

5 Key Tips for College Student Wellness

Strategies for Student Success

By DAVID S. ANDERSON, Ph.D.

Professor of Education and Human Development at George Mason University, USA, and author of Wellness Issues for Higher Education: A Guide for Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals (2015)



Introduction

Student success in college is valued by faculty, by staff, by parents, and by students themselves. While no single strategy will guarantee a student's success, it is clear that students benefit from having healthy attitudes and wellness skills, both during their college years and throughout their lives. Similarly, wellness-related barriers and obstacles can directly or indirectly result in academic non-success, behavioral problems, and attrition.

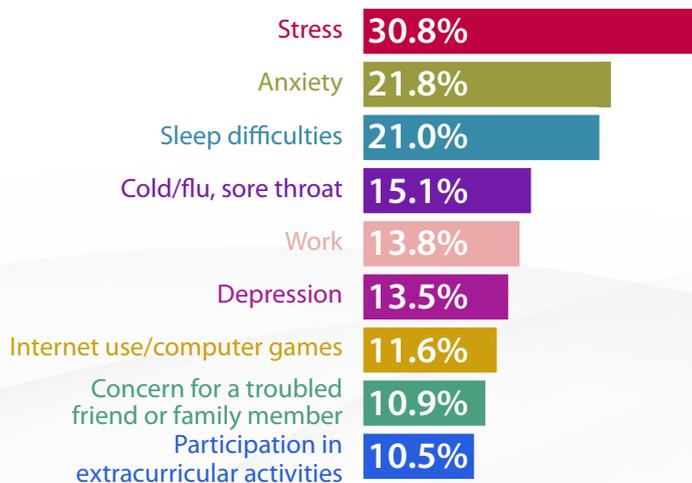
Those working with college students – faculty members, student affairs professionals, and even parents — have the opportunity to address a wide range of wellness issues affecting student success. Interested advocates can address student wellness from both a proactive and reactive perspective. Proactive efforts help shape the campus environment to promote healthy decision-making by students, and to acquaint students with and nurture them to access a range of services and stimuli to maximize their own potential. Reactive efforts can help identify problems before they emerge, and refer students to appropriate specialists as needed. The Five Key Tips in this paper provide substantive and current insights to aid campus professionals and others as they strive to help students succeed in college.

5 Key Tips for College Student Wellness

- 1 Students Have Pressing Needs
- 2 Colleges and Universities Have a Unique Role to Play
- 3 Student Success is a Shared Responsibility
- 4 Wellness is Holistic
- 5 Understanding Wellness Is an Investment Easily Applied

Students Have Pressing Needs

It's critical to understand that students' wellness needs affect academic performance. Top among the factors affecting academic performance, cited by students in research conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA), are stress (30.8%), anxiety (21.8%), sleep difficulties (21.0%), cold/flu, sore throat (15.1%), work (13.8%), depression (13.5%), internet use/computer games (11.6%), concern for a troubled friend or family member (10.9%), and participation in extracurricular activities (10.5%).



Drug and Alcohol Use

Among the students citing alcohol use with the ACHA survey, over one in five (**22%**) report consuming 7 or more at a time, with the average number of drinks being 4.82 per person. Nearly one in seven (**14.0%**) students report using one or more prescription drugs not prescribed for them during the last year, with **8.3%** reporting the use of stimulants, **6.2%** using pain killers, and **3.6%** using sedatives. Johnston and his colleagues, with their longitudinal survey, documents that, on a monthly basis, **63.1%** of full-time college students drink alcohol, **14.0%** use tobacco, and **20.6%** use marijuana; further, **35.2%** of students consume 5 or more drinks at least once in the past two weeks.

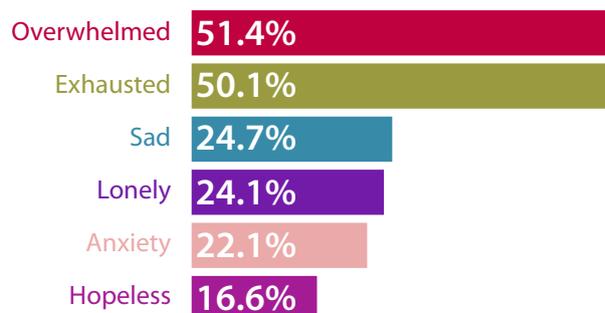
How Might this Affect Student Performance?

From an overall contextual perspective, students reported feeling, in the last two weeks, overwhelmed by all they had to do (**51.4%**), feeling exhausted, and not from physical activity (**50.1%**), feeling very sad (**24.7%**), feeling very lonely (**24.1%**), feeling overwhelming anxiety (**22.1%**), and feeling things were hopeless (**16.6%**) (ACHA).

