Creating Culture of Wellness in Institutions of Higher Education and Organizations

Higher education is an ideal environment to promote holistic health and wellness being for students, faculty, staff, the surrounding community, and visitors to the nation’s college campuses. Higher education institutions can incorporate health promotion values and principles into their mission, vision and strategic plans, and model and test approaches for the university and wider community, and society as a whole, to improve population health.

Many colleges and universities report offering an employee wellness program, and high-quality student programming can include health and wellness opportunities to enhance the undergraduate and graduate experience and improve academic performance.

According to Gallup (2021), faculty and staff who are emotionally and psychologically well represent lower healthcare costs, fewer absences, are more likely to recommend their institution as a place to work and is highly predictive of a high-quality student experience.

During the 2020–2021 school year, more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem, and in another national survey, almost three quarters of students reported moderate or severe psychological distress. Many campuses offer wellbeing resources and programs open to all students.

Effective practice of health promotion in higher education requires a shared responsibility of all campus and community members to create change and a paradigm shift to one of prevention rather than treatment. The goal of this is to create a unified initiative where all campus wellness partners are working toward one common goal, instead of being siloed and fragmented, which happens on college campuses.

A culture that promotes wellness requires an array of key components to flourish:

1) A systemic approach with a shared vision, mission and framework to guide strategy;
2) Leadership and management support;
3) Policies and procedures that support wellness;
4) Access to outcomes data and evaluation;
5) Resource allocation and commitment;
6) Grassroots efforts and peer support;
7) Partnerships and collaborations;
8) Practices that are based on evidence using well-defined metrics of success;
9) Effective communication about wellness opportunities and resources;
10) A sense of community in which people participate in programs and services;
11) Meaningful incentives that encourage participation;
12) On-boarding and orientation to the initiative;

13) Involving and obtaining feedback from students and/or faculty and staff;

14) Rewards and recognition for students, faculty and staff;

15) A variety of options that appeal to different interests.

There are some additional considerations that should be included in a comprehensive and integrative wellness initiative addressing students and faculty/staff concerns. Most notably, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, partnerships and measures, as well as a greater emphasis on the broader physical environment.