



## SPORT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Assessing employee wellness needs at colleges and universities: A case study

Tyler Tapps<sup>1</sup>, Matthew Symonds<sup>1</sup> and Timothy Baghurst<sup>2\*</sup>

**Abstract:** One of the most important factors in a successful employee wellness program includes strategic planning and assessment on the part of the employer prior to the initiation of a program. A needs assessment is crucial for colleges and universities who wish to develop programs catering to the wide range of employee types, interests, and backgrounds within their educational institution. This study sought to evaluate the interest levels of 438 employees at one university in the United States across 15 different wellness program areas. Participants in this case study completed a 33-question survey designed specifically for the study that focused on three broad components of personal wellness; the physical, nutrition, and personal lifestyle. It was discovered that strength training, stress reduction, and managing overall wellness were the three most desirable programs. Overall interest in programming was high (>95%), and participants were found to be significantly more interested in lifestyle programming over physical activity and nutrition ( $\Lambda = .35$ ,  $F_{(2, 362)} = p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .64$ ). Findings indicate the importance of investigating employee interest prior to developing wellness programming, which could facilitate participant engagement and adherence to the programs. University administrators who wish to create employee physical activity programs should assess the unique and specific needs of their employees as opposed to students in order to serve, accommodate, and build successful programs that can have a lasting effect on their employees' wellness.

**Subjects:** Leisure Studies; Leisure Management; Occupational Health and Safety; Health Education and Promotion

**Keywords:** worksite safety & health; university health; employee wellness; health research

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Tyler Tapps is a provost fellow and graduate coordinator in the School of Health Science and Wellness at Northwest Missouri State University. Dr Matthew Symonds is an associate professor and inaugural director of the School of Health Science and Wellness at Northwest Missouri State University. Dr Tim Baghurst is an associate professor and program coordinator in Health and Human Performance at Oklahoma State University. These authors currently work together on multiple research projects focused around the health and wellbeing of people in all populations. All three have extensive experience in programming of health-related activities for campus students, faculty and staff.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

One of the most important factors in a successful employee wellness program is the employer's strategic planning and assessment prior to the program's initiation. To cater to the wide range of employee types, interests, and backgrounds, higher education institutions must evaluate their needs. Our results demonstrate the importance of investigating employee interest prior to developing wellness programming. Doing so can facilitate participant engagement and adherence to the programs. University administrators who wish to create employee physical activity programs should assess the unique and specific needs of their employees rather than their students in order to serve, accommodate, and build successful programs that can have a lasting effect on employee wellness.

## 1. Introduction

A campus community exists within the larger, surrounding external community, and this interaction is difficult to separate. The activities and learning processes of individuals and groups on campus flow outward into the community. Traditionally, research associated with wellness programs on campuses have assessed individual needs according to what campuses already provide, not what is lacking (Barker & Glass, 1990; Carter, Kelly, Alexander, & Holmes, 2011). However, there is value in assessing the wellness preferences of university employees, as it can increase awareness for new wellness program planning and perhaps create shared community partnerships.

Educators and wellness providers are in prime position to both teach health and wellness courses and create wellness programs based on current needs data as provided by employees. Wellness programs promote change in quality of life for staff and faculty that can improve health status (ACHA, 2007). In turn, improved health increases productivity and reduces the economic burden on society (U.S. Department of Wellness & Human Services, 2012). Administrators have more opportunity to develop collaborative relationships and develop stronger bonds between employees increasing collegiality across disciplines by utilizing wellness programs designed with employee interests in mind.

Unfortunately, most university health and wellness assessments focus on student needs rather than the needs of employees; employee needs are commonly different from those of the students (Haines et al., 2007; Sell, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine employee preferences of wellness programs at a U.S. university.

### 1.1. Value of college and university wellness programs

A well-designed wellness program at a college or university in the United States (U.S.), or in any country, can serve as a model for other schools and the community. Such programs compliment local, state, and national health initiatives. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2007), the scope of practice of wellness in colleges/universities should include both environmental and individual approaches. Wellness professionals should build individual capacity and address individual risk for illness and injury. In addition, administrators who implement such wellness programs should address larger institutional and community issues, as well as public health policies that are not being tackled for employees through existing wellness programming (Naydeck, Pearson, Ozminkowski, Day, & Goetzel, 2008).

### 1.2. Study purpose

Programming for university employees have been shown to be successful (e.g. Baghurst, Tapps, Mwavita, Volberding, & Jayne, 2014). However, some have suggested that the development of programming and facilities for employees does not always consider the input of employees, even though it should (Brown, Volberding, Baghurst, & Sellers, 2014, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate university employees interest in and preferences for on campus wellness programming at a U.S. university. Short-term programming for university employees focused on improving health and wellness may also encourage participants in the long-term to live healthier lives, make conscious decisions related to their personal wellness, or simply be more cognizant of health and wellness options at their place of employment.

