

Cultivating Campus Settings Research at a Health Promoting University

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Abstract

Higher education plays a crucial role in promoting health and wellbeing through a settings approach (Dooris, 2001). The Okanagan Charter, a leading framework, calls on institutions to embed health into all aspects of campus culture and lead local and global health promotion efforts (IHPCN, 2015). This paper explores one example of how the Okanagan Charter's Calls to Action can be integrated within academic settings. The study examines an Honors Thesis Seminar designed to align with these Calls at an institution that has adopted the Okanagan Charter. The seminar engages students from diverse disciplines to explore the impact of campus settings on student health and wellbeing through seminar discussions, collaborative space studies, and original research projects. Drawing from coursework over three academic years, the paper evaluates how the seminar fosters cross-sector partnerships and advances research agendas with real-world relevance, while training students to become future health-promoting change agents beyond campus. It also suggests opportunities for future data collection to assess curricular outcomes. Finally, the research highlights the importance of teaching health and built environment topics across disciplines to create more vibrant, inclusive, and health-promoting spaces.

Introduction

The interconnectedness of health, equity, and wellbeing across people, places, and the planet has gained increasing recognition. Health is deeply embedded within socioecological systems, and its promotion requires a collaborative, multi-sectoral approach beyond the healthcare sector alone. A settings-based approach has emerged to address these complexities through “whole systems” thinking, empowerment, advocacy, and action (WHO, 1986, 2022). Within this context, higher education institutions have a unique and pivotal role due to their broad influence on both campus populations and surrounding communities (Dooris, 2001).

This holistic perspective has inspired the development of healthy campus frameworks, which have been implemented in various forms (Dooris et al., 2020; Suárez-Reyes et al., 2019; Travia et al., 2022). One of the most integrative frameworks adopted in the North American context is the Okanagan Charter. The Charter comprises two primary Calls to Action: first, “to embed health into all aspects of campus culture, across the administration, operations and academic mandates,” and second, “to lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally” (IHPCN, 2015).

This paper examines an Honors Thesis Seminar designed in alignment with these Calls to Action at an institution that has adopted the Okanagan Charter. The seminar enables students from diverse majors to explore how campus settings impact student health and well-being through structured seminar discussions, collaborative campus space studies, and the development of original research projects. Drawing on coursework from three consecutive academic years, the paper explores how effectively each component of this interdisciplinary seminar fosters health-promoting knowledge, action, and the development of future “change

agents.” Additionally, the discussion highlights opportunities for future data collection to assess curricular outcomes and considers how this methodology can be adapted in varied educational contexts.

Health Promoting Universities

The global movement towards “Health Promoting Universities (HPUs)” stems from the settings-based approach to health and wellbeing outlined in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. The Charter asserts that “health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love” (WHO, 1986). It further emphasizes that health arises from caring for oneself and others, making health-related decisions, and ensuring societal conditions enable all members to achieve health (WHO, 1986). Building on these principles and other initiatives, such as the WHO’s “Healthy Cities” agenda (Tsouros, 2015), this approach has been extended to higher education, recognizing the sector’s unique capacity to drive societal change. Universities play a vital leadership role by educating students, generating knowledge, fostering dialogue, and influencing decision-makers (*The Edmonton Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Institutions of Higher Education*, 2005).

The Okanagan Charter builds on these global commitments and definitions (IHPCN, 2015). Developed through a wide ranging participatory process engaging researchers, practitioners, administrators, students and policy makers, the Charter provides institutions with “a common vision, language, principles, and calls to action to become health and wellbeing promoting campuses” (*U.S. Health Promoting Campuses Network*, n.d.) By the end of 2024, thirty-two institutional members of the U.S. Health Promoting Campuses Network (USHPCN) had adopted the Okanagan Charter; the International Health Promoting Campuses Network (IHPCN) had grown to comprise fifteen national and regional networks spanning six continents (*Network — IHPCN*, n.d.; *U.S. Health Promoting Campuses Network*, n.d.)

Okanagan Charter: Calls to Action

The Okanagan Charter presents two core Calls to Action each supported by frameworks that outline key action areas to help institutions set priorities and implement initiatives within higher education settings (IHPCN, 2015). The first Call to Action directs institutions to “embed health into all aspects of campus culture, across the administration, operations, and academic mandates” (p. 3). This goal is supported by five key action areas: integrating health into campus policies, fostering healthy and supportive environments, cultivating a culture of care and wellbeing, promoting personal development among community members, and reorganizing campus services to align with these priorities (p. 7). The second Call to Action focuses on broader engagement, charging institutions to “lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally” (p. 3). This mandate emphasizes three action areas more closely tied to the academic mission: integrating health, wellbeing, and sustainability into curricula to develop future change agents; advancing multidisciplinary research agendas with real-world applications; and fostering effective partnerships both within and beyond campus communities (p. 8).

