

Leadership Abstract
Wellness Programs: Essential for Community Colleges to Meet the
Challenges of the New Millennium.
By
Marjorie McColm
Chair Early Childhood Education
Faculty of Community Services and Health Sciences
George Brown College of Applied Arts and Technology

Leadership in the Community Colleges
Course #TSP1820
Professors Charles Pascal and Roy Giroux

Strong, creative, knowledgeable employees will be the keystone for community colleges meeting the challenges of the next century. These employees may be already working in the community colleges but are not producing and contributing at their full capacity. How can the colleges ensure they are getting the best from their employees? The implementation of comprehensive holistic wellness programs is an excellent place to start.

Comprehensive wellness programs have been shown to boost employee morale, lower absenteeism, and increase creativity. So why are colleges reluctant to implement such program? The knee-jerk response will be the lack of resources and know how. However, the real reasons for not implementing wellness programs are more complex than know how and program costs. To implement a health and wellness program *successfully* requires changes in both individual attitudes and organizational cultures. Two things that are difficult to change, but not impossible!

Health and Wellness and the Workplace

Traditionally we have viewed "health" as being free from sickness. We have allocated most of our health resources towards dealing with sickness. Employee health plans are to pay for services needed by the unwell. Currently the word "health" has taken on a new meaning. The World Health Organization describes "health" as the extent to which an individual or group is able to realize and satisfy needs, and to change and cope with the environment.

In 1974 the Canadian Government published what is considered the seminal document of health promotion - *A New Perspective on the Health of Canadians*. The major thrust of this paper is that the health and vitality of Canadians is significantly influenced by personal decisions individuals make about their lifestyle. . Gutknecht and Gutknecht note in *Building Productive Organizations: Through Health and Wellness Programs* that 50% of premature death are related to lifestyle excesses. Because most adults are tied to a place of employment, health professionals target the workplace as a conduit to proliferate information on healthy living and to promote and lobby for laws that promote healthier work environments such as anti-smoking by-laws. With rising cost of benefit plans and the need for increased productivity, employers began to look to wellness programs not as just the "right thing to do" but as possible solutions to these problems.

The Case for Wellness Programs in the Community Colleges

In 1996 at a Heads of Applied Arts meeting of the Ontario Colleges it was reported that the number of college employees on long term disability was equivalent to that of a small college. The cost of employee benefit plans has doubled in the past decade. At one large Ontario College the absentee rate for sickness in the 97/98 academic year exceeded 11 days per employee compared to the Conference Board of Canada reported average rate of absenteeism of 9 days per employee.

Recent cuts in provincial grants and federal transfer payments have required the *downsizing* of college employees leaving the *survivors* to cope with increasing workloads

and rapid changes. According to Health Canada's *Corporate Health Model: A Guide to Developing and Implementing the Workplace Health System in Medium and Large Businesses*, "persistent organizational stress can be a source of illness, accidents and poor employee health practices or lifestyle." There are significant costs related to these long and short-term illness leaves such as recruitment, training and hiring of replacement staff. In addition there is the stress on the other workers and many lost opportunities.

Companies with comprehensive health and wellness programs report they are reducing absenteeism and workplace injury. For example Jay MacDonald director of the wellness program at Husky Injection Molding Systems of Bolton Ontario reports that his company has an absentee rate of one third of the industry average and estimates that this saves his company two million dollars annually. The Colleges simply can not afford to ignore employee health and must begin the implementation of a workplace health and wellness program.

Step 1: Start with Leadership

To build a successful wellness program it must have the support, encouragement and participation from leadership at every level including the president's office. Leadership participation communicates to employees that this is a very important strategic initiative.

An example of such a leader is Bobbie Gaunt, President and CEO of Ford Canada, who is determined to promote healthy life habits to her company employees (Toronto Star April 2, 1999). Breakfast and lunch meetings have changed from *meat and potato* to *fish and fruit*. She also takes every opportunity to fit exercise into her busy schedule. Peter Soderburg, President of Johnson and Johnson Health Management Inc., the subsidiary which runs the Johnson and Johnson's very successful "Live for Life" wellness program, believes that the participation by senior management is the biggest factor in determining the success of any program. Management through their active participation conveys the message that the wellness program is concerned with improving everyone's health and not just controlling costs. Effective leadership understands the importance of shaping a cooperate culture that supports health and productivity. All decisions are made through the filter, "How will this effect the health and well being of our employees."

Step 2: Establishing Broad Employee Commitment

Once the leadership has made a commitment, the next step is the involvement and support of others in the organization - middle management, faculty and support staff.

