

Lewis & Clark College
The Holistic Wellness Initiative
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Project summary

In the heart of Portland, where youth violence is rising and mental health resources feel harder to access than ever, the Holistic Wellness Initiative (HWI) shines as a transformative force, and a beacon of peace. I founded this initiative in 2022, with the efforts to address the pressing crisis facing Portland's historically marginalized high school students, a crisis marked by escalating peer violence, mental health crises, and the heavy emotional burden of systemic oppression. The program offers an innovative 10-day summer program at Portland State University from July 29th - August 8th, serving 60 high school students from Portland Public Schools, Reynolds School District, Parkrose, and Multnomah Education Service District. The HWI takes an upstream approach to violence prevention by nurturing peace from within. During the summer months, when structured activities and supervision decrease, create particular vulnerability for youth aged 8-18 who are at risk of becoming either victims or perpetrators of violence. Rather than waiting for crises to occur, HWI provides a sanctuary of growth and healing through integrated wellness practices, social justice education, and deep community engagement. The holistic curriculum weaves together yoga, art therapy, nature walks, mental health workshops, and food justice discussions, creating experiences that build resilience, emotional intelligence, and peaceful conflict resolution skills. By serving high school students from Portland Public Schools, Reynolds School District, Parkrose, and Multnomah Education Service District, HWI reaches those most impacted by budget cuts to youth programs, school districts and community centers. This comprehensive approach helps students develop crucial social-emotional skills and healthy coping mechanisms, reducing their risk of future involvement with the criminal justice system. HWI's impact ripples outward from individual transformation to community-wide peace-building. As students learn to navigate the emotional toll of systemic oppression while developing leadership skills, they become agents of positive change within their communities. The program doesn't just address symptoms, it nurtures the seeds of lasting peace by empowering young people to break cycles of violence, build emotional resilience, and create the meaningful social change our city desperately needs.

Background

The seeds of the Holistic Wellness Initiative were planted through my heartbreaking firsthand experience with Portland's youth crisis. As a staff member at Matt Dishman Community Center's teen program in 2018-2019, I witnessed the transformative power of structured youth programs in our city's most vulnerable communities. Every day, I watched young people find sanctuary, develop leadership skills, and build meaningful connections in a safe environment. These weren't just programs, they were lifelines for youth from low-income communities searching for direction and purpose. Then came the devastating budget cuts during the pandemic, forcing the closure of these vital programs. What followed haunts me to this day: within just one year, three teens I had mentored lost their lives to gun violence. Others whom I had watched grow and dream of bright futures fell into devastating circumstances, one was imprisoned, another became involved in sex trafficking, and several were drawn into gang activity. These weren't just statistics; these were young people I knew, laughed with, and helped mentored. This traumatic unraveling revealed a brutal truth: when we defund youth programs, we don't just close buildings, we close doors to hope and opportunity. The absence of these programs left a negative impact that was quickly filled by the

cycles of violence and despair the program had worked so hard to break. Each lost young life, each derailed future stands as a testament to the critical importance of maintaining and expanding youth support programs. This profound loss sparked my search for solutions. Through my own journey with yoga and mindfulness, I discovered powerful tools for building emotional resilience and well-being. In 2022, when I became the Wellness Coordinator for the Inquiry for Justice Program, I saw an opportunity to bridge these worlds. Working with disenfranchised students, I began integrating wellness practices with social justice education, creating a holistic approach to youth empowerment and violence prevention. Since the birth of this initiative I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of combining mental health resources, wellness practices, and community partnerships, with creating the comprehensive support system for youth.

Partners

For this project, my collaboration involves key individuals and institutions. Portland State University is the location the program will be held, where students will receive room and board during the duration of the program. Portland Public Schools, Reynolds School District, and Multnomah Education Service District are the school districts where students are recruited. The Lewis & Clark Art Therapy Graduate Program will provide art therapists to guide students in creative self-expression and emotional processing. Black Futures Farm will host food justice workshops, offering hands-on learning about sustainable food systems and food insecurity. Portland State University and the Inquiry for Justice program will serve as the primary venue for workshops and academic sessions. Anchor Within Counseling will facilitate mental health workshops, led by licensed therapists, to equip students with resilience and coping tools. A dedicated yoga instructor from Forge Hot Yoga will lead yoga sessions. Equitable Giving Circle, a local organization focused on supporting marginalized communities, will contribute additional resources to enhance the students' experience. Vision Quilt a non profit organization that creates panels to advocate against gun violence that will provide curriculum to gun violence advocacy.