Health Promoting Campus Implementation

Frameworks for activating the Health Promoting University concept, including the Okanagan Charter, have inspired diverse policies, processes, and initiatives (Travia et al., 2022). However, translating these frameworks into actionable strategies within the complex structures of postsecondary institutions has been varied. Research indicates that administrative efforts have achieved some success in bridging previously disconnected agendas, such as sustainability and health, and fostering collaboration across siloed systems, including facilities, support services, and academics (Dooris et al., 2020).

During initial adoption, key priorities include securing administrative buy-in, coordinating across institutional systems, obtaining funding, and participating in knowledge-sharing networks (Dooris et al., 2020; Suárez-Reyes et al., 2019). Beyond these administrative efforts, the implementation of specific actions is highly varied. A survey of leaders at 54 universities across 25 countries found that the most frequently addressed areas were skill development to improve health and wellbeing, support for health promotion research, and healthy policy development. Less emphasis was placed on creating healthy learning and work environments, fostering partnerships, and integrating health across the curriculum (Suárez-Reyes et al., 2019).

A review of recent USHPCN (2023, 2024) and IPCHN (2019, 2022) conferences further highlights the focus on knowledge sharing relating to adopting the charter, refining policies and systems, and conducting initial evaluations. Less is known about curricular efforts, especially cross-disciplinary coursework implemented outside health-focused fields. As the “wholesystems” approach to Charter adoption continues to mature, broader integration of such curricular initiatives is expected to emerge.

Method: Interdisciplinary Honors Thesis Seminar

As Okanagan Charter implementation spurs curricular innovation, the Interdisciplinary Honors Thesis Seminar, *Student Health, Wellbeing, and Campus Spaces*, provides one example of how student-led research-focused coursework can align with the Charter’s Calls to Action. This two-semester course engages students from diverse academic disciplines in exploring the intersection of health, wellbeing, and the built environment, with an emphasis on campus settings.

The course comprises three major components: a topical seminar, a collaborative campus space study, and the development of an original thesis research project. In the first half of the course, the topical seminar introduces a shared vocabulary and foundational concepts about the built environment’s impact on human experience, particularly student populations. Readings include scholarly articles, book chapters, and documents of practice such as global sustainability frameworks and campus health initiatives. Seminar discussions bridge academic theories and practical applications, encouraging students to contribute resources from their own fields while refining ideas for their thesis projects. Early assignments challenge students to analyse how various entities define, assess, and evaluate wellbeing in the built environment, helping them develop a nuanced understanding of the relationship between health, wellbeing, and campus spaces.

8th Fábos Conference on Landscape and Greenway Planning

The course, offered annually since 2022-23, has evolved based on student feedback and faculty assessments. Each iteration builds on the seminar's foundation to support two core research efforts: a collaborative campus space study and individual thesis projects (Figure 1). These components are examined with respect to how they address the Okanagan Charter's Calls to Action:

- **Call 2.1:** Does the course prepare future citizens to act as agents for health-promoting change beyond campuses?
- **Call 2.2:** Does the course contribute to health-promoting knowledge production that advances multidisciplinary research agendas with real-world relevance?
- **Call 2.2:** Does the course provide training, teaching, and knowledge exchange to benefit the future wellbeing of communities, societies, and the planet?
- **Call 2.3:** Does the course foster relationships and collaborations on and off campus?

This structured approach demonstrates the potential for interdisciplinary coursework to operationalize the Okanagan Charter's principles within higher education.



Figure 1: Course structure with Campus Space Study details shown

Campus Space Study

During the fall semester, students receive training in research methods and ethics, including CITI certification for Human Subjects Research. These foundational trainings prepare students for the Campus Space Study and ensure compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for subsequent thesis projects. Each year, campus and design partners collaborate with the course to help define research questions exploring how campus spaces contribute to student health and wellbeing.

Student research teams employ systematic observational methods to investigate the selected spaces. These methods are adapted from established frameworks, such as the Gehl Public Life Tools and the Toolkit for the Ethnographic Study of Space (TESS) (Gehl Institute, n.d.; Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Low et al., 2019). Designed for practical application, these tools enable students to collect data over a three-week period, encompassing physical, social, and intangible aspects

of public spaces. The data collection process fosters engaging discussions on systematic methods, data analysis, and interpretation, which shape students' thesis topics and research approaches. Additionally, ongoing dialogues with research partners provide valuable feedback and inform future campus space design and planning efforts. During the first three years, studies have focused on a Dining Hall a newly renovated Student Union, and Residential Tower Lounges (Figure 1).