Anderson and Gadaletto report on college administrators' beliefs that alcohol is involved with **24%** of student attrition and **28%** of students' lack of academic success, as well as with **55%** of violent behavior and **68%** of acquaintance rape.

Among freshmen, one-third (**33.1%**) reported being overwhelmed by all they had to do, **8.9%** felt depressed, at a level of "frequently" during the past year; further **45.1%** reported falling asleep in class, "frequently" or "occasionally" during the past year (Eagan et al.).

These data document briefly that wellness issues are very much a part of students' lives and often hamper students' basic success or survival. Further, they can easily thwart the achievement of students' goals and dreams.



Colleges and Universities Have a Unique Role to Play

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Our nation's colleges and universities have an important role with the development of the hearts, minds, and bodies of students. Not only do these institutions of higher education have a role in addressing the various wellness issues affecting academic and other success among students, but they also have an opportunity to shape future generations of people who serve as the backbone of our nation: workers, family members, leaders, and community members. Over a half-century ago, Sanford stated: "If our culture and our society are to be changed at all by the deliberate application of intelligence and foresight, no agency has a better chance of initiating change than our institutions of higher learning" (p.19).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), over 21 million individuals are enrolled in degree-granting institutions in the United States, higher than the 16 million enrolled in 2001, which itself was up **11%** over 1991. NCES estimates, for the decade 2011 – 2021, an enrollment rise of **13%** for students under age 25, and **14%** for those age 25 and above. Thus, the need and opportunity to address wellness issues are both growing.

Coupling this enrollment with an anticipatory and forward-looking approach, attention should be placed on the skills needed for various careers and emerging needs for the world of the next decade and beyond. These skills include, among others: critical thinking, ethical leadership, interpersonal relationships, innovation, balance, and engineered planning.

3

Student Success is a Shared Responsibility

Personnel in colleges and universities — including faculty as well as those in student affairs professions — have a unique role to play in the lives of students. These stakeholders are in high-level policy roles as well as those in advising, consultative, training, or programming roles; they are also seasoned professionals as well as those just beginning their careers.

It's important to remember that student success is not simply the responsibility of the student. While, ultimately, each student is responsible for his/her own personal destiny and academic success, concerned others can provide inspiration, redirection, challenges, and advice. Students need to learn to manage themselves and to overcome the range of challenges they might face; however, they can benefit from the wisdom and insight of others, particularly those working on the college campus.

The efforts to address student wellness issues is not just the purview of those with specific expertise in a topic area; these specialists have important roles to play, but all other campus personnel can serve as "first responders" for identifying and referring students, for encouraging students' use of various resources, for correcting myths, misperceptions, and inaccuracies about many wellness issues, and for promoting a positive, engaged lifestyle.

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Wellness is Holistic

Over three decades ago, the concept of health was reconceptualized as overall fitness that applies to the body, mind and spirit, rather than just being considered the absence of disease. This concept was named "wellness" and emphasized healthy living. Powers and Dodd see wellness as "a state of healthy living" that is "achieved by the practice of a healthy lifestyle, which includes regular physical activity, proper nutrition, eliminating unhealthy behaviors, and maintaining good emotional and spiritual health."

Wellness is about being positive and proactive. Wellness is preventive. Wellness is optimistic. Wellness is never-ending. Wellness is a journey. While wellness doesn't have a defined "endpoint" (i.e., a person is never completely "there"), a state of wellness is one of relative balance and productivity in one's life. It is about actualized potential, knowing that one can always get better and be better throughout life. Attention to wellness is important and necessary – and addresses the challenges to student non-success within a prevention-oriented, holistic mindset.

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Understanding Wellness Is an Investment Easily Applied

To fully understand wellness issues, personnel in colleges and universities can benefit from the expertise of those who specialize—whether that be in nutrition or stress, drug and alcohol use, mental and relationship health, sexual decision-making, study and writing skills, sleep and exercise, technology, or spirituality. Campus personnel and others invested in the success of students can benefit from current knowledge on the topic as well as best-practices. Specific wellness topics have a significant body of literature and research, for the collegiate audience as well as other age groups. By reading a synthesis of the latest research, exploring some of the controversies and emerging issues in wellness, becoming aware of various resources and documentation on the topic, and understanding policies and programs in place across the country, personnel can become quite well grounded in wellness issues.

The table below highlights current knowledge and recommendations on twelve key wellness issues associated with student success.

