WIP: Does this Course Need a Well-being Teaching Assistant?

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Abstract

The well-being teaching assistant (WTA) program is an intervention implemented since 2021 by a large and selective school of engineering in Latin America, in response to an increasing need to assist students facing academic and personal difficulties. WTAs are members of the teaching staff whose main tasks are (1) to actively initiate communication with students who are at risk of failing the course, (2) to identify issues with the students (3) to take action according to the type of issue that the student is facing, (4) to follow up cases, until resolution. A student followup software (SFS) is used by the WTAs to track and follow up each contacted student. The SFS also allows recording the time, length and type of each case. In previous publications, we have shown that WTAs are positively evaluated by students and we have analyzed the type of interactions between WTAs and students. In this paper, we consider a new question: *what are the conditions that determine the need for a WTA in a specific course?*. We present progress towards answering this question from the analysis of a questionnaire responded by students who had a WTA in 2024. In addition, we present the qualitative analysis of focus-group interviews with WTAs. The findings revealed a typology of courses that benefit from having a WTA. These courses are characterized as challenging, either due to their content or methodology, limited interaction with faculty, reduced accessibility or connection with students, by having a high enrolment or by being first-year courses that pose challenges related to adapting to university life. Courses with a diverse student population or at the final year of studies, which involve greater administrative needs, were also regarded as benefiting highly from having a WTAs. The study concludes with a discussion on the implications of the findings for the program and for future research.

Introduction

Mental health in higher education has gained significant relevance worldwide in recent years [1]. This interest is reflected in the formulation of educational policies as well as in the development of teaching methodologies and instructional practices [2]. Mental health has a great influence on the ability to learn [3][4]. In the case of Engineering, where high levels of stress and anxiety exist [5], it has been reported that mental health issues are usually normalized, and that these issues could be exacerbated when professors or teaching assistants do not sympathize with the burdens that students face [6].

Motivated by the need for supporting students facing difficult situations that affect learning, the School of Engineering at Pontificia Universidad Católica in Chile—a large and selective school with an enrolment of more than 800 new students annually—created the Wellbeing Teaching Assistant (WTA). WTAs are part of the academic staff, and their primary duties include: (1) establishing proactive communication with students at risk of failing the course; (2) identifying challenges they may be facing; (3) implementing appropriate actions based on the nature of the problem; and (4) following up on cases until they are resolved. Possible actions depend on the characteristics of the course and issue being faced by the student, and range from providing academic support or flexibility to providing emotional support and guiding students to contact student's health services.

Previous research [7][8] has explored and evaluated the effectiveness of the WTA program. The findings suggest that the program achieves its objectives; specifically, there is evidence in favor that WTAs are seen as proactive and providing emotional support. In addition the coverage of the program has grown, from 43 courses in 2022 to 163 courses in 2024.

In this paper, we address a question that was not considered in the previous three design cycles, namely *what conditions determine the need for a WTA in a specific course?* An answer to this question is important because it can guide decision making when expanding the program. It could also guide decision making for other engineering schools considering a similar intervention.

To address this question, we employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative components to deepen the WTAs' perspectives through focus group interviews, with quantitative components to analyze administrative records and survey data. The results highlight the key role of the faculty in creating favorable conditions for the WTAs' work. In addition, we find that courses with a more inflexible style (e.g., with more rules) may increase the need for student support and the challenges in providing it.

Methods

This study utilizes data from the second semester of 2024, during which WTAs were incorporated into 64 courses of varying nature (theoretical, practical, and large-scale courses spanning the curriculum). The research question addressed in this study was: *What are the conditions that determine the need for a WTA in a specific course?*

We used a mixed-methods approach [9] to address the research question from the perspective of students in courses with WTAs. Three different sources of information were employed: (1) the records created and updated by WTAs on a web platform where they were required to document interactions with students, identifying both the reasons for the interaction, and the actions taken; (2) a survey of students enrolled in courses that included WTAs during the second semester of 2024 (n = 468); and (3) two focus group interviews (n = 5) conducted with WTAs from different courses.

