

Project Management 340 Final Paper

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A young person's growth reaches a turning point when they enter college, a period of opportunity and challenge. Students who enter adulthood must deal with new obligations such as juggling their studies, taking care of their money, choosing a career, and establishing social networks. However, personal wellness and health are sometimes overlooked in the middle of these responsibilities. College students are particularly susceptible to declining physical and mental health because of their erratic class schedules, late-night study sessions, stress-induced eating, and excessive reliance on digital displays.

Even though the value of wellness is well acknowledged, many college students find it difficult to develop long-term eating and exercise routines. Although they are underutilized, institutions usually provide a range of services, including recreation centers, mental health counseling, and dietary advice. The failure to engage kids in a meaningful, approachable, and inclusive manner is the problem, not a lack of resources. Many students feel overwhelmed by time constraints, excluded from traditional exercise facilities, or uncertain about how to start living a healthier lifestyle.

The College Fitness & health Initiative was created as a 10-week student-led effort to address this gap and enhance campus health culture. The initiative developed a scalable strategy for improving student health by combining input loops, social engagement tactics, customized diet and fitness materials, and peer-driven research. The initiative's creation, execution, results, and suggestions for the future are all covered in length in this essay.

Background and Motivation

A straightforward observation gave rise to the concept for the College Fitness & Wellness Initiative: although students commonly express a desire to be healthy, they typically lack the resources, time, and confidence to actually follow through on this goal. This disparity is supported by research on the health of college students. Just 45% of college students reported reaching the recommended levels of physical exercise, and even fewer maintained regular good eating habits, according to the American College Health Association's 2022 National College Health Assessment. Furthermore, more than 60% of students claimed that stress affected their ability to learn, indicating a strong correlation between wellbeing and academic success.

Anecdotally, many students at the University of Illinois expressed frustration with trying to stay healthy amid the pressures of college life. Some avoided the gym due to feelings of intimidation or inexperience. Others felt guilty for eating irregularly or skipping meals but were unsure how to change. Most felt isolated in their wellness efforts. These stories served as the inspiration for developing a supportive, student-friendly initiative that prioritized empathy, accessibility, and practical impact.

Project Structure and Timeline

The project was structured over a 10-week timeline and divided into four overlapping phases:

1. **Research and Planning (Weeks 1–2)**
2. **Resource Development (Weeks 2–4)**
3. **Engagement and Community Building (Weeks 4–6)**
4. **Implementation, Feedback, and Final Review (Weeks 6–10)**

This timeline allowed for flexibility, iterative development, and ongoing responsiveness to student needs. Each phase contributed to the larger goals of the initiative: to empower students with knowledge, reduce barriers to wellness participation, and cultivate a positive, sustainable health culture.

Phase 1: Research and Planning

The first step was gathering information directly from students to ensure the program would address actual not assumed needs. A digital survey was distributed via social media, student organizations, and campus mailing lists. The survey asked about exercise habits, dietary routines, wellness challenges, preferred learning formats, and interest in group-based wellness initiatives.

Over 100 students responded. The findings were illuminating:

- 62% of respondents exercised fewer than twice per week.
- 47% reported they did not know how to plan a workout routine.
- 34% said they felt uncomfortable or anxious using gym facilities.
- 55% expressed a desire for wellness resources that fit their academic schedule.
- 68% said they would be more likely to engage in wellness programs if they were peer-led and beginner-friendly.

Open-ended responses provided more nuance. Students described barriers such as imposter syndrome in gym spaces, confusion about nutrition advice, and a feeling that wellness programs were “for athletes, not regular students.” This feedback was critical in shaping the program’s goals and tone. It became clear that the initiative had to emphasize inclusivity, practical tools, and social support.

Based on these findings, the following objectives were defined

- Create clear, customizable wellness resources suitable for all experience levels.
- Leverage digital platforms for outreach and accessibility.
- Build a peer community to foster accountability and connection.
- Use feedback to continuously refine offerings and increase student engagement.

Phase 2: Resource Development

Weeks 2 through 4 focused on developing materials that students could easily integrate into their lives. The first priority was creating two core fitness guides: a Beginner Workout Plan and an Intermediate Plan. The beginner guide emphasized bodyweight exercises squats, push-ups,

planks, stretches requiring no equipment and only 10–15 minutes per session. The intermediate guide introduced resistance bands, light weights, and structured cardio routines for those ready to progress.

To support different learning styles, short instructional videos were recorded by student volunteers demonstrating each exercise. These videos were housed on a shared Google Drive and promoted through social media and QR codes on campus flyers.

