

Position Paper

Leveraging System-wide Well-being and Resiliency in Higher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The world has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our lives came to a halt in the middle of March 2020 when schools and businesses closed their doors. People still working in traditional office settings shifted to a virtual office environment in the home and students in academic institutions were informed that they had to leave their home on campus and finish the semester in a remote capacity, engaging in online learning. Faculty who were not familiar with online teaching had to on-board rapidly and continue to deliver high-quality education. Changes happened at such a rapid pace; many students, faculty, healthcare clinicians, and staff experienced sharp increases in stress and anxiety due to multiple challenging issues, such as being quarantined, lack of personal protective equipment, fear of being infected with the virus or infecting loved ones, and home-schooling children. It has been an uncertain and trying time for all.

Public health emergencies can adversely affect the health, safety, and well-being of both individuals (e.g., insecurity, confusion, emotional isolation, and stigma) and communities (e.g., economic loss, inadequate resources for medical response, deficient distribution of necessities; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). These negative effects may translate into a range of emotional responses, such as distress or mental health conditions, or unhealthy behaviors, such as excessive substance use, and noncompliance with public health directives in people who contract the disease and in the general population. In a poll conducted in early April 2020 by Kaiser Family Foundation ([KFF], 2020), seven in 10 Americans (72%) said their lives have been disrupted “a lot” or “some” by the coronavirus outbreak. Nearly half (45%) of those polled in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the virus (KFF, 2020). We have yet to see the full aftermath of the mental and physical health problems due to the virus, but there is likely to be a tsunami of these issues stemming from the pandemic.

To compound the issue, the health of American adults has been declining. Six in 10 adults in the United States have a chronic condition; four in ten have two or more (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019a). Obesity has surpassed tobacco as the number one cause of preventable death and disease in the United States (Cleveland Clinic, 2017). Up to half of all premature deaths in the U.S. are due to modifiable behavioral factors including unhealthy eating, inactivity, and tobacco use (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015). Ninety percent of the nation’s \$3.5 trillion in annual healthcare expenditures are for people with a chronic condition (e.g., cancer, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease) and mental health disorders (CDC, 2019b). Fortunately, the majority of chronic diseases can be prevented through health promotion and healthy lifestyle behaviors (O’Donnell, 2016).

According to Blackwell and Clarke (2018), less than 23% of American adults meet the recommended guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week. As one of the leading health indicators, physical activity is associated with reducing the risk of chronic diseases and improving the overall physical function and performance of an individual (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2018).



With regard to fruit and vegetable consumption, approximately one in 10 American adults eat the recommended five servings of fruit and vegetables per day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Eating a diet rich in vegetables and fruits as part of an overall healthy diet may reduce risk for heart disease, including heart attack and stroke, and certain types of cancers (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

In recent years, mental health conditions have become a topic of concern, as continuous stress has shown in multiple studies to negatively impact both physical and mental health (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). The burden of mental illness in the U.S. is among the highest of all diseases, and mental disorders are among the most common cause of disability (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). Mental health disorders also have a serious impact on physical health and are associated with the prevalence, progression, and outcome of some of today's most pressing chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Recent systematic reviews and studies support that cognitive behavior therapy/skills building, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, and other strategies, such as deep breathing, journaling, and expressing gratitude significantly impact positive mental health, while promoting improvement in one's physical health (Botha, Gwin, & Purpora, 2015; Farholm & Sørensen, 2016; Melnyk et al., 2020; Sharma & Rush, 2014).

IMPORTANT POPULATION HEALTH STRATEGIES DURING COVID-19

During times of crisis such as COVID-19, it is important to focus on: Enhancing population health and well-being, including availability and access to programs, resources and services; acts of caring and kindness; conducting listening sessions to be able to identify the most important concerns and worries of people; and clear, effective, frequent communication. Emphasizing good self-care and maintaining overall health and well-being is imperative in assisting people to manage the stress, anxiety, and depression associated with the coronavirus. Promoting movement and physical activity during the day (e.g., walking outdoors or virtual activity sessions), sleeping 7-9 hours per night, and eating healthy are important healthy lifestyle behaviors to maintain during the pandemic to prevent the occurrence or worsening of mental health conditions and to ensure that the immune system is at its strongest to prevent or combat infection. Increasing access to mental health resources is critical during this time; people need them more than ever. Psychological safety also is a concern, so it is essential to keep a structured routine, restrict the amount of anxiety producing media coverage viewed, practice mindfulness/meditation, listen to or read in positive books, and embrace optimism (CDC, 2020). It is important to understand and reinforce that everyone is experiencing these heightened emotions. One is not alone in these feelings; these are normal responses.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WELLNESS CULTURES DURING COVID-19