Since the administrative records consist of the presence or absence of various tags, Non-negative Matrix Factorization [10] with the 'brunet' algorithm was used to understand how different reasons for contact are related to the actions taken by WTAs. Averaging the values of each factor at the course level allowed us to examine how each factor influences the volume of WTA activity, measured as the number of interactions with students.

The survey was designed *ad hoc* to measure aspects believed to determine the effectiveness of WTA work, such as dimensions of the support provided to students (personalized academic support, emotional support, and administrative support) and perceptions of faculty involvement in the program. Using structural equation modeling [11] with the DWLS estimator, the existence of direct and indirect effects from these latent dimensions on the effectiveness of WTA work was evaluated. For model fit metrics, we used the acceptance thresholds recommended in the literature [11] [12]: RMSEA < 0.05, SRMR < 0.08, CFI > 0.95, and TLI > 0.90.

Two group interviews were conducted with a sample of five students (two students in the first interview, three in the second). These interviews allowed the identification of distinctions and categories through which members of a collective observe and understand their reality [13]. The interviews were conducted in person by a moderator and a research assistant, who took notes and recorded audio files with the informed consent of the participants. The audio files were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted following the phases described by Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules [14].

Results

An initial answer to the question of which courses might require a WTA comes from the WTAs themselves in the focus group interviews. Based on their responses, we propose a typology of courses:

Disruptive Courses: These courses deviate from average engineering courses due to their content. Due to a combination of factors; mainly related to their methodology and the advanced analytical skills they teach, they are perceived as difficult. They also include courses with a large number of restrictions established in the program (Appendix 4, Quotes (a), (b), (c), (d), and (f)).

Courses with Limited Faculty Interaction: In these courses, faculty are less accessible or less engaged with students, as illustrated by the following quote. Quotes (i), (j), and (l), in Appendix 4 also illustrate this typology.

Quote (k): *"There are faculty members who don't create much closeness either. So, having someone* (the WTA) *who proactively talks to you, a person you don't have to initiate contact with, is different. I've encountered very different cases with well-being assistants, both as a student and as a well-being assistant."*

WTA K for Introduction to Programming and Dynamics of Mechanical Systems

Large Introductory Courses: These courses have high enrolment, they are often taught in the early years of the program, where the transition to university is perceived as a significant life impact (Appendix 4, Quote (o)).

Next, we analyzed the volume and type of work carried out by WTAs using their administrative records. Through non-negative matrix factorization, a three-factor model was developed (see Table 1), interpreted respectively as: (A) Mental and academic well-being, (B) Deadline flexibility, and (C) Non-intervention.

Table 1: Non-negative matrix factorization, relationships between labels and factors.

Label type	Label	Factor_1 [1]	Factor_2 [2]	Factor_3 [3]
Action taken	Personalized academic assistance	0.40		
Case description	Test	0.28		
Case description	Mental health	0.17		
Case description	Grades	0.16		0.45
Case description	Contents	0.13		
Case description	Submissions		0.48	
Action taken	Flexibility		0.47	
Case description	Deadline for activities		0.35	
Action taken	No additional actions were taken			0.94
Case description	Administrative			0.35

[1] Interpreted as *Mental and academic well-being*. [2] Interpreted as *Deadline flexibility* [3] Interpreted as *Non intervention*

By averaging these factors at the course level and combining them with the count of interactions between WTAs and students, a multiple linear regression was performed to estimate the effect of these factors on the number of interactions (No. Int.). The total number of students enrolled in the course was included as a control variable.

All three factors have statistically significant effects on the number of interactions, with the Non-intervention factor showing the largest standardized effect (.69). These effects remain robust when controlling for the total enrollment in the course, which does not have statistically significant effects.

Table 2: Linear regression model, predicted variable: No. Int. (R^2=.15)

Predictors	Std. coef.	Std. error	*F* statistic	*p* value
(Intercept)	.00	.12	.00	1.00
Deadline flexibility	.44	.20	2.13	.04
Non-intervention	.69	.19	3.53	.00
Mental and academic well-being	.45	.18	2.48	.02
Course enrollment	.20	.12	1.63	.11

Some findings from the group interviews help contextualize these results. WTAs perceive that when courses with more inflexible styles include a WTA, the workload for WTAs may increase (Appendix 4, Quote (i)). However, in such contexts, faculty often maintain their inflexible style, which hinders the range of action of the WTAs, limiting their role primarily to providing emotional support (Appendix 4, Quote (j)). This can lead to an overload for WTAs, who report feeling overwhelmed by the number of cases they need to manage.