Implementation

The Holistic Wellness Initiative (HWI) will be implemented in 3 phases to promote peace within the community of students. HWI will do this by incorporating elements such as yoga, art therapy, nature walks, mental health workshops, and food justice education. **Phase 1**, June will be the preparation and planning phase for the Holistic Wellness Initiative will involve developing a comprehensive syllabus that combines wellness practices, mental health workshops, and social justice education. During this period, we will confirm leaders for each session (yoga, art therapy, nature walks, mental health, and food justice) and coordinate with guest speakers and professionals. Partnerships and community outreach efforts will focus on collaborating with local organizations, such as Black Futures Farm and Equitable Giving Circle, Vision Quilt to secure field trip locations, guest speakers, and logistical arrangements, including transportation. Resources will be prepared, including purchasing yoga mats, art supplies, wellness kits, and educational materials, as well as coordinating the creation of printed course readers and other workshop resources. Lastly, we will finalize the list of student participants in collaboration with Portland Public Schools, Reynolds School District and the Multnomah Education Service District and conduct an in-person orientation with participants and guardians to introduce program goals, schedules, and expectations. In **Phase 2**, The Holistic Wellness Initiative will be executed over a 10-day period in late July through early August, featuring a series of daily activities and workshops that emphasize promoting peace by facilitating wellness activities, including yoga sessions to promote body awareness and stress regulation, art therapy for creative self-expression, nature walks to foster peace and environmental connection, and mental health workshops to build resilience and coping strategies. Food justice

workshops will introduce students to issues like food insecurity and gentrification, with field trips to hands-on sites such as Black Futures Farm. Students will also engage in community projects with the Equitable Giving Circle, assisting with food distribution and making food boxes for low income families, to promote equitable access to resources. **Phase 3**, mid-August, the program will conclude with a final showcase at the Portland State University Smith ballroom, where students will present their learnings, experiences, and projects to family, friends, and community members in celebration of their achievements. This wrap-up phase will also include post-program survey videos that will be done by the hired videographer that will create a documentary to capture the essence of HWI, feedback sessions, and data collection to evaluate improvements in students' stress management and understanding of social justice. A comprehensive report will document program impacts, success stories, and opportunities for future growth.

Anticipated Results

The Holistic Wellness Initiative (HWI) is designed to promote peace by creating lasting positive outcomes for students, community collaborators, and the program itself. In the short term, students will benefit from increased knowledge of wellness practices, stress management skills, and a greater understanding of social justice issues. Students will also learn about the community organizations in their city that can provide ongoing support whenever needed. This early engagement can also inspire students to change their life's trajectory and give them the tools and resources to sustain their emotional well-being.

Community collaborators, including local mental health professionals and social justice organizations, will gain stronger connections to the youth they serve and reinforce their community impact. Long-term, HWI seeks to establish lasting partnerships with community organizations and create a sustainable curriculum that can serve future cohorts of students, embedding wellness and peace-building resources within the program. These partnerships and curriculum expansions will provide future students with a consistent, high-quality learning experience that grows beyond the initial project scope.

Project Sustainability

To ensure the sustained impact of the Holistic Wellness Initiative, students will receive resources and contacts from local mental health and wellness organizations, supporting their ongoing journey in both social justice and well-being. Wellness kits will also be provided to help students continue practicing the techniques learned in the workshops. Program impact will be assessed through pre- and post-program evaluations, where students will use note cards to reflect on their experience. On one side of the card, they will write three new things they learned during the program, and on the back, they will note three aspects they felt were unnecessary. This method provides direct, student-centered feedback, helping to refine and enhance future program offerings. The expansion of the HWI will lead to the development of a solidified curriculum and strengthened community partnerships, creating a sustainable framework that can be used with future cohorts, ensuring long-term positive impact.