Nutrition resources were also a major focus. Many students admitted to skipping meals, overeating during stress, or relying on energy drinks and takeout. A series of nutrition tip sheets was developed, covering:

- Budget-friendly grocery lists
- Easy vegetarian meals for dorm kitchens
- Hydration and sleep optimization
- Smart choices in dining halls
- Meal prepping for busy schedules

The tone of all resources was supportive, not prescriptive. Rather than promoting dieting or weight loss, the materials focused on nourishment, energy, and sustainable habit-building. Emphasis was placed on balance and flexibility, acknowledging the real constraints students face.

In parallel, the team partnered with key campus offices namely the Recreation Center, Health and Wellness Services, and the Student Union to distribute resources and coordinate space for workshops and events. These partnerships helped amplify the initiative's reach and provided institutional support for long-term sustainability.

Phase 3: Engagement and Community Building

The success of any wellness program depends not just on content, but on community. Weeks 4 through 6 prioritized student interaction and relationship-building. A private Instagram account and GroupMe chat were launched, quickly gaining over 200 combined members. These platforms were used to share daily workout reminders, student spotlights, healthy snack ideas, and uplifting messages. Most importantly, they allowed students to share progress and encouragement in real-time.

To motivate participation, weekly challenges were introduced:

- **Step Count Challenge** (aiming for 10,000 steps/day)
- **Hydration Tracker** (logging 64 oz/day)
- **Stretching Streak** (5–10 minutes daily flexibility)
- **Mindful Eating Week** (three balanced meals/day)

Participation was tracked via digital forms and self-reporting. Small prizes like gift cards and fitness gear were awarded to randomly selected participants. More than the prizes, students appreciated the structure and camaraderie these challenges provided.

Two in-person workshops were also held: a “**Dorm Room Workouts**” session demonstrating no-equipment exercises and a “**Fueling for Finals**” nutrition talk led by a campus dietitian. Both events were attended by over 40 students and led to increased interest in regular wellness meetups.

Phase 4: Implementation, Feedback, and Final Review

During Weeks 6 through 10, all resources and programs were fully launched. Students were encouraged to follow the fitness guides, engage in social challenges, and attend weekly Zoom check-ins. These sessions allowed students to ask questions, troubleshoot obstacles, and reflect on their progress.

At the end of Week 8, a follow-up survey was distributed. The results demonstrated clear impact:

- 85% of participants felt more confident working out on their own.
- 71% exercised more frequently than at the start of the semester.
- 63% improved their eating habits.
- 100% of respondents said they would recommend the program.

Testimonials offered powerful insight:

“This was the first time I felt like I belonged in a wellness space. It was made for people like me students juggling life.”

Junior, College of ACES

“Before this, I thought fitness meant an hour at the gym every day. Now I know it can be 15 minutes in my dorm and that counts.”

First-year student, Gies College of Business

In response to student feedback, an **Advanced Guide** was created for those ready to pursue more challenging routines, and a new meal plan focused on high-protein vegetarian options was added.

A comprehensive final report was then submitted to the Student Government and Health Promotion Office, including all materials, survey data, and a proposal to integrate wellness programming into freshman orientation and RA-led programming.

Reflections and Broader Implications

The *College Fitness & Wellness Initiative* succeeded not because it reinvented health advice, but because it delivered it with empathy, accessibility, and a deep understanding of student life. Its success provides several key takeaways:

1. **Wellness Must Be Relatable:** Programs that assume students have hours of free time, disposable income, and gym expertise are destined to fail. Meeting students where they are—physically, emotionally, and logistically—is essential.
2. **Community Drives Motivation:** When students feel like they're part of a supportive group, their engagement increases. The use of social media, peer challenges, and workshops created a feedback loop of positivity and progress.
3. **Flexibility Fosters Sustainability:** Instead of rigid schedules, the initiative offered adaptable plans that students could tailor to their lifestyles. This encouraged long-term adoption rather than short-term burnout.
4. **Peer-Led Initiatives Work:** Students are more likely to listen to and learn from their peers. The casual tone, student-led demos, and approachable content built trust and lowered participation barriers.
5. **Data-Informed Planning Matters:** The initiative's foundation in surveys and feedback allowed it to evolve responsively, maintaining relevance and buy-in.

Additional Background and Motivation

The need for structured wellness programming on college campuses is further supported by national trends. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), young adults aged 18–24 report the lowest levels of physical activity and the highest increases in sedentary behavior over the last decade. Simultaneously, mental health challenges among college students have reached crisis levels. The rise of anxiety, depression, and burnout is well-documented, with many experts linking these conditions to sleep deprivation, poor diet, and lack of exercise.

