

## **Open Letter to WIU Instructors and Administrators:**

### **Homework and Mental Health at WIU**

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In these (post?)-pandemic times, our attention is drawn more and more to mental health issues that arose or were intensified by the pandemic. Hence it is more important than ever to address matters that may influence students' mental health. Homework is one thing that needs to be discussed, as it has a significant impact on students' mental health. Homework is one of those things that has been around for so long, in pretty much every educational institution, that it is easy to just forget about its purpose and even not think about it at all. People in general, even students, never really take time to think about what homework is all about, if it is effective or not, and how affects students' academic performance and their overall mental health. As stated by Lisa Mangione (special education teacher at Sweet Home Middle School in Amherst, N. Y, and a fellow of the Western New York Writing Project) in her article about homework, more work doesn't necessarily mean more learning: "While the debate over homework isn't new, it has resurfaced with some recent findings that there is a negative correlation between the time spent on homework and student achievement. In other words, there is a point of diminishing returns" (615). What is the point then? In this paper I will argue that the amount of homework a student gets can significantly influence their mental health without necessarily improving learning, and therefore WIU instructors should

work harder to come up with more efficient kinds of homework that will actually improve students' performance in the class without stressing them excessively.

I must talk a little bit about my personal experience with homework because this was what drove me to research this matter. From day one as a freshman here at WIU, I felt that it was going to be very hard for me to handle the school workload. As a music major, you don't get to just go home and chill after classes – and maybe get some homework done. You're supposed to practice your instrument, and in fact this is the most important thing you should do as a performance major. You also have rehearsals of ensembles that don't really count as regular school work (you don't get credit for it) and on top of that (at least in my case), on-campus employment to pay the bills. It is no easy task to juggle all that in your freshman year, and it certainly affected my mental health. It is not a good feeling when you get home after a long day of classes, rehearsals, and practice and have to stay up till midnight doing homework, knowing that tomorrow you have to wake up early again. But the worst part isn't just the work itself, it is the feeling that you're not benefiting from it. You go through all the trouble of getting these things done for the sake of your grades, but in the end you didn't learn much. Talking to other music majors, and other freshmen with different majors, I realized that I was not the only one that felt this way about school work. Many of them seemed highly stressed out and couldn't see the point of doing all this work when you're not really learning the content. With that in mind, I think instructors should be aware of this situation, and then come up with ways to help students learn better and stress less.

One of the issues with homework is that teachers, in general, do not get enough training on this matter. The importance of assigning proper school work is underestimated by instructors and schools, and that leads to inefficient assignments. The education specialist Natalie Wexler very accurately points out in her article for the

Forbes Magazine: “And most have gotten little training in how and why to assign homework. These are things that schools of education and teacher-prep programs typically don’t teach. So it’s quite possible that much of the homework teachers assign just isn’t particularly effective for many students.” It is truly concerning that instructors are not given proper training on how to assign homework. And in the end of the day, the students are the ones that have to deal with the consequences of this inadequacy. And sometimes these consequences can be very serious and cause mental health problems. Another issue observed by Mangione, is that more often than not teachers will focus on process over product, because that is the way they were taught how to do things. In other words, they will assign homework because it is the “right” way to learn, it is what they were taught to do, and that is why they will do it, and not for the sake of the actual learning outcomes (614). I conducted an online survey with seven questions on how homework is affecting students’ mental health at WIU. I got 17 answers from WIU students who attend English180 class – considering that this is a general education class, there are students from various majors attending it, providing the survey with a diverse student population. Some of the answers I got on this survey were quite disturbing. For the question “Would you say that the homework load harms your mental health?” On a scale from one (no negative effect) to five (extreme negative effect), 17.6% of students responded with 5; 29.4% answered 4, and 35.3 % chose 3. It means that 82.3 % of students think that homework has a more than mild negative effect on their mental health. 0% of students answered with a 1, meaning that 100% of them felt that there was some negative effect. Another question was: “Do you think that reducing the homework load would improve your academic performance by leaving you more free time to study as well as improving your mental health?” On a scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), 47.1% of students (8 out of 17) responded

with 5. Only one person (5.9%) responded with 1, which means that most students think that reducing the workload would be beneficial to them. Students already have a lot on their plate in terms of stress – paying tuition, living away from their families, the political instabilities of our times, and on top of that COVID 19. Schoolwork should not be such a big part of it.

This is not a simple issue and obviously cannot have a simple and universal solution that would work for everyone and every class. Different people have different ways of learning, and different classes require different approaches. What I would propose is for the instructors to put some thought into the work they assign to their students, instead of simply following guidelines or imitating other instructors.

Another way to dissipate the stress caused by schoolwork would be to make it optional. After all, the purpose of the class is for you to learn. If you don't feel that you need to do long homework assignments to learn, why bother? If you're able to grasp the content just by attending class and reading the material, good for you! If you're not, then you're free to do your homework and see if that helps or not. College students are grown-ups after all. If they feel that they need to get some work done in order to learn better, they will do that. Instructors often do not trust students' autonomy, and I believe that is why homework is graded.

I am not an education specialist, and I cannot tell what is the best way to assign schoolwork and dealing with this problem. What I can say is this: professors need to be understanding and flexible instead of just going through the motions and doing what is easier and more convenient for them. It is their job to figure this out, or at least try to.

Treating each student as a different individual with distinct ways of learning would go a long way toward solving this problem. As stated by Mangione "Regardless

of the assignment I can ask my colleagues: What is the curricular goal? What is it you want them to know and understand? If the goal is to demonstrate an understanding of the reasons why immigrants came to America, then *how* that understanding is assessed can take a myriad of forms” (614). There are as many ways to learn as there are different individuals out there. Assessing students’ learning in a more efficient way would require research, trial and error, and more work on the instructors’ end, but as a student who is currently struggling with mental health issues and schoolwork, I guarantee it will be worth it.

#### Works Cited

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