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Promoting Wellness in the Residence Halls

by Kristin Hutchinson

The philosophy of any residence hall system reflects the educational goals and objectives of the institution. The University of Northern Iowa purports to promote the fullest development of the individual’s intellectual, cultural, social and physical potential...

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Housing professionals are advocates of out-of-classroom learning opportunities. Through a variety of means, an attempt is made to provide information and experiences that are conducive to an individual’s well-rounded development. It is generally agreed by student services professionals that developmental changes require a diversity of experiences that appeal to both the head and heart. By formulating and adhering to an integrated program of learning experiences, housing professionals can do much to facilitate students' movement toward maximizing their human potential.

One such program that appears to fall naturally within the philosophical domain of the University of Northern Iowa’s Department of Residence is that of high-level wellness. High-level wellness as defined by Donald Ardell (1979) is a lifestyle approach to realizing one’s best potentials for physical health, emotional serenity and zest for living, and mental peace through clarity of purpose. By utilizing the expertise to be found among professionals at the university and the already established channels of communication with residents, the Department of Residence can become an advocate of high-level wellness at UNI.

The history of the wellness movement dates back to 1961, with the work of Dr. Halbert Dunn. In the mid-1970s the concept of wellness was formed into a social movement that first took hold in the business sector in response to the many economic implications of having a happier, healthier work force. Larger companies began to implement programs for employees to encourage exercise, better nutrition and healthier lifestyle choices (e.g. quit-smoking clinics, weight control support groups).

Wellness came to the university setting shortly after its birth in the business sector. A pioneer in campus wellness programming is the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The moving force at UWSP is Dr. Bill Hettler, Director of the University Health Service and Lifestyle Improvement Programs, and the model developed under his guidance is one of the most
comprehensive in the country.

The UWSP model seeks to integrate six dimensions of one's life: the intellectual, the emotional, the physical, the social, the occupational, and the spiritual. In the wellness model, mind, body, and spirit are integrated and inseparable. An understanding of one's self, a sense of meaning, and peace of mind are all active components of wellness.

Intellectual wellness measures the degree to which one engages his or her mind in creative, stimulating mental activities. An intellectually well person uses the resources available to expand his or her knowledge, along with expanding potential for sharing with others (Hettler, 1980). Students who view their classes as something more than a means to an end are engaging in wellness activities. Other examples at UNI would be those students who avail themselves of programs such as those offered by the Office of Learning and Instruction in speed reading, writing, and time management, as well as those who attend lectures and other cultural events.

The emotional dimension of wellness refers to degree of awareness and acceptance of one's feelings. This includes the degree to which one feels positive and enthusiastic about life. It measures the capacity to control one's feelings and related behavior, including the realistic assessment of one's limitations (Hettler, 1980). The counseling center at UNI is the most obvious place that supports emotional wellness through the use of individual and group counseling and programs such as suicide awareness. The resident assistants (paraprofessionals) in the residence halls are another source of support for residence hall students through role modeling and program planning that encourages emotional wellness discussions.

Physical wellness is probably the most widely recognized dimension. There are three major components of physical wellness: regular exercise that includes an aerobic component; knowledge of specific health-related issues such as blood pressure and cholesterol level; and proper nutrition. Examples of support at UNI in this area include exercise classes, intramural sports programs, and counseling groups for diet and eating disorders.

Social wellness emphasizes interdependence with others and with nature. It measures the degree to which one contributes to the common welfare of one's community (Hettler, 1980). Counseling that focuses on communication is one example of a social wellness support service. Residence halls at UNI by design are heavily involved in the social dimension. A sense of belonging to a "community" is encouraged by the formation of "houses" within the hall. Social activities and programs are often designed to facilitate interaction and interrelatedness.

The occupational component of wellness is related to the satisfaction gained from one's work. While it is true that students are generally attend-
ing the university to prepare themselves for an occupation, school also should be viewed as work. The mind-set that life begins after college detracts from the importance of the present. For the time that an individual is at college, school is the chosen work from which satisfaction must be sought. At UNI, two examples of departments that support *occupational wellness* are the Academic Advising Center and the Placement Center. They do so by helping students to understand their interests and abilities and correlating these with success both at school and after graduation.

The final dimension of wellness is *spiritual*. According to Hettler (1980) this is the measure of one’s on-going involvement in seeking meaning and purpose in human existence. It includes a deep appreciation for the depth and expanse of life and for natural forces that exist in the universe. Examples of support at the university for this dimension can be found in workshops that offer values clarification and student organizations dealing with spiritual values and religious beliefs.

