

Wellness Coaching: Helping Students Thrive

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Abstract

The promotion of healthy behaviors has become a mandate on many college campuses. Promoting mental health among all students is emerging as a particularly salient way to encourage academic success and lifelong well-being. Wellness coaching is one innovative approach for promoting mental health and academic achievement among all students. The coaching framework encourages students to target areas of development within a holistic model of wellness, and utilizes an approach grounded in positive psychology and strengths to help students accomplish self-endorsed goals. The process of wellness coaching supports students' ability to thrive (Schreiner, 2010), academically, socially, and emotionally. Wellness coaches are graduate students from diverse disciplines, with particular emphasis placed upon recruiting students from the field of higher education and student affairs. Student coaches receive multiple forms of training, including classroom learning, live shadowing, and ongoing mentorship and consultation. Programmatic assessment outcomes demonstrate support for wellness coaching as a distinctive model that facilitates student thriving and equips future leaders in higher education with applied competencies in student development and learning.

Keywords: coaching, college students, health promotion, mental health, motivational interviewing, positive psychology, strengths, wellness

Health promotion on college campuses has been identified as a critical factor for nationwide health improvement (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2012). Programs designed to enhance the health and wellness of students, faculty, and staff have subsequently become a priority at many institutions of higher education. Healthy Campus 2020 (ACHA, 2012) was developed as a guiding framework for college campuses to promote quality of life, healthy development, and positive health behaviors. The list of objectives that falls under this framework is comprehensive and contains dimensions including academic performance, mental and physical health, harm reduction, self-care, and sexual and social relationships. The diverse range of concerns articulated by Healthy Campus 2020 aligns well with holistic approaches to wellness, which typically integrate broad dimensions of functioning into a growth-oriented and preventative approach to health promotion (Granello & Witmer, 2012; Myers & Sweeney, 2005). The case for holistic health promotion is reinforced by research linking health behaviors with academic success. High levels of stress, lack of sleep, and alcohol use have all been correlated with decreased grade point averages for students (University of Minnesota, 2008). Conversely, utilization of mental health services is linked with increased retention among college students (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009). Therefore, efforts to promote health and wellness behaviors on college campuses can be viewed as supporting multiple outcomes, from instilling lifelong healthy behaviors to supporting academic achievement and student success.

While there is evidence that preventative wellness-oriented interventions can impact student populations, most universities provide only minimal support for prevention-oriented programs, even as the need and demand for support services increases. In a national survey of college counseling center directors, 92% of the respondents reported that the number of students seeking help at their centers has increased in recent years (Gallagher, 2012). At the same time, data from the National College Health Assessment (ACHA, 2014) show that 54% of college students surveyed indicated overwhelming anxiety, but only 14.3% of students reported diagnosis or treatment by a health professional for anxiety in the past 12 months. The discrepancy between these statistics suggests that even as the existing support services on college campuses are taxed with increased demand, there are still vast numbers of students who are not receiving support for concerns directly impacting their success in college. This may help to explain why a survey of Chief Student Affairs Officers identified college student mental health as the most salient critical issue facing higher education within the domain of student health and wellness (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014).

As part of the effort to address college student mental health, college counseling centers most often fulfill a specific mandate to assist students who require support for diagnosed mental health disorders. By contrast, there are few resources offered to promote mental health among the general student population. This may represent a significant gap in student services, as the majority of college students report having felt overwhelmed (86.4%), exhausted (82.1%), or very sad (62%) or lonely (59.2%) at some point during the past year of their life (ACHA, 2014). Additionally, findings from the inaugural Gallup Purdue Index report suggest that the most powerful elements linked to long-term success for college graduates are related to emotional support, but only 14% of all college students strongly agreed they had experienced each of these elements during their time in college (Busteed, 2014). In light of these findings, the office of student life at a university in the Midwest initiated a distinctive student service called *wellness coaching* through its student wellness center. The wellness coaching service is grounded in positive psychology and wellness, and has been developed with an intent to support students' ability to thrive in college by encouraging the development of healthy behaviors while promoting mental health and academic success for all students.