## 2. Method

The survey instrument was adapted from two existing instruments currently used to assess employee wellness needs and wants: (1) The Fort Martin/Albright region worksite wellness survey, which is used by numerous local and state agencies and is recommended by the National Safety Council (2012), and (2) The worksite wellness for Tompkins County New York survey (Tompkins County Wellness Department, 2012). The wording of these instruments was specifically tailored to relate more directly to employees at the university level and focused on three subsets: physical activity, nutrition, and lifestyle. The surveys were combined for simplicity and to ensure participants completed all components.

In total, the combined survey contained 33 questions including demographics, attitudes toward wellness, health history, physical activity, and programming specifically related to wellness issues in the

physical, nutritional, and lifestyle categories. A validation procedure of the reliability of the instrument was conducted which yielded a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient of .85 among the staff and faculty sample.

Surveys for this study were electronically distributed to 1,536 university employees following Institutional Review Board approval. At the conclusion of a two-week collection period, the survey was closed to further responses. The survey response rate was 28.5% (438 responses). A majority of employee responses (62.6%) came from faculty and professional staff. The other responses were from administrators, classified staff, and auxiliary services.

The level of participants’ interest in wellness activities were collected electronically and analyzed descriptively using SPSS 16.0. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to assess significant differences between the three subsets. Bonferroni follow-up testing was also conducted.  $\chi^2$  analysis was conducted to determine the employee level of interest within each programming option.

### 3. Results

A majority of the 438 participants were female (58.4%) and were employed fulltime by the university (79.2%). Ages ranged from 18 years to over 56 with a large portion of the sample (72.9%) over the age of 35. The largest group of respondents identified themselves as faculty members (35.2%) with other participants being administrators, professional staff, classified staff, or auxiliary staff members. Of the participants, only 30.4% reported being members of a fitness club and only 25.3% stated that they were frequently or very frequently physically active at work (Table 1).

**Table 1. Demographics of university employees in the study group**

Demographic	Response	N (%)
Gender	Male	182 (34.7%)
	Female	256 (58.4%)
Age	18–25	16 (3.7%)
	26–35	71 (16.2%)
	36–45	81 (18.5%)
	46–55	126 (28.8%)
	56+	112 (25.6%)
Employment type	Administrator	20 (4.6%)
	Faculty	154 (35.2%)
	Professional staff	120 (27.4%)
	Classified staff	65 (14.8%)
	Auxiliary services	17 (3.9%)
Employment status	Other	25 (5.7%)
	Full time	347 (79.2%)
Member of fitness club	Part time	60 (13.7%)
	Yes	133 (30.4%)
Physically active job	No	299 (68.3%)
	Never	59 (13.5%)
	Rarely	149 (34.0%)
	Occasionally	104 (23.7%)
	Frequently	68 (12.5%)
Participate in activities	Very frequently	56 (12.8%)
	Yes	191 (43.6%)
	No	21 (4.8%)
	Not Sure	162 (37.0%)

Respondents were asked to rate 15 programming options which they would be most interested in attending by using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = “not interested at all” to 5 = “very interested”. The 15 programming options were categorized into three subsets by the research team: (1) physical activity, including how to start an exercise program, strength training, yoga classes, Zumba classes, and walking clubs; (2) nutrition, including cooking classes, eating *wellnessy*, Weight Watchers, and *wellnessy* shopping on a budget; and (3) lifestyle, including stress reduction, sleep improvement, smoking cessation, time management, wellness screenings, and managing overall wellness.

In order to assess the interest for programming in each of these subsets, the sum of responses of each individual variable in the subset were calculated to determine an overall score (Table 2). Subsequently, means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) were compared. Of the three programming categories, participants reported the most interest in lifestyle (*M* = 18.33; *SD* = 4.73) followed by physical activity (*M* = 16.31; *SD* = 4.35), and nutrition (*M* = 12.75; *SD* = 4.13). A one-way repeated measures ANOVA yielded significant differences between each of the three subsets, ( $\Lambda = .35$ ,  $F_{(2, 362)} = p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .64$ ).

To learn how to better construct a successful program, individual programming options were also assessed via  $\chi^2$  analysis. Researchers combined categories 1–2 (not interested at all and not interested), 3 (neutral), and 4–5 (interested and very interested) to determine the level of interest by response percentage. Of the individual programs, participants responded that they were most

**Table 2. Results of program interest assessment**

Subset	Programing option	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	$\chi^2$ Interest level of individual programming options		
			Not interested at all and not interested (%)	Neutral (%)	Interested and very interested (%)
Lifestyle		18.33 ± 4.73			
	Stress reduction	3.64 ± 1.18	17.0	19.4	62.6
	Managing overall health	3.58 ± 1.13	16.2	23.6	60.1
	Health screenings	3.36 ± 1.19	20.6	26.0	52.3
	Sleep improvement	3.33 ± 1.39	25.6	18.3	53.2
	Time management	2.87 ± 1.30	36.8	27.0	33.8
	Smoking cessation	1.49 ± 1.05	82.0	7.3	6.8
Physical activity		16.31 ± 4.35			
	Strength training	3.69 ± 1.12	14.5	18.5	66.2
	Yoga	3.50 ± 1.34	20.3	19.3	57.2
	Walking clubs	3.04 ± 1.34	33.1	24.7	40.8
	Starting exercise program	3.04 ± 1.30	30.3	27.6	39.9
	Zumba™	3.04 ± 1.38	35.2	22.3	40.3
Nutrition		12.75 ± 4.13			
	Eating healthy	3.47 ± 1.25	23.0	16.0	59.6
	Cooking classes	3.37 ± 1.34	24.6	18.7	54.5
	Healthy shopping budget	3.33 ± 1.34	26.0	19.0	53.1
	Weight Watchers™	2.56 ± 1.36	46.9	24.4	24.9