Wellness Area	Topic	Key Tips
Emotional Wellness	Stress Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attention should be paid to the unique needs of traditional and nontraditional students, international students, students who are veterans, students in recovery, and others who experience stress from different sources and in different ways. To understand student stress in the context of a college campus, there must be commitment to an outcomes-focused, evidence-driven organization, as well as creative projects to address stress.
	Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health problems present themselves as academic struggles and failure, excessive absences from classes and obligations, excessive substance use, loneliness and isolation, social and interpersonal difficulties, changes in self-care and lack of self-care, extreme risky behaviors, inability to regulate emotions, hopelessness and despair. The support of university leadership is critical for promoting a caring culture that emphasizes student resiliency, as well as to target programs and interventions for helping shift stigma, prejudice, and discrimination regarding mental health issues.
	Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While evidence is conflicting about the use of social networking and the linkage to positive and negative mental health, college educators should be trained to identify signs of Internet addiction and develop programmatic alternatives that promote in-person, face-to-face social interaction. It is important to understand the potential for both positive and negative effects on the mental health and psychological wellness of students.

Wellness Area	Topic	Key Tips
Social Wellness	Relationship Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each student is unique, and brings unique perspectives to college, based on factors such as family relationships, international student status, peers, and significant others. • Faculty and staff play key roles in the development of students, and must develop positive relationships with students and help them learn how to enhance and thrive in their own relationships.
	Sexual Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social cultural contexts within which students make sexual health decisions is critical, including students' morals and family values, social norms, pressure, and expectancies. • Prevention, early detection, and effective interventions are critical to reducing sexual health risks and promoting positive sexuality.
	Alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant advances in addressing college student drinking focus on an evidence-based, scientifically rigorous field of study utilizing brief interventions and strategic ecological approaches. • Interventions should incorporate normative correction, challenge expectations of social benefits of drinking, and provide models of responsible attitudes.
	Prescription and Illicit Drug Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding why people use substances provides an opportunity to redirect potentially harmful and dangerous behavior. • Seven principles help understand the biological basis of substances: properties of the substance, characteristics of the individual, setting, dosage, preparation, method of use, and extent of artificial contents.
Intellectual Wellness	Study and Writing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending college provides individuals with opportunities to develop and sharpen skills valued by employers, such as critical thinking and analysis, teamwork, sound judgment, problem-solving, public speaking, writing, professional appearance, punctuality, reliability, initiative, flexibility and honesty. • Academic skills constitute the ability to prepare, be organized and clear about one's purpose and goals, manage one's time, communicate appropriately, and seek support in order to perform well.
Physical Wellness	Sleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to issues of sleep quantity, sleep quality, sleep regularity, and REM sleep is vital for enhancing bedtime performance. • College personnel can promote a community that values and practices good sleep behaviors by attending to living environments and learning environments; strategies may include room darkening, external lighting, soundproofing, quiet hours, encouraging positive sleep behaviors, having a sleep statement, and dispelling myths about sleep.

Wellness Area	Topic	Key Tips
Physical Wellness (continued)	Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to sound information is critical to offset common myths on topics such as what to eat, getting fat, drinking soda, eating breakfast, and the use of butter, organic foods, eggs, sugar, multivitamins, as well as nutrition's linkage to grades. • Campuses can implement numerous strategies for change, such as mastering grocery shopping, preparing food, encouraging dialog, evaluating the campus environment, exploring marketing tactics, and establishing a campus garden and service learning projects.
	Exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise has numerous benefits for students, including increased academic performance, decreased stress, improved mental health, and overall health; it can help students flourish during college. • A comprehensive exercise program includes attention to cardiovascular exercise, strength training, stretching, and flexibility.
Spiritual Wellness	Spiritual Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "sweet spot" for wellness lies at the intersection of the body, mind, and spirit. • The integration of spirituality could be the lifeblood of a campus, infusing itself into conversations between faculty, staff, administrators, and students; these may occur with campus celebrations, as well as memorials or community loss.

Conclusion

The variety of wellness issues faced by students provides numerous opportunities for all college personnel, including faculty, staff, administrators, and others committed to students' success, to help shape students' lives. Whether through attention to staff training or the development of policies, or by promoting healthy discussions or creating supportive living and learning environments, campus personnel can help orchestrate a quality setting for all.

Important to this understanding is that wellness issues do not exist in separate "packages" or "silos"; interplay among them is widespread, and progress in one dimension can be helpful for positive results in another.

Campus leaders will benefit from a careful examination of what their campus is doing and what it could be doing better. Ongoing attention to students' needs and issues is critical for designing the most appropriate resources and strategies for the campus and its student population. Through these efforts, campus personnel can demonstrate their investment in students and their collective futures.

A great resource for enhancing students' success and learning about opportunities for impact is *Wellness Issues for Higher Education: A Guide for Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals*, which provides a synthesis of current topical knowledge and applications for policy, programming, training, reflection, and other venues for action.

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