Defining Wellness Coaching

Wellness coaching can best be described by considering the two words that comprise the title of the service both separately and together. The first word, *wellness*, refers to a multidimensional concept made up of a wide variety of components including spirituality, physical health, mental health, social relationships, and intellectual development, (Gieck & Olsen, 2007; Granello & Witmer, 2012; Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Studies of college student populations have investigated discrete elements of wellness such as spirituality (Winterowd, Harrist, Thomason, Worth, & Carlozzi, 2005), mental and emotional health (Conley, Travers, & Bryant, 2013; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Ruthig, Marrone, Hladkyj, & Robinson-Epp, 2005), physical health (Gieck & Olsen, 2007; Waldon & Dieser, 2010), and social wellness (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). By comparison, relatively few studies have investigated a more integrated and multidisciplinary approach to college student wellness (LaFountaine, Neisen, & Parsons, 2006).

Empirical studies employing a holistic framework for wellness most often describe overall wellness levels for particular population demographics (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). For example, Myers and Mobley (2004) distributed wellness assessments to undergraduate students (N=1567) to explore differences in wellness scores between traditional and non-traditional students. Similarly, LaFountaine, Neisen, and Parsons (2006) distributed a holistic wellness

assessment to first year college students (N=1007) to contrast the wellness of first year students with normative scores for the total undergraduate population. Findings from these studies suggested targeted wellness interventions to promote the adoption of healthy behaviors among college students. One of the most rapidly emerging paradigms on college campuses for providing this type of intervention are services focused on coaching relationships.

Coaching, the second word in the program title, is defined as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (International Coach Federation [ICF], 2014). As coaching services have become more accepted, often as forms of individualized advising, some universities have contracted with external vendors, or used forms of coaching as a mandated intervention for targeted student populations (Dalton & Crosby, 2014; Keen, 2014). By contrast, the wellness coaching service harnesses character strengths and intrinsic motivation for change to promote students’ ability to accomplish self-selected, wellness-oriented goals. As such, it is identified as an educational intervention grounded in positive psychology (Seligman, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) that empowers students to thrive in college by promoting positive emotions, social connectedness, and academic engagement and determination (Schreiner, 2010).

By creating a unique program, rather than purchasing coaching support through a third party vendor, wellness coaching staff have been able to develop a service addressing the specific niche identified as a critical area for additional student support. Additionally, the creation and implementation of the service generated a strong collaborative partnership between academic affairs and student affairs. Faculty members from the graduate program in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) contributed their expertise on student development to help shape the program while also playing a key role in recruiting students to train as coaches. Wellness coaching is provided by upper level undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom are also students in the HESA program. Their training and experience in the wellness coaching program enhances their preparation as student affairs leaders by providing transferrable skills in competencies including advising and helping, ethical professional practice, personal foundations, and student learning and development (Bresciani & Todd, 2010).

A final benefit realized by internally developing the wellness coaching service was the ability to develop customized assessments of the programmatic outcomes by retaining full access to data generated by the coaching program. The ability to tailor program assessment enables the wellness coaching staff to emphasize the institutional values that are perceived as particularly important for student development. While the purpose of the program is to support development and growth among all students participating as coaches and clients, effective outcome assessments may also begin to define a general scope of practice for coaching services to assist student affairs practitioners at many institutions in providing intentional, ethical, and responsible support to students.

Integrating Wellness and Positive Psychology

Wellness coaching draws upon several theoretical foundations to support the overall validity of the program, including theories of wellness, positive psychology, motivation, and student development. Wellness refers to a multidimensional, synergistic construct oriented toward maximizing the potentiality inherent to each individual (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Historically, the origin of the wellness philosophy is rooted in the fifth-century B.C.E. writings of Aristotle, who identified *eudaemonia* as the state of flourishing that represents the ultimate expression of each person’s ability to live well (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). The process of flourishing is often referred to as happiness, and happiness, in this sense, is meant to represent

the emotional state occurring when individuals who understand their essential nature aspire toward their desired lifestyle (Witmer, 2012). As such, the concept of eudaemonia has been formational in research agendas within wellness and positive psychology (Seligman, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) as a guiding framework for understanding optimal human functioning.

Positive psychology is referred to as “an umbrella term for theories and research about what makes life most worth living” (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 603). The emphasis upon happiness within the field has been critiqued with the suggestion that positive psychology wears “rose-colored” glasses when viewing human experience. Gable and Haidt (2005) refuted this assertion, stating that positive psychology acknowledges the struggle and suffering universal to human experience while equally emphasizing the potential for growth toward optimal functioning for each person. Positive psychology suggests we attempt to understand and resolve experiences that negatively impact human development while also studying what is good in human experience, or what makes life worth living. As such, positive psychology aligns well with the fundamental orientation of wellness theorists.