Cultural factors also contribute to the problem. Fitness and wellness industries frequently market unrealistic body standards, often alienating students who do not fit those ideals. When campus wellness programs replicate these messages—focusing on aesthetics over function, or competition over collaboration—they risk further disengaging students who already feel excluded. The *College Fitness & Wellness Initiative* sought to disrupt this pattern by creating a judgment-free zone that celebrated all bodies, all experiences, and all efforts, no matter how small.

Expanded Engagement and Community Building

Another creative strategy used during this phase was “Theme Weeks.” Each week of the initiative had a specific focus—such as “Mindful Movement Week” or “Protein Power Week”—with curated content and challenges related to that theme. This allowed students to explore various dimensions of wellness in a structured yet exciting way. For example, during “Stress Less Week,” daily breathing exercises were posted, and a virtual meditation session was held featuring a guest speaker from the Counseling Center.

The initiative also made a conscious effort to include underrepresented voices. A spotlight series featured students from different majors, cultural backgrounds, and fitness levels sharing their wellness journeys. By highlighting diversity, the program helped dismantle the idea that fitness

looks or feels the same for everyone. For many participants, this representation was empowering and validating, encouraging continued engagement and self-compassion.

Expanded Reflections and Broader Implications

One of the most valuable long-term implications of this initiative is its potential for institutional adoption. While student-led programs are agile and relatable, their sustainability often depends on administrative support. By demonstrating measurable outcomes and compiling a comprehensive final report, the *College Fitness & Wellness Initiative* positioned itself as a candidate for integration into university wellness frameworks.

Moreover, this initiative presents an opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration. Academic departments such as Kinesiology, Public Health, and Information Sciences could all contribute to future iterations whether through research, technology integration, or curricular alignment. Imagine a wellness app co-developed by students and faculty, or a freshman seminar focused on building healthy habits.

Finally, this initiative shows that wellness programming can serve as a model for equity and inclusion. By centering accessibility and prioritizing empathy, it laid the groundwork for future programs that challenge ableism, fatphobia, gender norms, and other systemic barriers to health. A truly inclusive wellness culture does not ask students to change who they are; it adapts to meet them as they are. Additional Justification Through Literature and Best Practices.

The effectiveness of wellness interventions depends not only on student motivation but also on evidence-based program design. Research in public health emphasizes that behavior change is most successful when it is supported by environmental cues, peer influence, and low-barrier access to resources (Glanz et al., 2015). The *College Fitness & Wellness Initiative* followed these best practices by embedding wellness messaging into existing student routines and social networks. For example, a 2020 study by the Journal of American College Health found that students were significantly more likely to complete a fitness program when they received daily digital reminders and participated in a community-based challenge. Similarly, the American Council on Exercise (ACE) notes that early exposure to consistent, moderate activity is more predictive of long-term adherence than high-intensity routines.

By aligning the initiative with these insights—offering flexibility, community engagement, and low-pressure options—the program increased its chances of making a lasting impact. Unlike rigid top-down wellness efforts, this initiative empowered students to take ownership of their routines, which is a core principle of successful health education.

Expanded Conclusion:

Institutionalizing Wellness for the Long Term While the College Fitness & Wellness Initiative was designed as a 10-week project, its success signals the need for permanent, integrated wellness structures within the university ecosystem. Wellness should not exist in a silo; it should be embedded into academic advising, student affairs, housing, and even the classroom.

Imagine if professors opened each lecture with a 60-second guided breathing exercise or offered optional walking office hours. Consider if fitness credits were included as electives in all majors, or if wellness-themed residence halls became the norm. These small shifts would normalize self-care and encourage a culture of health without sacrificing academic rigor. At the national level, this initiative could serve as a model for how student-led innovation can solve complex problems. Rather than waiting for top-down policies, students can and should drive change. Colleges that empower students to lead wellness programming not only improve health outcomes but also cultivate leadership, empathy, and resilience.

Ultimately, wellness should not be treated as a luxury for those with free time and disposable income. It is a foundational human need. When institutions recognize this and act accordingly, they don't just support healthier students they create healthier campuses and, by extension, healthier communities.

Conclusion

College students deserve more than a list of services—they need wellness systems that speak to their lives. The *College Fitness & Wellness Initiative* was a blueprint for what is possible when empathy, evidence, and engagement converge. Over 10 weeks, it helped students discover that health isn't about perfection it's about persistence, progress, and support.

As universities continue to prioritize mental health and retention, programs like this should be embraced and expanded. With minimal funding, creative outreach, and student leadership, campuses can transform wellness from an afterthought into a cornerstone of student success.

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