interested in strength training (66.2% interested or very interested,  $M = 3.69$ ;  $SD = 1.12$ ), stress reduction (62.6% interested or very interested,  $M = 3.64$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ), and managing overall wellness (60.1% interested or very interested,  $M = 3.58$ ;  $SD = 1.13$ ). The individual programs with the lowest interest level were smoking cessation (6.8% interested or very interested,  $M = 1.49$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ), Weight Watchers™ (24.9% interested or very interested  $M = 2.56$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ), and time management (33.8% interested or very interested,  $M = 2.87$ ;  $SD = 1.30$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The current study asked employees from a U.S. university to rate their interest levels in 15 different wellness program areas that were focused and conceptualized in three primary areas: physical wellness, nutritional wellness, and lifestyle wellness. Survey respondents originated from a variety of areas within the university. As well, participants reported varying physical activity levels and represented a broad age range (18–56 years). Only a small percentage of university employees (4.8%) indicated that they would not participate in wellness programming if offered. As such, our study suggests that an interest in employee wellness programs for all employees at universities, regardless of their job responsibilities exists. In addition, this suggests that employee interest in programs grow once made aware of what programming options are available to them.

Often, contemporary employee wellness programs stress the importance of physical activity and proper nutrition. Interestingly, the current study of university employees indicated greatest interest in lifestyle activities (e.g. stress reduction, managing overall wellness). These results suggest that programming specific to lifestyle health and wellness may be a current trend that could help drive employee participation. This may be because their hectic lives do not allow time to exercise or to prepare a healthy meal. Along with traditional exercise and nutrition programming, results point to a growing need and interest in incorporating lifestyle-programming options into employee wellness programs. This discovery differs from studies focused on the wellness programming needs for students (e.g. Sellers, Baghurst, Volberding, & Brown, 2014), demonstrating that lifestyle-programming in regard to nutrition is typically not a main concern for university students (ACHA, 2007).

Overall, wellness programs promote change in quality of life for staff and faculty that can improve health status (ACHA, 2007). Improved health may also increase productivity and reduces the economic burden on society (U.S. Department of Wellness & Human Services, 2012). Administrators may also have opportunity to foster ancillary benefits; collaborative relationships within these programs may develop, which may help to improve stronger employee relationships. Such connection across levels may aid in knowledge sharing and improved communication across the workplace (Vajjhala & Baghurst, 2014). Such programming may develop stronger bonds between employees increasing collegiality across disciplines, done so by utilizing wellness programs designed with employee interests in mind as opposed to traditional physical and nutritional programming currently being offered on university/college campuses.

#### 5. Conclusion

A variety of implications for wellness needs are present on college and university campuses. A university administration that advocates and promotes targeted wellness activities will encourage the development of a campus community that works to achieve and maintain a wellness lifestyle (Ewing, Ryan, & Zarco, 2007). Current wellness-related programs should be designed and delivered based upon the needs and interests of current employees (Brown et al., 2014, 2015). Further, university wellness programs can also serve as a springboard for interdisciplinary collaboration and communication related to the exploration of individualized wellness programming.

Colleges and universities are worldwide and are generally comprised of a diverse group of administration, faculty, and staff. Therefore, wellness program coordinators need to be able to effectively assess the unique needs and interests of each campus. Thus, as a first step, wellness program coordinators should gather information and uncover the needs and requirements from their specific employees, which will help to fulfill the needs of their campus (Barker & Glass, 1990; Bright et al., 2012).

The outcomes from this study suggest that the health and wellness programming desired by university employees may differ from those of the students. In many workplaces, and in a study conducted with just a student sample, these desired outcomes differ from employee preferences (Carter et al., 2011). Furthermore, most research about interests in employee wellness programs has been conducted using samples from large corporations, and does not account for the unique settings of colleges and universities (Sell, 2005).

The diverse composition of employees at colleges and universities requires special consideration by wellness committees when designing and offering programs. To be successful in engaging employees in programming, wellness administrators face an increasing need to understand the specific innovative programs and unique needs of employees as opposed to student counterparts. In relative terms, most colleges and universities already have the physical tools and expertise on campus to begin an employee wellness program. Assessing needs and interests, subsequently developing, and implementing aligned programs is one challenge wellness professionals will encounter.

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#### Cover image

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