Seligman (2013) drew upon findings from positive psychology research to create a model for a life well lived. Five components were identified to constitute this model: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Seligman (2013) used the acronym PERMA to refer to this model, and suggested that individuals who report the presence of these five components in their life are likely to be flourishing, or realizing high levels of happiness and success. The presence and ability to maintain positive emotions was foundational for the experience of flourishing, as the ways in which humans emotionally process aspects of their lives has a large impact on their overall happiness. Flourishing individuals can also identify experiences of engagement in their life. Engagement is strongly associated with the state of flow, which is described as an immersive experience where individuals participate in tasks requiring high levels of challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The third element of meaningful and lasting relationships refers to the human desire for strong social connections. While the topic of relationships was not included in Seligman’s (2002) original work on authentic happiness, it was incorporated over time as studies highlighted the importance of social bonds for our overall happiness (Seligman, 2013). Flourishing also involves elements that generate a sense of meaning. Individuals who are committed to transcendent practices, ideas, and beliefs, or are engaged in purposeful pursuits, are more likely to show signs of human flourishing. The final component of PERMA is accomplishment, defined as the ability to achieve at least some valued goals viewed as important for one’s life (Seligman, 2002).

Schreiner (2010) adapted Seligman’s flourishing model for the particular developmental experience of students in settings of higher education, and referred to this new framework as the thriving model. This adaptation is intended to capture the unique dimensions comprising optimal collegiate experiences, as most positive psychology studies used findings associated with adult populations. Thriving college students are described as those who are not only “academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 4).

Schreiner’s (2010) model for thriving in college also contains five components: positive perspective, engaged learning, social connectedness, diverse citizenship, and academic determination. Positive perspective is described as students’ levels of optimism, especially in the face of challenges. Schreiner (2010) suggested students who possess a strong capacity for maintaining positive perspective do not have an unrealistic view of the world, but instead are

able to demonstrate resiliency and perseverance even when progress may be slow. Positive perspective is considered the foundational aspect of the thriving model, just as positive emotion is the primary element of Seligman's (2013) flourishing model.

Engaged learning refers to students who process and meaningfully connect their academic learning to their experiences outside of class. Engaged students are immersed in and energized by new knowledge, skills, and awareness. Social connectedness describes students' ability to form healthy relationships and the degree to which support networks exist for students. Diverse citizenship encompasses students' desire to make a difference in their community, as well as their openness to the diverse worldviews of others. The final element of academic determination refers to the use of time, energy, and effort towards academic goals, with the ultimate emphasis on persistence toward graduating from a degree program. Schreiner's adaptation of the flourishing model also incorporates Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of retention for college students by acknowledging that the academic and social nature of college is linked to institutional fit, retention, and graduation.

The emphasis on positive psychology in wellness coaching is augmented by the integration of character strengths into the coaching process. Prior to students' first coaching session, they complete the VIA Survey of character strengths (Peterson & Park, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths refer to individual capacities for thinking, feeling, and behavior, and the results of this assessment are woven into the coaching process throughout the duration of students' engagement with the program. Strengths-based approaches to student development have shown promise on university campuses. For instance, the University of Minnesota implemented and assessed a year-long strengths-based curriculum with incoming students. The participating students completed an assessment of strengths and six hours of training on strengths during a first-year survey course. Findings indicated students developed increased confidence in identifying strengths, more accurate self-assessments of ability, integration of values in choice of major or career, more effective learning, and development of realistic expectations about the future (Stebbleton, Soria & Albecker, 2012).

Additional motivational theories, including Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) inform the stance and practice of wellness coaching. Coaches draw upon these theories to create evocative contexts for students, eliciting their own motivation for change by supporting their autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, it is the distinctive integration of wellness and positive psychology that forms the theoretical underpinnings of the programmatic framework and provides a platform for assessing the outcomes of wellness coaching. These foundational theories complement each other and support students' ability to reframe perspectives and accomplish meaningful goals.

