



REVIEW ARTICLES

Incorporating Nature Into Human Services Education Programs

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Capsule Statement: As institutions of higher education seek innovative responses to rising mental health challenges faced by students, initiatives at Guttman Community College join a growing body of scholarship that shows nature-based interventions as a powerful tool in supporting human services students.

Student mental health is often a top priority for human services programs given the unique pressures students face when managing the dual responsibilities of coursework and direct client engagement during their practicum placements (Spector & Reynoso, 2024). Supporting students as they develop strategies for self-care is a requirement for human services programs seeking accreditation at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Council for Standards in Human Services Education, 2025). Beyond traditional student-focused efforts such as curricular integration of self-care workshops, online modules, and collaboration with campus wellness services (Spector & Reynoso, 2024), a growing body of scholarship also highlights nature-based experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, as an exercise that mollifies stress and anxiety for undergraduates (Kras et al., 2025; Krigstin et al., 2023; Rakow & Ibes, 2022).

Nature Experiences

The Biophilia Hypothesis, as well as the field of ecopsychology strongly emphasize the importance of the human-nature connection for overall well-being and are supported by numerous studies showing the mental health benefits of spending time outdoors (Meredith et al., 2020; Rakow & Eells, 2019; Roszak, 2001; Wilson, 1986). Rooted in the belief of the human-nature relationship, nature-based learning (NBL) provides college students with experiential learning opportunities to connect with nature while supporting both overall well-being and learning outcomes (Jordan & Chawla, 2019). While there has been extensive research on the multiple benefits of NBL with early childhood through high school populations, there is a call for a deeper exploration on the benefits of NBL in higher education (Jordan & Chawla, 2019; Kras et al., 2025; Krigstin et al., 2023). Initial studies with undergraduate students have shown promising benefits such as enjoyment, increased engagement in the lesson, and improved well-being (Kras et al., 2025; Krigstin et al., 2023; McCartan et al., 2023). The field of social work has increasingly prioritized the integration of nature-based interventions into

both clinical practice and undergraduate curricula (Lorenzo et al., 2025; Ouedraogo, 2024; Palmer, 2025). It is vital that the field of human services join the conversation on how the offering of nature-based experiences can support students, while enhancing the curricula and client care.

Nature-based Experiences in a Human Services Undergraduate Program

An example of how NBL has been implemented for human services students at one community college is a culminating assignment in a special topics course focusing on holistic approaches to human services across the lifespan that requires students to explore the benefits of spending time in nature not only for themselves, but also for their clients. Students read peer-reviewed studies on the mental health benefits of spending time in nature and participate in class discussions on various nature-based interventions such as animal and horticultural therapy. As part of a culminating assignment, students are asked to spend a minimum of one hour in a natural setting where they engage in mindful observation including note taking and a minimum of five photographs that highlight their experience. Once completed, students reflect on their experience and its impact on their well-being and how it can be incorporated into their work with clients in either a written (two to three pages) or audio (10 -15 minutes) format. Reflection questions are organized into five categories including description of the experience, mindfulness practice, connection to nature, photographic analysis, and client connections. The assignment module spans over three weeks and the final submission is assessed by a standardized rubric.¹

In addition to course-based assignments, NBL at Guttman extends into co-curricular and practicum-linked experiences that support human services students' professional development. Faculty collaborate with campus partners to design nature-based activities that reinforce both student well-being and applied learning (Kras et al., 2025). For example, students enrolled in a practicum course participated in a guided visit to a local farmer's market in New York City, where they learned about food deserts and urban agriculture, and discussed the health implications of access to fresh produce. Students learned how they, as human services professionals, can support and educate their clients in using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to purchase fresh food. This project directly linked a NBL experience to client advocacy.

Another example was a workshop offered to all human services students presented by New York Therapy Animals that described how animal-assisted therapy supports individuals in a variety of settings including hospitals, school, libraries, and nursing homes. Students had the opportunity to engage in role playing scenarios, interact with therapy dogs, and learned the

¹ Additional information about this assignment can be found at <https://greenguttman.commons.gc.cuny.edu/kras-special-topics-in-human-services-holistic-approaches-in-human-services-across-the-lifespan/>

therapeutic aspect of client-animal interactions (Kras, 2021). This workshop supported the program learning outcome of introducing students to human services-related fields.

Recommendations

Building on evidence that NBL supports student engagement, well-being, and enjoyment of learning, the following recommendations highlight feasible strategies for implementation in human services programs. There are multiple ways to integrate NBL into course and program design without requiring extensive resources. Faculty can incorporate natural elements into the classrooms when feasible and make use of campus areas with natural light and fresh air. Students can be encouraged to take brief mindfulness breaks that include nature sounds, a sensory walk outdoors, or guided nature meditation. Class can be held outdoors, or students can be given the opportunity to complete in-class assignments in campus green spaces such as a community garden. Faculty can share the benefits of spending time in nature for students and their future clients by assigning readings on nature-based interventions and ecotherapy. Practicum coordinators can further support this work by cultivating partnerships with internship sites that provide nature-based interventions for their clients.

Conclusion

Preparing human services students to engage with nature-based interventions requires both an understanding of their value and opportunities to practice integrating nature into their personal and professional lives. Providing students with nature-based experiences can enhance their learning, their mental health, and the lives of the clients they support.

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