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The Well-being Imperative: Integrating Health into Spanish and Portuguese Studies



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During the Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention in January 2025 in New Orleans, Louisiana, Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Studies scholars gathered to hear four presentations on topics in health and well-being in contexts where Portuguese and Spanish are spoken. Victoria Louise Ketz, Boris Yelin, Amy Elisabeth Wright, and Alejandro E. Latinez presented papers on a variety of topics, including a critical literary analysis of illness, the implementation of project-based assessments to explore themes of health and well-being in an undergraduate Portuguese class, an exploration of illness as a superpower in a television series, and a study on written disease narrative in the search for understanding and identity. Due to the great interest from the MLA session, the *Hispania* editorial staff and I decided to open a call for papers on these important topics, which produced this special feature.

The past few years have brought into stark relief the need for higher education to respond with greater intentionality to the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of our students, our colleagues, and our neighbors in our communities. For those of us dedicated to the teaching of Spanish and Portuguese, this is not merely a tangential concern; it is a profound opportunity to enrich our pedagogy, deepen our scholarly inquiry, and align our work more closely with the lived human experience. The success, well-being, and fulfillment of our students depend on “creating living and learning environments characterized by both compassion and challenge” (Cavanagh xiv–xv). As our students navigate an increasingly complex world, a holistic approach to languages and cultures—one that explicitly addresses themes of health, wellness, and self-care—is no longer a pedagogical luxury but a fundamental responsibility. Let us fully embrace the potential of our disciplines to be at the heart of this critical conversation.

My introduction serves as a guide to a special feature designed to ignite conversations within our professional communities of practice as educators, learners, and citizens. As the guiding theme of this feature, health and well-being in Spanish and Portuguese studies refers to a multilayered, dynamic, and often complementary set of realities. First and foremost, the communities of which we are a part, including university campuses, classrooms, and our cities and towns, must prioritize the continued nurturing of a culture of mutual care. Cultural texts—literature, film, media—that offer themes of well-being, health, illness, or disorder are ideal contexts through which students might better understand the human experience. Spanish and Portuguese university classes focusing on guiding students to develop knowledge and essential skills in areas of clinical care, health communication, medical ethics, and social justice offer a venue for advancing inclusion and equity in communities. Higher education institutions are communities of care. The sustained efforts to advance the well-being of students and colleagues as well as the curriculum and coursework in fields of compassionate health and medicine create a multilayered opportunity for us to strengthen and deepen our commitment to cultivating communities of mutual aid and compassion. This is *the well-being imperative*, the title of this

introduction, that is fundamental to the comprehensive approach to integrating health and well-being into our communities with care, compassion, and inclusive practices.

The feature includes an article by Victoria Ketz, which details the incorporation of just a few moments of mindfulness practices (in the target language) into several Advanced Spanish classes. Overall, students in these classes reported that the mindfulness practices produced positive benefits and enhanced overall wellness for them. And, as Ketz describes, “[t]he stressless pre-activation of the target language helped future discussions” in the classes. The feature presents pedagogical approaches that shift our attention from “what we teach” to “how we teach it,” showcasing practical strategies for designing courses and classroom activities that promote empathy and a healthy learning environment. Debra J. Ochoa offers a compelling analysis of two Catalan films directed by women about female middle-aged protagonists who have experienced trauma, and who, by the end of both films, reconceptualize their fulfilling futures, rejecting normative, restrictive notions of ableism. The two films, Mar Coll’s *Tots volem el millor per a ella* (2013) and Roser Aguilar’s *Brava* (2017), show that, in the context of crip futurity, healing is not about a return to an able-bodied state. Instead, healing is a process of finding wholeness, well-being, and joy while embracing one’s identity. In her article, Amy Elisabeth Wright also breaks down binaries of the Quixotesque notion of so-called sanity versus so-called mental illness in the original and remake of a cult classic Mexican soap opera, *Diana Salazar’s Strange Return* (1988–89 and 2024–25). Wright, who highlights that the mental struggles of the protagonist of the series are, in fact, strengths of resilience, identifies three health themes in the series. These include intergenerational trauma, mental health stigma and isolation, and therapy. Not only do students have the opportunity to delve deep into these themes as they watch and analyze the series, but they also develop critical thinking skills and spoken and written communication skills in Spanish. Mark Mascia also describes how he approaches health themes with cultural products. He writes about teaching three Spanish novels from the twentieth century that include characters that end their lives, noting that studying literature helps humanize and deepen understanding of science and medicine. He argues that instructors can help reduce stigma often associated with mental health and illness through leading with compassion and empathy.

Several articles in the special feature describe the development of Spanish courses based on well-being and inclusivity. Natalia Santamaria Laorden examines the important role of health humanities and narrative medicine for students in languages for specific purposes classes (LSP) and programs. In medical and health LSP contexts, students benefit greatly (academically, personally, and professionally) by prioritizing compassionate communication, intercultural competency, and social connections and mutual care. In their two articles, Marcela T. Garcés and Maureen Tobin Stanley detail the development of two Spanish for healthcare/medicine courses at their institutions. Garcés describes the social justice orientation of student learning outcomes in the intermediate Medical Spanish undergraduate course that she developed, and Tobin Stanley highlights the pillars of care, ethics, and communication in the advanced Spanish for Healthcare undergraduate course at our institution. Both articles offer roadmaps and best practices for the development of Spanish courses around themes of health, which Garcés expands on when she writes that it is the responsibility of instructors to prepare “students for careers . . . [and] also life” (emphasis added).

Alexandra López Vera elevates the need to continue to address gaps in clinical healthcare that is both culturally competent and inclusive. López Vera’s research identifies the following key action items: develop training for inclusive language use (e.g., using the pronoun “elle” in Spanish and avoiding misgendering patients) and diverse sexual health needs, expand family and relationships from outdated binary and monogamous restrictive norms, create and foster patient-centered and culturally sensitive clinical and healthcare environments. Finally, Elizabeth Scarlett pens an analysis of the medicalized fictionalized autobiographical collage in Pedro

Almodóvar's 2019 film *Dolor y gloria*. Medical discourse permeates the film not only in its interwoven themes of illness, substance abuse, addiction and recovery, stress, aging, and anxiety, but also in its visual medical imagery—the “swirling colors . . . of Rorschach tests”—and its implicit structure of the film reverting back on to itself, as Scarlett notes, “like a Möbius strip.” In the conclusion of her detailed analysis of the film, Scarlett states, “the cure is collective”—a notion worth further exploring. In what ways does the collective (e.g., sense of belonging, compassionate mutual aid) “cure” in the context of higher education?

By weaving together threads of literary, filmic, and media analysis with practical applications and innovative best practices in teaching and learning, this feature aims to be more than a collection of articles; it is an invitation to collaboration. I hope it serves as a catalyst for new research, innovative course design, and more professional dialogues anchored to health and well-being first and foremost. The task of mapping well-being and health onto what we do as educators of Spanish and Portuguese is a vital and ongoing one. The well-being imperative calls on us to look beyond the traditional confines of our syllabi and to consider how our scholarship and teaching can contribute meaningfully to the health and vitality of our students, our colleagues, and the communities where we study and live.

WORK CITED

Cavanagh, Sarah Rose. (2023). *Mind Over Monsters: Supporting Youth Mental Health with Compassionate Challenge*. Beacon.