Programmatic Implementation and Staffing

Wellness coaching uses wellness and character strengths to promote the thriving dimensions of positive perspective, social connectedness, engaged learning, and academic determination. The wellness coaching program described here utilizes a holistic model of wellness that contains nine dimensions: career, creative, emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual wellness. The dimensions are conceptualized as interconnected, so stressors affecting any of these individual domains have the potential to impact wellness across multiple dimensions. As an example, challenging coursework may initially affect students' intellectual wellness as they struggle to learn and perform well academically. However, this common stressor may also impact additional wellness dimensions. For instance, this experience could affect their emotional wellness by generating negative feelings

or their physical wellness as stress can impact patterns of sleep and eating. Within the context of wellness coaching, this perspective is turned on its head. Just as stressors in any one area can diminish a student's holistic wellness, the pursuit of growth-oriented behaviors in any wellness dimension provides a means of enhancing overall wellness. Therefore, in a first session, coaches encourage students to identify focal areas of wellness for their coaching experience.

Following the selection of targeted wellness dimensions, coaches review the results of the VIA Survey (Peterson & Park, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) with clients. This is an intentional process prompting students to reframe their self-perspective from a focus on deficits to an individual who possesses strengths and inherent value. Coaches practice strength-spotting during coaching conversations to help students better perceive the role of strengths in their daily life in order to reinforce this new perception. The final component of a first session in wellness coaching is guiding students through a process of setting goals for personal wellness. At subsequent sessions, coaches facilitate open-ended conversations with students to help them make progress toward their self-identified goals while simultaneously supporting students' capacity to create the life they would prefer to be living. Coaches may augment the work occurring within the coaching sessions by providing additional resources for inter-session work (e.g. TED talks, online articles, evidence-based interventions from positive psychology). Coaches also facilitate referrals to other campus services to complement coaching in supporting students' development and accomplishment of their goals.

The wellness coaching staff is comprised of paid staff members, graduate assistants, and volunteer coaches from diverse academic disciplines. Several of the paid staff members are also licensed mental health professionals, which helps to ensure maintenance of an ethical scope of practice by all members of the coaching staff. The volunteer coaches are upper level undergraduates and graduate students who complete 12 hours of classroom learning with an extensive shadowing process where coaches-in-training co-facilitate sessions with more advanced coaching staff. Students receive training in communication skills, positive psychology, strengths facilitation, goal setting, Motivational Interviewing, referral, and self-care. All coaches meet regularly with paid members of the coaching staff for ongoing mentoring and consultation. Similar programs led by peer leaders, educators, and mentors have been shown to positively influence student engagement (Black & Voelker, 2008), feelings of support & belonging (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Yazedjian, Purswell, Toews, & Sevin, 2007), academic performance (Astin, 1993; Landrum & Nelsen, 2002; Lewis & Lewis, 2005), and retention and persistence (Cuseo, 2010; Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998; Tinto, 2006). Therefore, coaching led by peers may be an optimal method for helping students to achieve wellness-related goals.

Assessment and Outcomes

In the 2013-14 academic year, the coaching staff provided more than 650 individual coaching sessions for over 150 students. The age range for students who utilized the service was 17-43 years old. 30% of the students who attended coaching were first year undergraduates, while 25% were graduate and professional students. Demographically, wellness coaching clients closely paralleled university-wide enrollment, with 23% of clients identifying as non-white for race/ethnicity. There were two exceptions to this generalization, as the percentage of wellness coaching clients who identified as Latino/a was double the percentage of Latino/a students at the university, while the percentage of international students was about half the percentage of international students at the university. 66% of wellness coaching clients identified as female, while 34% identified as male.

The most common wellness dimensions selected as focal areas by clients were emotional (87%), social (59%), career (48%), and intellectual (46%) wellness. These findings parallel the thriving dimensions (Schreiner, 2010) as emotional wellness relates to positive perspective, social wellness with social connectedness, and career and intellectual wellness with academic determination and engaged learning. Over 80% of all participants returned for more than one coaching session, and the average duration for coaching was 3.66 sessions.

The wellness coaching service assesses programmatic outcomes based upon a survey distributed to students electronically upon completion of the coaching service. While the survey is currently administered within a short time frame (e.g. 1-2 weeks from when students complete coaching), the initial survey was delivered for the first time following the end of the 2013-14 academic year. The response rate was 20% (N=30) which indicates a reasonable sample from which to draw initial conclusions, although achieving a higher response rate is a priority for ongoing assessment.

