

Designing and Implementing Health and Wellness Programs: Positioning Health and Wellness at the Forefront of a Polytechnic Institution

Ross CP^a, Raskin G^b, Callahan-Nasser I^c

^aGeorge Brown College, ^bRoss University School of Medicine, ^cMcGill University

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Abstract

The past 20 years has seen a renaissance of activity with respect to workplace wellness. The concept of providing a health and wellness program for employees has grown to include employee assistance aid. Within the polytechnic community, the health and wellness programs have expanded to the student body as well. If you consider the fact that a polytechnic has a population of some small cities, then the case for support of providing services is well founded. Due to the mix of international and domestic student populations, the wellness programming has taken on a new mosaic of services. The attention to cultural sensitivities and competencies needs to be addressed and incorporated when contemplating any services and programming to be delivered to the polytechnic community. Most recently, with the increase of mental health issues amongst staff and students, it is time to implement a strong interdisciplinary approach to wellness and mental health.

Introduction

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” (Dickens, 1859).

There has been a newfound acknowledgement over the past 20 years that employers have a duty to provide a healthy workplace to its employees. This overarching mandate is further expanded across campuses of higher learning to the student population as well. Across Canada, polytechnics are responding with a number of health and wellness initiatives in order to facilitate the transformation of a healthy workplace and provide services that will affect positively the overall health of all its constituents. According to the Rand Corporation, out of concern for the impact of chronic disease on employee health and well-being, the cost of health care coverage and competitiveness, employers are adapting health

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*Essays advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. They may be narrower in scope than the above categories, but the subject matter should be of general scholarly interest.

promotion and disease prevention strategies commonly referred to as workplace wellness programs” (Mattke et al., 2013). Student associations at polytechnics have followed suit with their own wellness initiatives catered to the student body.

The modern polytechnic institution is a service-based institution that most of us, directly or through family and acquaintances, will interact with at some point in our lives. Polytechnics are the deliverers of high-quality education, applied research and work integrated linkages to industry and the sectors they serve. In many cases, they are the intersecting point among domestic student education, international students and global outreach. Essentially, it can be said that these aforementioned polytechnics act as a ready-made model of society as a result of its demographically diverse composition and its embodiment of the various facets of individuals’ daily lives. While they can serve various purposes, these educational institutions are a place where individuals conduct their daily activities; it is a place for eating, learning, socializing, and in some cases, living. The diversity of the constituents at a polytechnic allows program development to derive knowledge from a wide range of individuals in order to create a culture of wellness that accurately represents all individuals. Polytechnics have an advantage in addressing diverse competencies in program development due to the community’s differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, education level and so on. These institutions of higher learning are equipped with the necessary conditions for program development and implementation honoring diversity sensitivity. The multifaceted nature of polytechnics, coupled with their representation of diverse populations, make these institutions the optimal environment for modeling and developing new health and wellness programs.

The polytechnic has its origins in the trades training world. It was a place where people went to train in the skilled trades. As post-secondary education grew and evolved, polytechnics began transforming themselves into institutions that created certificates, diplomas, advanced diplomas and Bachelor’s degrees (Polytechnics Canada, 2024). These institutions of post-secondary education became the places of cutting-edge education and applied research. Along with those changes came the influx of students domestically and internationally. Today, they continue to be so, and although

they exist in a time of constrained resources, polytechnics continue to be central to the landscape of building community and differentiating provinces and ultimately Canada.

With the growth of students and staff at each polytechnic, the focus has now turned to providing a wellness model that focuses on the workplace and the classroom. The concept of wellness has changed over time and is somewhat more elusive and open to interpretation but just as important. Wellness is used to describe a state of individual health that is holistic and dynamic. Health can be holistic in the sense that it transcends the physical, and includes mental, emotional, and social dimensions. It is also dynamic in that it can respond to stressors, crises and adapt to change. Health status was always a priority in educational settings; however, with the post-pandemic rise of globalization and the increase in international students, polytechnics have been refocusing their efforts in the provision of health and wellness services for their constituents.

The mosaic of student body has undergone a transformation in our polytechnics. Using the wellness lens as a predictor of the health status of a population, we note that we must change the way we deliver services in our institutions when it comes to health and wellness. At one time thought of as the absence of disease, the concept of wellness is increasingly being seen as the outcome of processes that enhance optimal structure, function and interaction between human beings and their environment. The factors affecting the health status of students and employees have changed and become much more complex. Factors such as mental health, nature of work, spaces at work and the mosaic of the student population and interplay must now be considered.

The impact on the entire polytechnic community is always considered first and foremost when contemplating the kinds of services and aid to be offered to the polytechnic community. The causes of poor health and the co-relationship to the determinants of health are essential considerations in order to design fully functional wellness plans. The delivery of service must be easily accessible and broad based enough to allow for constituent participation and possible referral. The wellness programming must be fluid enough to adapt to ongoing issues and able to pivot to unexpected circumstances. One example was the pivoting of vaccination clinics for a mass immunization program

to deal with COVID. A second example is allowing for the provision of services that are recognizable to the diverse multicultural composition of our current student population (examples: offering of traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture for Asian descent students, Ayurveda medicine for Indian students). These two source countries as well as regional neighboring countries constitute over 70 percent of the international student applications for polytechnics. In a recent paper authored by Moon (2023), "The Coexistence of Western Medicine And Korean Traditional Medicine In Korea," it has been noted that, "Eastern medicine does not evaluate an illness purely based on the symptoms the person is showing, but rather on complex patterns of disharmony in the body" (Ma et al.2020). This difference in the way a condition is treated would pose a problem for the insurance agencies who are underwriting the treatment protocols of its members. Therefore, the access to familiar recognizable treatments of staff and students from different countries other than the western world would be hard for the polytechnic to implement. This is a real limitation in the pursuit of employee and student wellness.