For the Student Union Space Study, the project team investigated how the renovated building, reopened during the pandemic, was meeting the needs of a re-adjusting student population. In consultation with the project architect and the Student Union director, the team focused on key questions about the functionality and performance of the building's main public spaces. Observations and survey data collected over two years revealed that the building effectively fulfills its objective as the campus "living room." Participants rated the space as welcoming and inclusive and significantly better than other campus public spaces in contributing to their wellbeing. However, more detailed findings highlighted opportunities for improvement. For instance, students found the building more suitable for social activities, such as collaborative work, than for solitary tasks like studying. This disparity was partly attributed to furniture arrangements. The study also provided broader insights into designing post-pandemic campus environments. Recommendations included creating a greater variety of student workspaces across campus and tailoring furniture layouts to accommodate diverse needs.

The Residential Lounge Space Study, focused on a recent renovation of one lounge, provided valuable insights for future lounge renovations. In collaboration with Residential Life staff, the research team examined the activity and use patterns of various new spaces, including a large common area, a communal kitchen, and several small study rooms. The findings show that the renovation successfully caters to a diverse range of students and activities, while also creating welcoming and functional spaces within the brutalist tower complex. Participants rated the renovated floor as comfortable, accessible, lively, and inclusive. Most students visited multiple times per week, spending several hours at a time. The space was highly rated for both group and individual studying, as well as for socializing with friends. Survey respondents specifically highlighted the space's contribution to their social wellbeing, noting it as an ideal place to meet new people. The renovated lounge was also praised for its productivity benefits, with students appreciating the private study rooms and comfortable furniture, which help them stay focused. Overall, students valued the variety of areas and furnishings that provided choice and a sense of agency, while the design itself contributed to a relaxing, mood-boosting atmosphere. However, some recommendations were made to better meet student needs, including improved soundproofing and the convenience of reserving study spaces.

Evidence that this course component responds to the Calls to Action comes from research partner correspondence and student reflections collected through a post-study assignment. Testimony from practitioners highlights how the campus space studies fosters supportive research collaborations and contributes to research agendas that align with real world outcomes. Partners have emphasized the data gathered substantiates the role of these spaces in student wellbeing and strengthens their ability to advocate for such investments. They noted that systematic data collection is advancing understanding of how these spaces are used and their impact on various aspects of student wellbeing. Additionally, partners indicated that the study data positions them for more focused future research, aiming to better understand which campus populations' needs are being met and where improvements are needed. Finally, practitioners

stressed the importance of having data to evaluate whether projects are meeting their original goals, as this is crucial for informing future campus development initiatives.

Student reflections highlight how participating in campus space research not only benefits campus wellbeing but also equips students with valuable skills to become future change agents. In their project reflections, nearly all students noted the new and often surprising insights they gained throughout the process. They emphasized that the systematic research practices they learned would be useful for future research projects, including their theses. Additionally, even when they thought they were familiar with the campus space being studied, students found that data collection and analysis expanded their understanding of the accessibility, uses, meanings, and value of these spaces. They developed a deeper appreciation for how meeting spatial needs can support communities. Specifically, students recognized how design influences behavior and interactions within spaces and noted that the experience helped them bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Honors Thesis Research Projects

Through the topical seminar, campus space study, and associated workshops, students gain an understanding of the research and formulation process, initiate research aligned with their specific interests, and spend the remainder of the year conducting original research projects that culminate in a final substantive project. In the first three years of this course, students from eighteen different majors across eight colleges have pursued twenty-four individual theses (Figure 3). This diversity in academic backgrounds contributes to a rich, multidisciplinary intellectual environment.