Findings from research support that wellness cultures are a key element in enhancing population healthy lifestyle beliefs and behaviors in academic institutions (Melnyk, Amaya, Szalacha, & Hoying, 2016). At the 2015 International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, the Okanagan Charter (Okanagan Charter: An international Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, 2015), an international organization based in Canada, presented a "transformative vision for health promoting universities and colleges." The Charter provides a rationale for the need to develop cultures of wellness at universities, positing that higher education plays a central role in all aspects of the development of individuals, communities, societies and cultures – locally and globally. In the emergent knowledge society, higher education institutions are positioned to generate, share, and implement

knowledge and research findings to enhance the health of citizens and communities both now and in the future. The sheer volume of people who live, work, and visit academic institutions can allow for a greater collective impact, with work done collaboratively in trans-disciplinary and cross-sector ways. Higher education institutions can incorporate health promotion values and principles into their mission, vision, and strategic plans, and model and test approaches for the wider community and society.

Resilient institutions invest in all levels of their organization and promote empathy and self-care to not only top leadership but to management, faculty, staff, and students as well, which enables them to prosper during times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic (Forbes, 2020). According to Marken & Matson (2019), faculty and staff who are emotionally and psychologically engaged are more committed to their work and produce better student outcomes than less-engaged peers. Findings from research show that higher levels of resilience are directly related to better health and well-being outcomes when living through a crisis (Everyday Health, 2020).

As outlined in a paper by Amaya, Donegan, Conner, Edwards, and Gipson (2019), a culture that promotes wellness needs multiple imperative components in order to flourish. These factors include, but are not limited to:

- 1) a systemic approach with a shared vision, mission and framework to guide strategy,
- 2) effective communication about wellness opportunities and resources,
- 3) leadership and management support, which include verbally supportive messaging about why the university invests in wellness programming, role modeling healthy behaviors and allowing for wellness activities to take place during the work day,
- 4) resource allocation and commitment, such as financial and physical space/prompts,
- 5) partnerships and collaborations between groups within and outside the organization to further the cause,
- 6) rewards and recognition,
- 7) grassroots efforts and peer support, such as student and employee wellness champion teams,
- 8) access to outcomes data and evaluating the culture, initiative, and programming on a regular basis,
- 9) on-boarding and orientation to the initiative, along with continuous training and learning opportunities,
- 10) a sense of community in which people participate in programs and services,
- 11) policies and procedures that support wellness,
- 12) a variety of options to appeal to different interests,
- 13) practices that are based on evidence, but allow for innovation and creativity to come into play when appropriate.

Regardless of where a university or college is on the continuum, the above best practices are key considerations for any strategic wellness initiative.

As of 2016, 57% of colleges and universities reported offering an employee wellness program (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2017). Wellness programs have been touted as ways to enhance morale, boost productivity, improve academic performance, reduce turnover, lower healthcare costs, and improve overall population health (Kent, Goetzl, Roemer, Prasad, & Freundlich, 2016). In large part, over the history of academic institutional wellness programming, wellness programs have typically been geared to the student population. According to National Intramural and Recreation Sports Association (NIRSA): Leaders in Collegiate Recreations Institutional Data Set (NIRSA, 2018), 89% of campuses report managing at least one wellness program, and 80% report at least one dedicated wellness space for students. In more recent decades, the shift to employee (faculty and staff) wellness programming has gained traction for the reasons cited above. As an industry, higher

education needs to continue to make the case for creating and sustaining cultures of wellness that will benefit all who live and work in institutions of higher learning.

The question to be asked now is, “how are wellness initiatives and programs in higher education adapting as a result of pandemic?” The answer to the question is still unknown. Some universities will make it through the pandemic and even flourish with new innovations; others will have to close their doors or downsize with drastically reduced budgets, adversely affecting much of the faculty/staff and student experience. Now more than ever, the universities that have invested in building solid wellness cultures and the provision of evidence-based programming and resources for their faculty, staff, and students are more likely to make it through the pandemic with more resiliency than those who have not invested in wellness. Leaders at colleges and universities must make wellness a priority and allow health promotion professionals to implement best practice strategies to help the people who live and work at their institutions so that when a pandemic or other type of disaster happens, they will quickly be able to respond to enhance the health and well-being of faculty, staff and students.