There is no doubt about it—Canadian polytechnics excel at delivering state-of-the-art, timely education. But do they deliver compassionate care? How do polytechnics model and exemplify these concepts of wellness? In spite of the fact that some wellness initiatives, such as smoking cessation, have been done in polytechnics and that similar good initiatives have been done well, polytechnics cannot predict the future of health and wellness programming. We will require the kind of leadership position in wellness programming that is flexible and dynamic. What is the reason for this? One reason is that polytechnics are primarily concerned with the extremely large task of delivering just-in-time counselling and aid. Nevertheless, the polytechnic is the ideal place for organizational wellness programs to be modelled. It has been noted in the literature that the key facilitators of wellness in the workplace are:

- Broad outreach and clear messaging from organizational leaders.
- Making wellness activities convenient and accessible for all employees.
- Making wellness an organizational priority among senior leaders.
- Leveraging existing resources and building relationships with health plans to expand offerings at little to no cost.

- Approaching wellness with a continuous quality improvement attitude and solicit feedback from employees to improve programs. (Mattke et al, 2013).

In a post-pandemic time, employees are struggling with stress, burnout, and loneliness like never before (Workhuman, 2023). Research has found that fewer than one in four employees say their organization cares about their wellbeing—nearly half the number who said the same before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is probably true for the student body as well.

One effective and easily implementable tool for helping the polytechnic community as a whole is employee recognition (Workhuman, 2023). In previous research, Gallup and Workhuman established an extensive connection between employee recognition and wellbeing, finding that employees who receive the right amount of recognition for their work experience lower burnout, improved daily emotions, and stronger relationships with their co-workers. (Workhuman 2023). The same principle intuitively can be applied to students. If individuals feel connected and respected in the workplace/school, this can have a positive influence on daily mental health and well-being.

Organizational wellness programs are multidimensional. They encompass a multifaceted approach to enhancing the wellness of all members of the organization. They might include programming such as diet, lifestyle, stress management, ergonomics, counselling and more. Ideally, this should be more than just a "cafeteria style" offering of the most popular initiatives that might interest staff and students. They should be part of an overarching plan that seeks to create an institutional ethos that embraces wellness and health promotion at its core. Polytechnics will need to deal with mental health issues and serious infectious diseases and virology in the future. The polytechnic is a perfect place to trial best practices and promising practices in wellness and health models. Due to their size and relationship to industry, the polytechnics are an ideal place to serve as a test case for the refinement of population wellness strategies. The post-secondary education sector will need to leverage its institutional sophistication and applied learning talents to further refine and roll out focused health and wellness programming for its constituents. The auditing and collection of data with respect to efficacy and effectiveness of its targeted

approaches will be crucial in understanding what is working and having an impact. The complexity of the design will depend on a comprehensive approach. The approach will include areas of focus such as physical activity, healthy nutrition, stress management, clinical preventative screenings, sleep health, social connectedness, and substance management (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2015). Collectively addressing these aspects of health and wellness, along with others that are identified by collaborative parties, promotes a holistic approach to well-being among individuals. It is important to note that developing a culture of wellness, implementing health and wellness programs, and establishing organizational well-being are all interconnected and can simultaneously promote or hinder one another. Establishing a culture of health emphasizes the importance of integrating employee health into the institution's mission and purpose, which, in turn, helps to develop effective health and wellness programs.

Canadian polytechnics should embrace the concept of organizational wellness as being vital to its mission. Recently, more educational institutions are paying attention to the health of their students and employees. Institutions have made significant strides in developing a wellness strategy and model. Specific components of wellness programs have been launched.

An organization is a collection of individuals within a set of institutional objectives, operating procedures, recurrent tasks, policies, and a managerial structure. This organization itself has certain relationships, a position in society, a culture and a certain spirit or zeitgeist that pervades it. An organizational wellness strategy must fully integrate the various facets of health, in alignment with the nature of the organization and the programmatic methods for achieving increased wellness across the organization.

What are the benefits for Canadian polytechnics? For one, a wellness-based culture produces more, is more efficient, and, in a way, it is sustainable and builds for the future. Employees who enjoy greater health, more job satisfaction, and are immersed in a wellness-based organization can naturally give more of what they have to offer in their skills, energy and actual output. This output is directly linked to the customer service given to the student body. In 2023, polytechnics have been a model for overall workplace

wellness. These institutions of higher learning that serve as an example of the power, speed and effectiveness of collective consciousness and reinforcement of a top priority (health of a community) must now evolve into a new organizational focus. As polytechnics sharpen their focus on the holistic lens of health, the results for staff, students and the community will, without a doubt, be positive. Sustainable health practices will be achievable.

Note on Contributors

Dr. Cory Ross, BA, MSc, DC, DPH(cc), CSM(Oxon), MBA, DSc, FRCP(Edin) Provost, George Brown College, Toronto Ontario Canada, coryross@georgebrown.ca

Dr Gannady Raskin, MD, ND, ED, Medical Education Readiness Program, Ross University School of Medicine, Atdalem Global Education, Miami, Florida, gannady.raskin@medready.org

Isabelle Callahn-Nasser, BA (Hons) student at McGill University

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