One underlying component of wellness that is present in all six dimensions is self-responsibility. Self-responsibility refers to an individual’s understanding of the need to answer for his or her own conduct and obligations. A person is not likely to put forth energy into the six dimensions of wellness without first accepting the premise that each individual is accountable for his or her own well-being. While it may seem easier to place the responsibility elsewhere (e.g. doctors, public health officials), in the final analysis, optimal wellness begins and ends with the individual. While others may influence choice, each person must make his or her own lifestyle decisions and face the resulting consequences.

Self-responsibility is also an underlying component of the Department of Residence at UNI. Staff members strive to create an environment that is supportive of the efforts of residents to develop and practice a wellness lifestyle. Much of the encouragement comes in the areas of living environment (e.g. confronting neighbors/roommates), policy adherence (discipline), and improved communication skills. By making use of this already established framework, the Department could expand its commitment to encourage self-responsibility to include all the areas of wellness.

Much, in fact, is already being done at UNI in the area of wellness, but the programs could be strengthened by making a concerted effort to promote a balanced lifestyle. The Department of Residence is in a good position to bring current programs under the umbrella of high-level wellness. This would strengthen existing programs and could address neglected areas. What follows is a brief summary of the programs in place in the six wellness dimensions as well as some suggestions for improvements or additions.
Intellectual Wellness

The intellectual dimension would appear to be an area of wellness that receives a great deal of support since one could assume that by taking classes at the university a student is engaged in stimulating mental activity. Unfortunately, sitting in a classroom does not ensure intellectual wellness. The student needs to actively seek to expand his or her intellectual skills both in and out of the classroom.

At UNI, the Department of Residence seeks to provide an environment that supports the intellectual pursuits of the residents. Professional and paraprofessional staff within the hall work in conjunction with hall student government to provide programs, individual assistance, and recognition in support of academic pursuits. Examples include recognition (letters and plaques) for academic excellence, programs organized by resident assistants on study skills, and volunteer tutoring programs organized by hall senates.

In the past year, two new programs were implemented in several halls: peer academic advisors and peer instructional assistants. The goal of both these programs is to bring services into the halls in hopes that the closer proximity will encourage residents to take advantage of the advice and experience of trained peers. Both of these programs will be undergoing revisions that will tie them more closely to the hall coordinator to provide a clearer plan of outreach. Through these programs excellent possibilities exist for ongoing individual and group assistance in such areas as study skills, time management, and career and major selection.

The challenge for the Department of Residence in the arena of intellectual wellness lies not in the philosophical commitment but in the practical application. Many projects are undertaken on a somewhat haphazard basis. A centralized long-range plan that could serve as a model for the varied activities in the halls would be of help in focusing the energies of everyone involved. Setting goals and objectives for types of services and frequency of contact would lead to a more proactive approach to intellectual wellness.

Emotional Wellness

One of the greatest threats to emotional wellness is stress. Stress can be defined as a physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation. Although it is impossible to exert complete control over stressful events, what is within the realm of control of the individual is his or her reaction to stress. By accepting this responsibility the effect of stress is minimized.
The residence halls at UNI provide an excellent ground for educating residents on how to control stress reactions. Programs such as stress management, relaxation techniques, and massage are all offered in the halls. Too often, however, programs are organized as a reaction to observed high stress levels which is also when many people will not take the time to attend such programs. An ongoing commitment to educating residents about the signs and effects of stress in combination with more regularly scheduled programs on how to channel stress positively would help to create a healthier living environment.

One major program in place in the residence halls that supports the emotional dimension of wellness is the F.O.C.U.S. program (Focusing on Communication, Understanding, and Sensitivity). Resident assistants facilitate group discussions on such topics as dating expectations, the ideal mate, and differences between men's and women's communication styles. The goal of these types of programs is to encourage students to explore their feelings on various topics and to gain understanding by sharing with others. The F.O.C.U.S. programs have been growing in popularity over the last few years. With the increased attendance at these programs comes the challenge of finding stimulating new topics for discussion.

Physical Wellness

The physical component of wellness is the area that receives the most organized attention at UNI. An active wellness program provides classes in aerobics, aqua trim, and weight-lifting as well as opportunities to find out more about such things as blood pressure, cholesterol and nutrition. One of the ways in which the Department of Residence currently supports physical wellness is by offering the use of some of its facilities for exercise programs. Many of the halls, through the financial support of the hall government, also offer exercise and sports equipment for student use. Actively participating in the intramural program is another way residence hall students engage in physical wellness. In some halls, resident assistants have established ongoing exercise programs.

The nutritional side of physical wellness presents a challenge. Preparing and serving nutritious meals for more than 4,000 people is only part of the problem. Educating the diners in making nutritional choices is the other half. The amount of information available on nutritional needs can be confusing to the average student/consumer. Without simplified material on proper nutrition, the result can be the dreaded "freshman 15" (the number of pounds the average freshman gains during his or her first year in school).

