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## Nature Rx: Improving College-Student Mental Health

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## Nature Rx: Improving College-Student Mental Health

Donald A. Rakow and Gregory T. Eells (2019)  
Cornell University Press

Reviewed by Christina Brandsma, M.A.

College students would benefit from a new prescription found to increase immune function, reduce stress levels, improve mood, lower blood pressure, increase the ability to concentrate, improve sleep patterns, and improve social ties. In *Nature Rx*, Donald Rakow and Gregory Eells propose nature is that magical prescription, suggesting a potential link between college students' lack of engagement with nature and their struggling mental health. According to *Nature Rx*, institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned to improve college student mental health through a campus culture that reengages students with nature. Written by a professor from the School of Integrative Plant Science at Cornell University and the Director of Counseling and Psychological Services at Cornell University, *Nature Rx* acknowledges the ongoing crisis of college student mental health, enumerates the benefits of spending time in nature, and demonstrates the advantages of Nature Rx programs on college campuses. Since its publication in 2019, college student mental health concerns have only continued to rise, and with them, this book's relevancy.

Citing research from the 2015 American Freshman Survey, the 2015 National Collegiate Health Assessment, and a 2015 supplemental survey from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, *Nature Rx* reports on the state of college student mental health. Incoming freshmen are experiencing the lowest mental health in over three decades and the rate of students seeking

mental health support has increased, on average, five times the rate of institutional growth. The authors detail various efforts colleges have employed to keep pace with the mental health crisis. Increased student to counselor ratios, improved university policies, resilience training, reframed expectations, and targeted interventions bolster a campus climate that supports mental health, but the needs continue to outpace the supports in place.

It appears colleges could use a magic pill to remedy this situation and nature may just fill that prescription. Time in nature has been found to increase immune function, reduce stress levels, improve mood, lower blood pressure, increase the ability to concentrate, improve sleep patterns, and improve social ties. From adventure experiences and multi-day forest bathing excursions to simply viewing scenes of nature, Rakow and Eells offer a wide array of nature doses. The authors compiled research from a variety of sources, both in and outside of higher education, to better understand the impact of nature on college students, including multiple international studies. To address dosage, the authors leaned on research from the University of Exeter in England to suggest light outdoor activity for a minimum of five minutes daily yields the greatest change in health outcomes.

*Nature Rx* then uses this data to mobilize readers into action on their own campuses. The following ten steps are presented as a roadmap for such action:

- Step 1: Organize a committed group.
- Step 2: Secure the support of the administration.
- Step 3: Inventory green spaces on campus.
- Step 4: Engage the students.
- Step 5: Partner with campus health services.
- Step 6: Develop an app or website.
- Step 7: Impact the academic program.
- Step 8: Develop an approach to evaluation.
- Step 9: Identify and overcome the challenges.
- Step 10: Model the behavior.

These ten steps are presented with additional research, experiential anecdotes, and practical tips for implementation. This basic structure requires tailoring to individual campuses, but to assist with this customization, case studies of four institutions are presented. The form and structure of each institution uniquely shape their nature initiatives in ways that not only bolster college students' mental health, but also

increase campus pride. The four institutions whose programs are assessed are UC Davis, University of Minnesota, the College of William and Mary, and Cornell University. The purposes of their programs range from reducing student stress and anxiety to integrating the outdoors with the academic mission of the institution. Within these programs, the initiatives are also varied and include cataloging nature activities and spaces, training healthcare workers to prescribe nature, and welcoming the community to enjoy the outdoor spaces on campus. These examples illustrate the varied forms nature programs can take.

While the evaluation of specific programs on college campuses is limited in the book, the general benefits of nature are undisputed. The authors also note that program duration must be long enough to integrate into the institutional culture before it can adequately be evaluated. *Nature Rx* never pretends nature is the singular solution to a multifaceted problem. College student mental health demands a holistic solution, but nature must play a role. Rakow and Eells present a need for increased nature engagement, compel readers to consider nature as a component in the solution, and equip higher education professionals to thoughtfully implement nature-oriented programs to foster wellbeing.

Christians working in student development should lead the charge of promoting nature engagement for all of the reasons cited in *Nature Rx* and because God's qualities have always been seen in nature: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1, NIV). If Christian colleges want to see college students improve their health, know God, and grow in His likeness, higher education professionals ought to encourage students to spend time in nature. And as is the case with all learning and discipleship, Rakow and Eells found modeled behavior by caring adults to be an effective strategy for encouraging students to spend time in nature. Practitioners across disciplines in higher education should evaluate the challenges they are seeing in their areas and institutions and consider the ways nature could be part of a prescribed solution. *Nature Rx* can serve as a catalyst and an example to follow. Read this book to motivate you to see nature as an untapped resource available to your campus and then read it again and be inspired to creatively mine nature as part of the treatment plan for various campus challenges.

***Christina Brandsma is a student care coordinator at Belmont University.***