

Too Busy to Rest: The Pause Retreat

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Abstract: The Pause Retreat was a new initiative at Southern Methodist University designed to address student stress, burnout, and overcommitment through a 24-hour off-campus experience focused on rest and wellness. Supported by a Student Affairs grant, the retreat aimed to engage 50 students but ultimately drew only a limited number of participants, revealing barriers such as scheduling conflicts and lack of financial investment. Despite low turnout, post-retreat surveys indicated meaningful growth in participants' understanding of rest and appreciation for connection and reflection. This case highlights the tension between student busyness and wellbeing efforts, offering key insights into timing, accountability, and communication for future programs. The Pause Retreat underscores the importance—and challenge—of helping students slow down in a culture that rarely allows it.

Keywords: Student wellness, retreat, wellbeing, mental health, rest, experiential learning, student success, higher education programs, student Engagement

Context/Background

Like many of their peers across the nation, students at our mid-sized university are ambitious, high-achieving, and overscheduled. In this hyper-focused environment of resume building and accolades, it is rare to find a student who only has one major or hasn't participated in at least one internship before the end of their sophomore year. Our student body is encapsulated by ensuring that they do not "fall behind" their peers. While often self-imposed, they are overinvolved, stressed out, and—simply put—tired. Students often report not knowing how to rest or how to reenergize themselves amidst their busy schedules. Colleagues from the offices of Religious Life, Housing, and Wellbeing Education came together in the Fall Semester of 2024 to combat this environment of restlessness among our students by hosting a new initiative: The Pause Retreat.

Empowered both by a grant from the Division of Student Affairs and the support of the University's Wellbeing Commission, the Pause Retreat would be a free opportunity for students to explore rest and wellness in their daily lives. Students would not only learn about the different dimensions of wellness but also have the opportunity to put rest into practice in this off-site, 24-hour retreat. Unfortunately, our envisioned restful retreat weekend did not go according to plan. Despite initial student interest and ease of accessibility, our highest goals for the retreat's impact fell short for our students. Regardless of the outcomes, our team learned several valuable lessons as we continue to find the balance between meeting student needs and obtaining student buy-in while planning impactful programs.

Specifics of Case

Retreat Overview

The Pause Retreat was a new initiative to address concerns of stress, loneliness, and burnout among university students. This 24-hour retreat would take students to a local campsite in order to pause in the semester, practice rest, and learn about self-care over the Fall Break weekend in October 2024. Our team, with representatives from the offices of Religious Life, Housing, and Wellbeing Education, received a grant that would allow us to provide this retreat experience free of charge to 50 students. The retreat had four identified learning outcomes. As a result of attending the Pause Retreat, students would:

- Connect with their peers through intentional conversations and activities about rest.
- Identify different types of rest and practice resting in ways that best suit their lifestyle.
- Articulate the importance of rest and the best practices for implementing rest into their lives on-campus.
- Improve their habits and practices for rest and self-care.

To assess these learning outcomes, students would complete both pre- and post-experience surveys. We set the schedule of the retreat to include community-building moments, facilitated sessions for learning, and informal opportunities to practice rest. Below is an outline of our schedule for the retreat:

Friday	
2:00 PM	Gather in Student Center
2:30 PM	Depart Campus
4:30 PM	Arrive at Camp
5:30 PM	Dinner
7:00 PM	Kick-Off Session
8:00 PM-10:00 PM	Late Night Activities

Saturday	
7:00 AM	Yoga
8:00 AM	Breakfast
10:00 AM	Group Session
11:00 AM-3:00 PM	Free Rest Time & Lunch
3:00 PM	Closing Session
4:00 PM	Clean-up & Pack-up
4:30 PM	Depart Camp
6:30 PM	Arrive at Camp

Recruitment

During the beginning of the Fall semester, we held ample recruiting initiatives to generate interest and raise awareness including tabling during Move-In Weekend, advertising to the Parents and Families Network, and targeted recruiting to students who were struggling with rest or loneliness. We received much positive feedback from students and staff regarding this opportunity as we headed into our recruiting period. We hoped that the free cost of the experience as well as the flexibility of the Fall Break weekend would make this trip accessible to any student who wanted to attend. Students would need to fill out a short application, and spots were on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Results

The inaugural Pause Retreat had mixed results. On the one hand, we did not meet our expectations for student participation. At the end of the application period, only 18 students had applied to attend, far short of our anticipated 50 spots. This shortfall turned out even worse than expected as only 6 students attended the event—2 undergraduate students and 4 graduate students. We lost 12 participants from the experience in the 24 hours leading up to the trip. Ironically, many of these participants cited being “too busy” as their primary reason for backing out of the experience. Our team had anticipated some loss of signed up participants, but we could not have imagined losing so many all at once. Obviously, the loss of two-thirds of our participants drastically impacted our overall cost per participant due to pre-booked lodging, transportation, and meals; as such, this initiative turned out to be more costly than we had anticipated. Despite initial student interest prior to the recruitment period, our desired participation fell drastically short of expectations.