According to the Health Canada Model the chances for success are increased when the employees are fully informed about the intention of the program and are invited to drive the process of implementation. Obtaining the support of union leadership will be key for the success of a wellness program in the colleges. To achieve wide spread support, employees must feel some aspect of the program applies to them regardless of their current health status. Wellness programs are not just for those who are in poor health or conversely an elite fitness program for the healthy. There must be a commitment to tailor the program to the diverse needs and preferences of groups of employees. Single parent

employees and employees who work shifts will require attention to the timing of programs and activities. A good health program recognizes the interdependence of various health habits, for example pairing smoking cessation clinics and stress management activities.

Step 3: Health and Wellness Assessment.

Before rushing into a program a comprehensive needs assessment should be administered.

The questionnaire should ask employees about their life style habits such as smoking, and exercise, and their current feelings about those habits. What habits or behaviors do they want to change and how can the college help them? The assessment should include questions about their current health, for example, whether or not they have high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Also it would be important to know how employees view their level of stress. The assessment itself can be a tool for educating the employee about their current state of health and well being. The college needs to be very cautious in how the needs assessment is administered. Employees should be well informed about who will collect the information and how it will be used. For example NBTel of New Brunswick held a series of "wellness fairs" to "kick off" the program. At these fairs employees were given information about health and wellness and what a wellness program could look like. The data collected from the needs assessment will be an initial benchmark against which the college will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their wellness program.

Step 4: Designing and implementing Your Health and Wellness Program

Once the results of the needs assessment are completed a committee made up of the three employee sectors - management, faculty and support staff should be created.

At NBTel one of the first tasks of the committee was to develop a wellness policy statement which was endorsed throughout the company. Once the policy statement is endorsed the next task of the committee will be to design a wellness program that responds to the needs and preferences identified in the questionnaires. For example if the employees who smoke indicate they have no desire to quit then it makes little sense to start smoking cessation programs.

The committee should develop both long and short-term goals and start the program slowly.

Many programs can be started with little resources. The experts suggest starting with some kind of physical activity. Lunchtime walking programs or exercise competitions can be started with little or no cost. Soderberg suggests that to encourage participation that some kind of incentive program should be developed. At Johnson and Johnson, employees who participate in exercise activities can earn Live for Live dollars which can be used to buy fitness and health related products from a catalog. Another way to stretch the wellness dollar is to develop partnerships with other departments and agencies. Getting the cafeteria on board, so that employees have a wide choice of healthy foods to choose from is one way to develop a wellness culture. At the Canada Life cafeteria, the company, to encourage a change in eating habits, subsidizes healthy food choices. Colleges can work with their Employee Assistant Program (EAP) to

provide information about stress management. To encourage employees to take time for themselves and develop stress-relieving hobbies, various craft and hobby guilds could be invited to give exhibits and demonstration of their work. Weight Watchers will conduct programs at the work site if enough employees request it. Colleges with fitness, recreation programs and sports marketing could use students to develop, implement and market programs.

Once the various options are explored the committee will then develop a detailed action plan which will identify the resources required, the marketing plan and the evaluation methods.

The launch of the program should be a significant event and involve as many employees as possible. Regular communication to employees about the various activities through a variety of modes should be on going.

Step 5: How to Measure Success

All activities of the programs must be evaluated. Participation rate statistics and evaluation of the programs must be examined to determine if employee needs are being met.

Is the program reaching the employees with the biggest health risks? The employee health assessment will be administered again to detect changes in life style habits, health conditions and the employee's perception of their own well-being. The college may want to examine other indicators of corporate well being to see if there are any changes, for example an increase in participation in professional development or a decline in union grievances. Once the assessment is completed a new action plan should be developed ensuring to incorporate any new needs that have been identified.

The Key to Ongoing Success and Creating the New Culture

A wellness program is like a garden to grow and flourish so it must be carefully maintained. It cannot be a one-year effort; it must have continuous support and participation by leadership, dedicated resources and on going assessment. Colleges that are truly committed to their employees' health and well being are creating environments that promote healthy behavior and are seeking ways to improve working conditions that may be contributing to poor health.

The goal of every college is to be a vital organization able to take on whatever challenge that is presented. This can only be achieved through healthy, creative and productive employees. A comprehensive employee driven health and wellness program is a significant tool for achieving that goal.

For information on developing a Health and Wellness program contact Health Canada

Health Promotion in the Workplace, Health Canada Jeanne Mance Building, Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 1B4

For further information, please contact:

Marjorie McColm

Associate Dean

Health Sciences and Community Services

George Brown College

Telephone: (416) 415-2123

E-mail: mmccolm@gbrownc.on.ca