The third area of physical wellness, that of knowledge of health-related
issues is approached through programs in the residence halls and a monthly newsletter from the campus health educator. Programs on self-breast examination and self-testicular cancer examination have been presented in the halls. Even though attendance is often small, programs such as these are certainly important contributions to wellness.

The challenge in the physical wellness area is how to best present the information that is already available from various sources in a unified manner. One small beginning would be to give one nutrition or physiology tip at the beginning of each aerobics or weight-lifting session. By maximizing the use of newsletters, making pamphlets available in the halls, and increasing regularity of programming on health-related topics, the Department will be providing the information that will enable students to make informed decisions about health and wellness.

Social Wellness

The social dimension of wellness is a natural by-product of residence hall living. At UNI, the halls are organized into “communities” of approximately 50 people each. These houses are designed to foster a sense of belonging and ownership among the residents. A resident assistant in each house, together with elected house leaders, facilitate social interaction and encourage self-responsibility in maintaining a positive living environment. With the house system, residents have a chance to have an impact on their living environment.

Students also have ample opportunity to explore their skills in social interaction, whether it be with a roommate, house member, or students from other houses or halls. Resident assistants facilitate this growth by encouraging residents to get involved in house activities, mediating roommate conflicts, facilitating discussions on community issues, and modeling good social wellness.

Even though the social wellness dimension may be the natural habitat of residence halls, the challenges still abound. While the opportunities are plentiful, the motivation is sometimes lacking. Once again, self-responsibility is the key. Only when residents themselves realize the benefits to be gained from choosing involvement will the social potential be maximized.

Occupational Wellness

In many ways the occupational dimension is tied in closely with the intellectual one. In supporting the efforts of students to succeed intellectually, the Department of Residence is supporting occupational health.
Many of the experiences available to students in the halls not only will benefit them in the short term, but also help them to be better employees in the work force. For example, learning to work through conflicts with roommates or house mates allows residents to develop valuable skills in conflict mediation which will assist them in working out problems in their future jobs.

In addition to the programs in place to support academic pursuits, there are programs presented on career choices, job seeking skills, and resume writing. This is another area of wellness that could benefit from having specific goals set. The challenge is to reach people early in their college careers and start them thinking of their college years as part of their career, not a preamble to it.

Greater emphasis should be made on choosing an occupation as a part of a lifestyle plan. Too often people approach career selection from the angle of what jobs are most plentiful and pay the best. Students who better understand how job choice complements their life choice will find themselves in happier work settings.

**Spiritual**

Spiritual wellness in the residence halls is often left entirely to the student and the local churches. As noted earlier, spiritual wellness in this context is not so much a church-related activity as it is a searching process. According to Vera Chester (1986) spirituality is the human capacity for seeing beyond the phenomenal world, and for responding to that reality beyond. She feels that spirituality is the power in people that gives rise to poetry, song, story-telling, symbol, prayer, and myth.

Since spirituality in its base form is not church-affiliated, there is no need to be hesitant in addressing it as a topic in the residence halls. One way to address wellness in this area would be through the use of values clarification exercises. As people graduate from college and join the work force, the likelihood is great that they will be confronted with moral and ethical dilemmas. Unfortunately, college seniors across the country feel unprepared to think their way through ethical dilemmas (Ritchie and Dunfee, 1987). Organizing discussion groups in the halls that give residents an opportunity to explore their values in a safe and accepting environment provides opportunities for growth in spiritual wellness as well as job preparedness.

Teaching meditation techniques that allow for bodily relaxation and a freeing of the mind is another avenue available for programming in the spiritual realm. As people learn to quiet themselves, new opportunities for self-understanding and insight become available. In this vein, learning
how to make use of personal journals to record feelings and insights and learning how to interpret dreams are two approaches to seeking meaning and purpose in human existence through self knowledge.

Conclusion

Self responsibility is a component of every aspect of life. At UNI, individuals are held accountable for their mistakes as well as encouraged in their successes. The college years are ideal for students to experiment with lifestyle choices in an environment of relative safety and support. The Department of Residence can support this growth by providing accurate information and ample opportunities to learn and practice life-long skills.

As stated previously, many of the areas of high-level wellness are being addressed at UNI. One of the problems is that these services are fragmented and therefore not consistently available to everyone. By pulling together the programs and services under the umbrella of high-level wellness, the Department of Residence could help to ensure that all areas of an individual’s development are equally addressed.

High-level wellness is achievable by anyone. All it requires is individual desire, commitment and proper information. With much of the framework already in place, a clearly formulated approach to wellness is possible. What better place than the UNI residence halls to start people on the path to life-long wellness?

References


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