Quote (j): *"If the faculty doesn't give in, the (TA) coordination doesn't either, and we end up in the position of constantly saying that we can't provide any help. Even though we can provide emotional support, if we can't offer concrete solutions, this can lead to a student failing the course, falling behind, or even facing financial problems. For example, there are cases where parents say they won't pay anymore if the student falls behind in the program."*

– WTA B for *Computer Architecture*

In alignment with this, the Structural Equation Model (SEM) examines the relationships between Instructor Involvement (Ins. Invol.) in the WTA program, the support provided by WTAs to students, and students' perceptions of how the WTA's support helped them resolve a problem (see Appendix 3). We observe that Instructor Involvement (Ins. Invol.) has a direct effect on Emotional Support (Em. Sup.), and this dimension, in turn, influences the perception that the problem was resolved (Prob. Sol.). Three of the four fit measures (SRMR, CFI, and TLI) are within the acceptable thresholds recommended in the literature. Only RMSEA is above the expected value of 0.05.

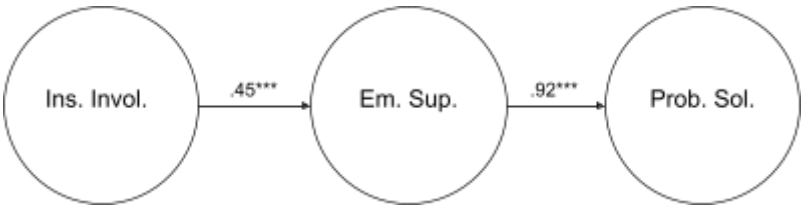

Figure 1: output model

Table 3: fit indices

RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
0.0784	0.0740	0.9959	0.9944

These relationships also emerge in group interviews. Some WTAs mentioned that when faculty do not understand or support the role of the WTA, it can contribute to an environment where they feel their work is less effective or that they lack the necessary support to intervene in critical situations, as illustrated by the following quote and Quote (bb) in Appendix 4.

Quote (cc)*: "I've also had to work with polarized faculty:* ***some are engaged*** *and say, 'I have a student dealing with an issue, could you talk to them?'* ***while others simply ignore the cases****. It surprises me that sometimes faculty seem desensitized; they neither meet with a student who is in tears nor read their emails explaining a crisis. This kind of attitude, especially when it fails to consider that a student might be neurodivergent or have a special condition, is very challenging. Often, the importance of adapting to these needs is not understood."*

– WTA B for *Computer Architecture*

Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the question: *What are the conditions that determine the need for a WTA in a specific course?* To address this, we explored the perspective of WTAs through focus group interviews, administrative records via matrix factorization, and the perspective of students in WTA-supported courses using SEM.

A preliminary answer to this question arises directly from the WTAs' perspective, identifying different types of courses that could benefit from this program: (1) disruptive courses, (2) courses with limited faculty interaction, (3) large-enrolment courses, and (4) courses with highly heterogeneous student populations (different cohorts, specializations, etc.).

From the administrative records retrieved from the web platform, we observed that courses where WTAs predominantly follow a non-interventional approach show a higher number of recorded interactions between WTAs and students, regardless of course size. This might indicate that, in most cases, no further intervention is required, alternatively, that contexts hindering intervention generate a higher workload for WTAs. Likely, both hypotheses may

hold true for different cases. At the very least, evidence from focus group interviews makes it plausible to interpret that restrictive courses simultaneously create greater needs and more challenges for intervention, though more research is needed to allow for a definitive conclusion.

Moreover, the SEM analysis from the student survey and the group interviews converge in suggesting that the effectiveness of WTA work is strongly influenced by how the faculty responsible for the course create conditions enabling their intervention.

Our interpretation is that courses with more inflexible styles, which pose greater challenges for WTA intervention, might be where their presence is most needed, yet precisely where providing effective support to students is most difficult. This also comes with mental and emotional costs for the WTAs themselves. Conversely, in courses where faculty are more involved, conditions are more favorable for WTAs to provide effective support to students.