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW ONE LARGE PUBLIC LAND GRANT UNIVERSITY HAS RESPONDED TO COVID-19

The Ohio State University (OSU) prioritized building and sustaining a comprehensive wellness culture for faculty, staff and students based on best evidence over the past several years. Since the pandemic swept the nation, OSU was able to respond quickly with intensified efforts to address the needs of its population during COVID-19 at a low cost (see Figure 1). In mid-March 2020, OSU’s President asked faculty, staff, and students to depart campus and move classes to online formats and work from home. Led by the University Chief Wellness Officer and Vice President for Health Promotion, the wellness team response was swift. The university had already invested in online and distance learning, so the wellness initiative was well prepared to move evidence-based programming into a virtual environment. All of the wellness offerings and resources at OSU, including its academic medical center, were converted to an online format and recorded so that faculty, staff and students could access any of the programming on demand. Students, faculty, and staff are currently able to access mental health services via telehealth, group health coaching, a 24/7 mental health text service was instituted for all faculty and staff, and a new student wellness app is updated daily with pertinent information related to the pandemic. We have been able to successfully leverage our vast wellness resources in a very short period of time while strategically communicating them and meeting the needs of the university community. As we measure our wellness culture on an annual basis (Melnyk, Amaya, & Szalacha, 2018), we are especially interested in how the pandemic and our response will resonate with the university community.

By the end of March, a comprehensive website specific to COVID-19 was developed, based on the nine pillars of wellness (<https://wellness.osu.edu/covid-19-resources/stay-strong-active-keep-calm-covid-19>). An eight week virtual webinar series “Stay Well and Calm through the COVID-19 Storm” was implemented (See Table 1). Resources for front-line healthcare workers, students, and faculty and staff now displaced to the home environment was made available (<https://wellness.osu.edu/chief-wellness-officer/covid-19-resources>), and the employee assistance program sprang into action with educational topics on anxiety, depression, grief and overcoming change. A virtual resiliency and compassion program, a 24/7 provider care line, and several initiatives aimed at clinicians and front-line staff at the medical center have been employed.

Table 1: Staying Calm and Well Through the COVID-19 Storm*

Week	Webinar Title	Presenter(s)
Week 1	Stress Buster: Using Cognitive-Behavioral Skills to Allay Anxiety & Depression	Bernadette Melnyk, PhD, APRN-CNP, EBP-C, FAANP, FNAP, FAAN
Week 2	Staying Physically Active While Home: Tips and Tricks	Brenda Buffington, EdD; Kathleen Hatch, MEd and health coach, Bonnie Wilhelm
Week 3	Be Here Now: Mindfulness Works!	Sharon Tucker, PhD, APRN-CNS, NC-BC, EBP-C, FNAP, FAAN
Week 4	Sleep Soundly During the COVID Pandemic: You Can Do It!	Alice Teall, DNP, APRN-CNP, FAANP, NC-BC and Kim Joo, DNP, APRN-CNP, CNE
Week 5	Physical Distancing and Loneliness: How to Stay Socially Connected	Kate Gawlik, DNP, RN
Week 6	Building Resiliency Skills: A Necessity in the COVID-19 Epidemic	Jackie Hoying, PhD, RN
Week 7	Eating Healthy and Balanced in Stressful Times: Why it Matters	Gina Forster, MS, RDN, LD , Dave Hrabe, PhD, RN, NC-BC and Megan Amaya, PhD, CHES
Week 8	Gratitude and Positivity: A Dynamic Duo in the Midst of the COVID-19 Storm	Bern Melnyk, PhD, APRN-CNP, EBP-C, FAANP, FNAP, FAAN

*These recorded webinars can be accessed at <https://u.osu.edu/keepcalmcovid19/recorded-webinars/>

In terms of strategic communications, there is ongoing outreach to our wellness champion team, the Buckeye Wellness Innovators that now number nearly 700 faculty and staff (Amaya, Melnyk, Buffington, & Battista, 2017), through a weekly COVID-19 email. The university community is notified almost on a daily basis of new wellness programming and resources and the president and provost include these resources in their weekly and daily communications. At the forefront of the efforts has been the University Chief Wellness Officer. As a mental health nurse practitioner, she is fully prepared to lead the efforts, partnering with wellness experts across campus to address diverse needs (see Figure 2 for a COVID-19 acronym she created). The wellness team is right there with her, experts in their own areas. It takes a village.