On the other hand, however, this experience met our expectations for the student impact and experience. Throughout the retreat, participants expressed their thankfulness for the intentional opportunity to create space to rest free of charge. More so, participants had ample opportunity to explore their personal rest practices and envision how they might incorporate regular rest in their daily lives. In the pre- and post-experience surveys, several themes emerged among participant responses including the following:

- **Increased Positive Evaluations in Personal Rest:** On average, participants reported higher agreement on their evaluations of rest after attending the Pause Retreat. Additionally, participants responded with more detailed definitions of rest after attending the Retreat. Participants were given the opportunity to explore types of rest and think about their personal philosophy behind rest throughout the retreat.
- **Exploring Creative Rest:** Our Free Time Rest activities on Saturday provided several opportunities for participants to practice “Creative Rest” and participants gravitated towards these types of activities. “Creative Rest” included activities and practices that involved creative expression such as painting, drawing, playing with playdough, free writing, etc. Participants were asked to list the types of rest that they currently practiced prior to attending the retreat. Afterwards, they were asked to list the types of rest that they

wanted to incorporate more after the retreat. Creative Rest had the highest increase in the Pre and Post Surveys. Prior to the retreat, 80% of participants indicated that they did not incorporate Creative Rest in their normal practice. After the retreat, 80% of participants indicated that they wanted to utilize this type of practice going forward.

- **Lack of Spiritual Rest:** “Spiritual Rest” was also included in the list of types of Rest for Participants to report on. Notably, Spiritual Rest was not selected by most participants (40%) in both the Pre and Post Surveys. What is most surprising about this data is the fact that 4 of the 6 participants were graduate students in the school of theology.
- **Rest and Connect:** In general, participants expressed two important takeaways from their experience on the Pause Retreat. First, participants appreciated the opportunity to create intentional space to rest during the semester and explore new practices. Additionally, participants noted the opportunity to connect with others while on the retreat as impactful.
- **Recommend to a Friend:** Finally, all participants indicated that they would recommend friends to attend the Pause Retreat in the future based off their experience.

While our expected participation was not met, our team believed that we met the most important learning outcomes for our students during this new experience. Offering opportunities for students to connect with one another and slow down amidst their hectic schedules remains a worthwhile goal. We strived to provide a creative way to address our students' expressed concerns over stress and busyness, but this particular experience did not engage in the breadth of impact we would have liked. The students who attended had an incredibly positive experience. The main issue of future endeavors center around the cost of offering this kind of opportunity and engaging student interest on this topic.

Reflections and Areas of Improvement

In reflection on the overall initiative, the leaders of the Pause Retreat had the following observations and areas of improvement for future retreat weekends on rest:

Participant Follow-Through

As mentioned above, we lost 12 of our 18 students who had initially signed up to attend in the 24 hours leading up to the retreat. Most students indicated not having enough time to attend as being the reason they needed to cancel. The leaders suspected a few factors at play in these circumstances:

- **Lack of Financial Commitment:** Because the retreat was free, students did not have any financial investment or incentive to follow through with their commitment. Future retreats should highly consider requiring a small registration fee at minimum to limit students backing out. Of course, special circumstances could be considered on a case-by-case basis to maintain wider accessibility for participation.

- Time of Year: The Fall Semester was originally chosen to provide an opportunity to rest during what is typically a more hectic semester for many students (Football weekends, Fraternity & Sorority Recruitment, new year activities, etc.). Counterintuitively, the busyness of the Fall semester may have limited students perceived ability to attend this kind of experience. Simply put, students may not have felt they had the time and space to attend this kind of retreat weekend given their other commitments. As such, the Spring Semester may prove to be a more worthwhile season of the year to host this kind of experience.

Retreat Finances

The lack of participant follow-through resulted in increased cost per participant; thereby, these circumstances jeopardize the sustainability of offering this retreat experience. Transportation ended up being the largest financial burden on our financial commitments. Future retreat experiences should have a smaller attendance cap until there is further student demand. Limiting participation to 20 (two 12-passenger vans) would allow for ease on transportation costs as well as flexibility in case of cancellations.

Older Students

Leaders noted that the attendees were primarily older undergraduate students or graduate students. As such, this type of experience may cater to older, more mature students rather than the wider undergraduate population. Future retreats focused on this kind of formative work might consider intertwining topics around life after graduation or rest in professional life as these themes might further interest the students who are already more likely to attend this kind of experience. Furthermore, a graduate specific opportunity may be worthwhile to consider in the future.

Marketing

Finally, we learned from anecdotal conversations with students that they saw the marketing for the retreat but were uncertain of what it was and did not ask further questions. Marketing in the future should focus on providing a more in-depth description of the experience or further opportunities for interested students to receive more information. Additionally, intentional outreach to specific groups and student organizations may provide opportunities to provide clarity.

Questions to Ponder

In addition to the reflections listed above, those considering offering retreat experiences on their campuses might consider the following questions:

- What are the unforeseen limitations to participation in the life of your university?
- How can you best balance financial commitment from students with accessibility?
- Like with our older undergraduate or graduate students, are there student populations that certain experiences better cater towards?

- How do you engage with irony of busy schedules interfering with opportunities to engage in opportunities for rest? How are your campus cultures setting up students to fail or succeed in this area?

Overall, offering this retreat was invaluable to learning how to best engage with students—albeit still disappointing. We had hoped to offer a unique opportunity for students to bond and practice resting. Despite our best efforts, we fell short of our goals. The impact on the students who attended, however, demonstrate the worthwhileness of these kinds of experiences. Our challenge in the future is to be able to offer such formative experiences while attracting and retaining the students who most need them.

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