While we cannot directly answer the research question posed, this study outlines a deeper understanding of the program that can inform decision makers. Among the limitations of the study, we observe that the focus group interviews did not capture the full heterogeneity of WTA experiences in substantially different courses. Similarly, to date, we have not included in this research the perspectives of faculty or students who have benefited from WTA support.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Descriptive statistics of administrative records.

Table: Distribution of the number of interactions between WTAs and students per course.

Min	Q1	Mean	Q3	Max
1	2	8.92	11	63

Table: Labels assigned by WTA to their interactions with students. % of total.

Label	**Count**	**%**
Administrative	103	18.04
Content	34	5.95
Context	54	9.46
Submissions	141	24.69
Exam	0	0.00
Death	11	1.93
Test	73	12.78
Laboratory	2	0.35
Other	28	4.90
PIANE	30	5.25
Deadline for activities	104	18.21
Reinforcement	23	4.03
Grades	174	30.47
Repeater	18	3.15
Mental health	46	8.06

Table: Actions taken by WTA, % of total.

Label	**Count**	**%**
Personalized academic assistance	107	18.74
Connect the student with academic advisors	9	1.58
Connect the student with the university's health services	6	1.05
Flexibility	140	24.52
Inform the student about academic advisors	21	3.68
Inform the student about the university's health services	14	2.45
No further actions taken	274	47.99

Appendix 3: Complete output of Structural Equation Model.

Factors

Latent variable	Observed variable	Std. effects	SE	*z*	*p* value
Instructor Involvement	The instructor(s) frequently mentioned the existence of the WTA.	0.76	0.00		
Instructor Involvement	I had the impression that the instructor(s) were involved in the work of the WTA.	0.90	0.09	13.24	0
Instructor Involvement	I have heard that, in the event of an unforeseen situation, the instructor(s) referred my classmates from the course(s) to talk with the WTA.	0.78	0.08	13.11	0
Instructor Involvement	In unforeseen situations that made it difficult to submit an assessment, the instructor provided flexibility so we could submit it at another time.	0.61	0.09	8.81	0
Emotional Support	The contact with the WTA made me feel that someone cared about me.	0.85	0.00		
Emotional Support	The WTA offered me support during a difficult time.	0.80	0.04	21.19	0
Emotional Support	The contact with the WTA made me feel calmer.	0.98	0.04	28.12	0
Emotional Support	The WTA provided me with support to deal with a personal problem.	0.81	0.04	22.02	0

Regressions

Predicted	Predictors	Std. effects	SE	z	*p* value
Emotional Support	Instructor Involvement	0.45	0.09	5.89	0
Problem Resolution	Emotional Support	0.92	0.03	31.85	0

Appendix 4. Quotes from group interviews.

Quote (a): *"It has to do with the factor of difficulty (...). For example, Introduction to Programming is difficult,* ***but it's difficult because it's different****. There are people who* ***don't know what programming is, who have never seen anything like it, so that adds more difficulty****. Because in engineering, there are also many difficult courses. So, courses that go beyond what is a regular course, I don't know how to explain it better."*

– WTA A for *Introduction to Programming*

Quote (b): *"It makes sense to me that it's a* ***non-average course****. The courses I've had as a WTA are courses with different realities. It's not like calculus, where you can just come in and solve problems, but you need to develop the ability to analyze. You can't just stay at the basic level of solving an integral, you have to go much further, and that also implies having a good foundation, having confidence. For example, Fluid Mechanics is a very abstract, academically demanding course. So, I don't know what the historical fail rate is, I don't know if that will be relevant,* ***but truly, non-average courses are important****."*

– WTA C for *Fluid Mechanics*

Quote (c): *"There are courses that are very stressful or that have very demanding content, like having too many assignments, too much workload in general (...). For example, Capstone, it could be Fluid Mechanics, it could be courses in Statics, or it could be Optimization, which is like the first elective that people take when they're still very young, in their second year, and it's a course that has projects, assignments, quizzes, and exams, and people struggle a lot with it. And also, it's non-withdrawable because it has a project, and the course is different from what one is used to (...), and people really struggle with it."*