Even as the semester wound down, faculty, and staff alike were still trying to address and promote wellness in the online classroom. Faculty shared wellness resources with their students via Zoom, the university online class platform Carmen, and through email communication. Many included small wellness opportunities in their classes, such as

promoting frequent breaks, stretching and movement breaks, and education on wellness topics. As a substantial number of students expressed deep anxiety and mental health concerns, faculty and staff were quick to respond when notified.

OSU has an after-hours mental health call line called Buckeye Pal that is staffed by students, and counselors are available to meet with students virtually. The call line and all other student resources will continue to be offered over the summer months. Student wellness programming was been moved virtually. Fitness classes are live streamed and recorded, and wellness coaching is conducted telephonically or virtually. Additionally, the Office of Student Life made personal phone calls to over 13,000 students as part of their wellness check initiative. Furthermore, through the use Zoom, the university is able to provide transcripts of all educational programming for faculty, staff and students, to increase accessibility of those who need it.

CONCLUSION

Although we all have a long and uncertain road ahead of us, we do know that investing in the well-being of all faculty, staff and students will have huge returns, including better population health, fuller engagement, higher morale and job satisfaction. There will be substantial learning lessons for all Americans from the COVID-19 pandemic, including higher education. As we all continue to discuss further actions to alleviate the burdens associated with the pandemic, we need to measure its growing effects on various dimensions of well-being (e.g., mental, physical, financial, social, and spiritual). It also will be important to use the lessons that we learned from the pandemic to be more prepared for future stressful times and events. There will be silver linings; we will eventually overcome the present challenges and will be stronger than ever.

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Figure 1 – Supporting Buckeye Nation through COVID-19


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Supporting Buckeye Nation Through COVID-19

- Our university-wide wellness team (Your Plan for Health, Ohio State Health Plan, Employee Assistance Program, Chief Wellness Officer/Buckeye Wellness, the College of Nursing, Gabbe Health & Wellness (OSUWMC) and Office of Student Life pulled together to create evidence-based well-being resources to support our students, faculty and staff through this crisis.
- Resources and communications were created to support employees and students in varying stages of stress, readiness to change and current work and classroom situations (remote vs. reporting to campus).

 <h3 style="color: #c00000;">High-Touch</h3> <p>In the moment, through personal 1:1 support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Converted to telehealth • Launched mental health text messaging service • Programming for frontline hospital and clinical staff • Health and wellness coaches conducted outreach with digital wellness care packages 	 <h3 style="color: #c00000;">Informative</h3> <p>Consolidated resources, ideas & best practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy living tips and strategies for families at wellness.osu.edu • Self-care videos and education for students, faculty & staff • Articles, recorded webinars and print-ready resources at wellness.osu.edu/chief-wellness-officer/covid-19-resources 	 <h3 style="color: #c00000;">Community</h3> <p>Created virtual groups for employees and students to stay connected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8wk wellness series led by Chief Wellness Officer & OSU faculty • Group health coaching series on Resilience & Coping • Virtual fitness and educational programming • Connected to Buckeye Wellness Innovator champion network • Wellness programming increased (MINDSTRONG, Health Athlete) 	 <h3 style="color: #c00000;">Engaging</h3> <p>Reach employees and students with timely and engaging content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness programming • Webinars on grief, sleep, exercise, financial, nutrition, coping • Healthy habit challenge on staying socially connected & sleep • Wellness app with timely information for students • Expanded resources (Enrich (igrad), WHIL)
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Figure 2 – COPE with COVID-19


COPE with COVID

Control the things that you can, not the things you can't

Open up and share your feelings

Practice daily stress reduction tactics, including physical activity

Engage in mindfulness; be here now; *worry will not help!*

Count your blessings daily

Overturn negative thoughts to positive

Volunteer to help others

Identify helpful supports and resources

Do your part to prevent spread of the virus

- Bern Melnyk



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