generally negative trend for beginners enrolled in ENGR 2100 vs. those not taking the course. Positive correlations were found for both PWS and ICOPPE results from the end-of-semester survey with second semester enrollment. However, the structure of the two instruments is fundamentally different – calculation of a single wellness score based on integration of information from six different domains vs. direct specification of a score in each domain based on three (or, in the present case, two) questions. This may make direct comparison of scores between the two invalid and reinforces the current uncertainty in the literature about the best approach for measuring wellness.

In the case of the PWS, Wellness Composite scores from the current work were approximately 20% lower than those found in previous work with college students [16]. It is not clear if this change is significant and, if so, what factors might underlie it. The amount of time between gathering the data sets (20+ years) and significantly different student backgrounds (engineering students vs. students in a health education course) mean there is no inherent reason to expect similar survey results. Expanded data sets across broader student demographics are required to better understand the value, if any, of the absolute value of the Wellness Composite score vs. documented change over time.

The average change in mindset scores over the course of the semester for beginners in ENGR 2100 and other beginners was very similar (+ 1.38 vs. + 1.33). Confidence in graduating from college and in graduation from WMU, specifically decreased for both groups. The decrease was smaller for beginners enrolled in ENGR 2100, but the small population size means the difference may not actually be representative of the two populations.

Conclusions

The current work identified positive statistical correlations between two measures of wellness (the Wellness Composite score and the ICOPPE Overall Life rating) and retention to the second semester for beginner engineering students. Among these students, beginners enrolled in a wellness-focused student success course showed larger gains in their Wellness Composite score relative to other beginner students over the course of their first semester. However, changes in scores on most aspects of the ICOPPE instrument were larger for students not enrolled in the student success course. Beginners in the class showed much larger gains in the interpersonal domain of the ICOPPE but less positive/more negative gains in all other domains.

Future Work

The PWS and the ICOPPE take two very different approaches to measuring wellness. While the PWS purports to include six different domains, individual domain scores have been shown to be interrelated. The PWS also explicitly includes questions asking respondents to consider past, present, and future depending on the phrasing of specific questions (see Appendix A). The short-form of the ICOPPE considers only present and future and domains of the ICOPPE have been shown to be independent. Whether either of these approaches is a more appropriate method for understanding the influence of ‘wellness’ on engineering student success remains an open question. Expanded data sets from diverse student pools is needed to better understand the potential significance of these instruments and the implications for supporting engineering student retention and, ultimately, graduation. Comparison of survey results with longer-term retention and academic success will also aid in understanding the potential value of these instruments.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions

PWS Factor Grouping [10,11] / Mindset Factor Grouping*	*(+ indicates regularly scored item (i.e., 6 -> 6, 5 ->5, etc.) (-) indicates reverse scored item (i.e., 6 -> 1, 5 -> 2, etc.)
Psychological (+)	I am always optimistic about my future.
Emotional (-)	There have been times when I felt inferior to most of the people I knew.
Social (+)	Members of my family come to me for support.
Physical (-)	My physical health has restricted me in the past.
Mindset (+)	I think I could significantly improve my intelligence level with enough time and effort.
Spiritual (+)	I believe there is a real purpose for my life.
Intellectual (+)	I will always seek out activities that challenge me to think and reason.
Mindset (-)	I honestly don't think I can change how intelligent I am.
Psychological (-)	I rarely count on good things happening to me.
Emotional (+)	In general, I feel confident about my abilities.
Social (-)	Sometimes I wonder if my family will really be there for me when I am in need.
Physical (+)	My body seems to resist physical illness very well.
Spiritual (-)	Life does not hold much future promise for me.
Intellectual (-)	I avoid activities which require me to concentrate.
Mindset (-)	I believe my intelligence is something about me that I personally can't change very much.
Psychological (+)	I always look on the bright side of things.
Emotional (-)	I sometimes think I am a worthless individual.
Social (+)	My friends know they can always confide in me and ask me for advice.
Physical (+)	My physical health is excellent.
Mindset (+)	I believe I have the ability to change my basic intelligence level considerably over time.
Spiritual (-)	Sometimes I don't understand what life is all about.
Intellectual (+)	Generally, I feel pleased with the amount of intellectual stimulation I receive in my daily life.
Mindset (+)	I believe I can always substantially improve my intelligence.
Psychological (+)	In the past, I have expected the best.
Emotional (-)	I am uncertain about my ability to do things well in the future.
Social (+)	My family has been available to support me in the past.
Physical (+)	Compared to people I know, my past physical health has been excellent.

Spiritual (+)	I feel a sense of mission about my future.
Intellectual (+)	The amount of information that I process in a typical day is just about right for me (i.e., not too much and not too little).
Mindset (-)	I believe I can learn new things, but I don't have the ability to change my basic intelligence.
Psychological (-)	In the past, I hardly ever expected things to go my way.
Emotional (+)	I will always be secure with who I am.
Social (-)	In the past, I have not always had friends with whom I could share my joys and sorrows.
Physical (+)	I expect to always be physically healthy.
Spiritual (-)	I have felt in the past that my life was meaningless.
Intellectual (+)	In the past, I have generally found intellectual challenges to be vital to my overall well-being.
Mindset (+)	I think I have the capacity to change my intelligence quite a bit regardless of my current intelligence level.
Psychological (-)	Things will not work out the way I want them to in the future.
Emotional (+)	In the past, I have felt sure of myself among strangers.
Social (+)	My friends will be there for me when I need help.
Physical (-)	I expect my physical health to get worse.
Spiritual (+)	It seems that my life has always had purpose.
Intellectual (-)	My life has often seemed void of positive mental stimulation.
Mindset (-)	I don't think I personally can do much to increase my intelligence.
Factor Grouping ICOPPE [12,13]	Below are several categories of wellbeing - overall, interpersonal, community, occupational, physical, psychological, and economic. For each category, consider your current personal circumstances and select the response that best represents your life as it is now:
	Overall Life
	Interpersonal - relationships with important people in your life
	Community - the community where you live
	Occupational - your main occupation (employed/self-employed, student, volunteer, etc.)
	Physical - your physical health and wellness
	Psychological - your emotional and psychological wellbeing
	Economic - your economic/financial situation
Factor Grouping ICOPPE [12,13]	Below are several categories of wellbeing - overall, interpersonal, community, occupational, physical, psychological, and economic. For each category, consider your current personal circumstances and select the response that best represents your life as it is now:
	Overall Life
	Interpersonal - relationships with important people in your life
	Community - the community where you live

	Occupational - your main occupation (employed/self-employed, student, volunteer, etc.)
	Physical - your physical health and wellness
	Psychological - your emotional and psychological wellbeing
	Economic - your economic/financial situation
Self-Efficacy	I am confident I will graduate from college
	I am confident I will graduate from WMU