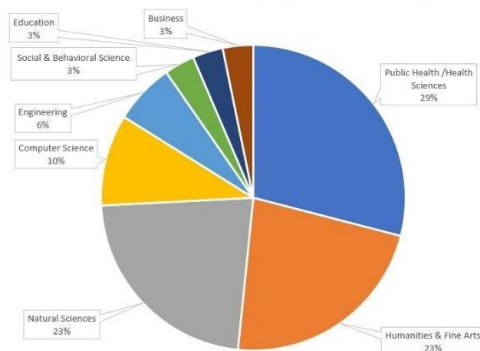


Figure 3: Thesis Student Representation by College

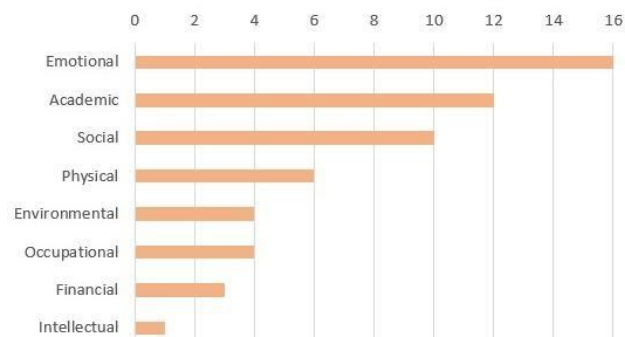


Figure 4: Wellbeing Domains Investigated

Students' individual theses utilized eleven different primary research methods to explore a wide range of topics, populations, and environments, addressing eight distinct domains of wellbeing (*BeWell@UMass*, 2023). (Figure 4). The majority of research projects focus on the health and wellbeing of undergraduate student populations, including those who identify as disabled (2), low income (2), neurodivergent (1), or living with chronic illnesses (1). A few projects have also considered graduate students (1) and professionals (3). Projects have examined the role of residence halls in student wellbeing (5), explored classrooms and other learning spaces (5), considered dining services (2), and investigated the role of outdoor campus spaces and infrastructures (6). While not all research projects are framed in collaboration with campus partners, several have directly addressed issues identified by Residential Life, Student Affairs, RecWell, and Dining Services. Others have highlighted implications for Campus Planning, Disability Services, and specific programs and departments.

Several thesis projects align with the themes of the Fabos conference. For example, one study used focus groups to explore birding as a "stealth health" technique for addressing mental health challenges in college-aged populations. This research highlights birding's potential to promote social wellbeing, improve mental health, and increase physical activity among students. The findings suggest implications for academic offerings and emphasize the importance of protecting campus landscapes that provide bird habitats (Dresser, 2024). Another study applied an Attention Restoration Framework (ART) and employed photo elicitation methodology to examine how campus environments contribute to restoration, as outlined in the ART framework. The study found that students were particularly drawn to green and blue outdoor spaces with distant views and a high diversity of plant and animal life. The findings have implications for the campus master plan, which were discussed in the thesis (Hannon, 2023). Further, several students have employed comparative case study methodology to test how crosspollinating existing frameworks may create more robust methods for considering human and planetary health. For instance, one student analysed cases of outdoor space use during the Covid-19 pandemic, examining the co-benefits for human and climate health to identify patterns for optimistic and adaptive interventions (Hamilton, 2023).

Evidence that this course component addresses the Calls to Action is supported by the crossdisciplinary nature of the seminar environment and the diverse topics explored. Research partner correspondence, along with a review of the implication sections in students' thesis documents, shows that the course is advancing research agendas with real-world implications. Additionally, student reflections, captured in correspondence and course evaluations, suggest that the course effectively trains students to become health-promoting agents in their postgraduate lives beyond campus.

Discussion and Limitations

The Interdisciplinary Honors Thesis Seminar, *Student Health, Wellbeing, and Campus Spaces*, is testing a pedagogical model for creating academic opportunities in alignment with the Okanagan Charter's Calls to Action. The seminar format, campus space studies, and cohortbased thesis process provide examples of curricular efforts to integrate health, wellbeing, and sustainability into interdisciplinary academic settings. These efforts also aim to foster crosssector partnerships (Call 2.3) and advance research agendas with real-world relevance (Call 2.2), while training students to become future health-promoting change agents beyond campus (Call 2.1). As such, elements of the course structure may be adaptable to various other interdisciplinary academic contexts and curricula.

While emerging evidence suggests that the course aligns with and responds to the Okanagan Charter's Calls to Action, limitations in the data must be addressed to enable a more comprehensive evaluation. For example, although students currently complete structured reflections at the end of their collaborative campus space studies, they are not yet surveyed at the conclusion of their thesis research on questions directly related to the Okanagan Charter Calls, due to the diversity of thesis topics. Additionally, while campus partners have provided feedback on the value of the campus space studies and the theses addressing their professional domains, this feedback could be collected in a more structured manner in the future. Over a longer time span, campus professionals could also be surveyed about the impact of this research on influencing campus actions.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Okanagan Charter is enriched by practical knowledge-sharing from diverse institutional contexts. This research explores how to fulfil the academic mandate of the Okanagan Charter by fostering original research focused on campus settings and educating graduates who can advocate for health-promoting built environments. Additionally, it examines how to demystify the teaching of built environment and health-promoting topics to students from various disciplines, aiming to harness a broad range of intelligences to create more vibrant, inclusive, and health-promoting spaces.

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