– WTA K for *Dynamics and Mechanical Systems*

Quote (d): *"To add a bit more, this also happens in courses that particularly require a lot of self-discipline. It's not a course where you're guided all the time. It requires a lot of time management, which is something many people don't do. I've seen it a lot in engineering, people who were top students with a 7.0 GPA in high school, and then they come to university and everything falls apart, because they're not used to having a study rhythm and self-management. And there's the typical 'I can do it on my own,' and then sometimes you realize you can't do it on your own."*

– WTA H for *Artificial Intelligence* and *Data Structures and Algorithms*

Quote (e): *“In advanced programming, which already has a heavy workload, now we also have to take written exams. The exams are made excessively complex, so that a program cannot read or process them."*

– WTA B for *Computer Architecture*

Quote (f)*: “First-year courses, common curriculum (...) I know it's complicated, like first-semester courses, such as calculus or chemistry, which are not part of engineering. Later, people start skipping classes, and the course that would need a strong WTA presence is Introduction to Programming. I would also consider disruptive courses, as you mentioned, one from the first semester, because it's such a significant life change entering university. I would also think of it as a course."*

– WTA K for *Dynamics and Mechanical Systems*

Quote (g): *“Courses with a high failure rate and repeated failures, where people fail them more than once. I think it's important because, for example, I've had to work with the same student more than once.”*

– WTA H for *Artificial Intelligence* and *Data Structures and Algorithms*

Quote (h): *“(...) or also, continuing along those lines, courses where faculty are not very approachable. For example, the WTA has served as a bridge between students and the faculty. In the end, if the student doesn’t feel that closeness with the faculty, they won’t have the confidence to say, 'Professor, this happened to me,' 'Can I take the test?' or 'Can you extend the deadline?'"*

— WTA C for *Fluid Mechanics*

Quote (i): *“It happens to me with programs that are very strict, and you know that you can’t justify* (absence to) *a test, you wouldn’t have anyone to talk to because you know the answer will be 'no.' However, if there’s a figure like a well-being assistant, like what’s happening to me now with Information Systems, students reach out asking for flexibility, something that didn’t happen before because this figure wasn’t there, someone closer to whom I can say, 'Hey, you know, this really bad thing happened to my best friend, I need help.' It’s like having someone who can listen to them and who won’t just give a flat 'no.'”*

– WTA H for *Artificial Intelligence* and *Data Structures and Algorithms*

Quote (j): *"If the faculty doesn't give in, the* (TA) *coordination doesn't either, and we end up in the position of constantly saying that we can't help. Even though we can provide emotional support, if we can't offer concrete solutions, this can lead to a student failing the course, falling behind, or even facing financial problems. For example, there are cases where parents say they won't pay anymore if the student falls behind in the program."*

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Quote (k): *"There are faculty members who don't create much closeness. So, having someone* (the WTA) *who proactively talks to you, a person you don't have to initiate contact with, is different. I've encountered very different cases with well-being assistants, both as a student and as a well-being assistant."*

— *WTA K* for *Introduction to Programming* and *Dynamics of Mechanical Systems*

Quote (l): *"While in large courses, you're not contacted by all 120 people and only 4 or 5 reach out, for those 4 or 5 people, it really makes a difference. Like those 4 or 5 people, at least I'm in constant contact with them, they always express their gratitude, saying it helps a lot to have someone to talk to or simply to vent. I think it's a mental health support, and also helps to feel more at ease with the course, knowing that you're not the only one struggling and also helps in knowing how to cope with those things."*

– WTA A for *Introduction to Programming*

Quote (o): *"Large courses, I believe, really need a well-being assistant, especially first-year courses, as it's the challenge of adapting and the difference between high school and university."*

– WTA K for *Introduction to Programming* and *Dynamics of Mechanical Systems*

Quote (bb): *"Many students come to us seeking flexibility that faculty are unwilling to provide. If the faculty doesn't give in, the (TA) coordination doesn't either, and we end up in the position of constantly saying that we can't provide any help. Even though we can provide emotional support, if we can't offer concrete solutions, this can lead to a student failing the course, falling behind, or even facing financial problems. For example, there are cases where parents say they won't pay anymore if the student falls behind in the program."*

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