The first set of items on the exit survey asks students to report changes in knowledge, self-awareness, and behaviors regarding wellness, strengths, and goal setting. Based upon these items, a majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that wellness coaching had provided them with greater knowledge about, skills for, and awareness of their personal wellness (90%). In the same manner, respondents also indicated wellness coaching had enhanced their capacity for setting and achieving goals (84%), and utilizing their personal strengths (83%).

A second set of items was created to assess whether students reported greater thriving using four of the constructs identified by Schreiner (2010): positive perspective, social connectedness, academic determination, and engaged learning. Students responded to three items for each of these four areas. Examples of survey items include “Because of wellness coaching I have a greater ability to put difficult experiences in perspective” (i.e. positive perspective); “As a result of wellness coaching I feel more connected to others at the university” (i.e. social connectedness); “Because of wellness coaching, I am determined to succeed in college” (i.e. academic determination); and “I am more actively engaged with my academic work as a result of wellness coaching” (i.e. engaged learning). Overall, respondents either agreed or strongly agreed wellness coaching helped them to maintain a positive perspective (88%), enhanced their social connectedness (68%), increased their academic determination (63%), and promoted engaged learning (63%). These outcomes take on added significance in light of research that identified dispositional optimism (i.e. positive perspective), sense of belonging (i.e. social connectedness), and academic optimism (i.e. academic determination) as significant predictors of retention and persistence in college student populations (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009).

Several open-ended items were included in the survey to elicit qualitative feedback from students. Prompts for these items included: “What was most helpful for you in the wellness coaching sessions;” “What was least helpful;” and “Are there any additional comments that you would like to share about your experience?” Three themes emerged from this set of student responses: self-discovery, navigating transitions in college, and self-acceptance.

Students described coaching as a space for self-discovery, particularly through the incorporation of strengths, which they described as transformative for their experience. For instance, one response stated, “wellness coaching aimed at helping you discover what type of person you are and how you can improve any area of your life. Instead of information being fed to you about ‘what you should do,’ the sessions lead to self-discovery and unleashed the confidence through your strengths that you didn’t know you had!” Students also reported

making use of wellness coaching to navigate transitions in their college experience. These statements were included from students in all stages of the college experience, from first year students who used coaching to adjust to college to graduate students who attended coaching to address concerns related to professional identity development. An example of navigating transitions can be seen in the response, “Wellness coaching has helped me work through very confusing situations, situations that I had heard about other people experiencing before but had no idea how to navigate in my own life. I am more self-aware and self-confident and self-empowered because of my wellness coaching experience.” The final theme that emerged from the qualitative feedback was self-acceptance. Students reported the emotional support they received through wellness coaching resulted in a radical shift in their perspective toward themselves. For instance, one student stated “discovering my strengths with a firm foundation and encouragement from the coaches was overall what helped me. It allowed me to see myself from others perspectives and gave me a lot of confidence. With this confidence and encouragement, I found my place [in college].”

Limitations

The Wellness Coaching program is currently entering the second year of providing peer-based support services grounded in positive psychology, strengths, and wellness. Initial data from the first year of programmatic implementation suggest this approach has been successful in providing a meaningful service for supporting students’ ability to engage, persist, succeed, and thrive in their collegiate experience. However, there are several limitations to our programmatic assessment. The first limitation is the sample size for the first set of data. The gap between service provision and assessment resulted in a less robust response rate than desired. Also, while the demographic characteristics of the students who utilized this service is largely representative of the overall enrollment of the institution where this study was conducted, we do not assume these characteristics are equally representative of student populations at other institutions. Therefore, caution should be exercised before generalizing any findings from this study.

Future Directions

At this point in time, the Wellness Coaching program has only explored four of the five aspects of Schreiner’s (2010) thriving model. This is because the initial iteration for wellness coaching was not designed to directly address the construct of diverse citizenship, and does not actively encourage students to engage their community or to accept the diverse viewpoints of others. As it stands, coaching provides students with a space for exploring the person they hope to become and the life they want to create for themselves. Future developments include integrating diverse citizenship into the coaching process. One possibility for doing so is to expand the scope of the goal setting process in coaching by asking students to consider both, “What is the life you want to live?,” and also, “What kind of world do you want to live in?” This shift in perspective may prompt students to explore their ability to thrive individually while also contributing to the movement toward thriving communities.

The outcomes associated with wellness coaching seem to suggest a close alignment between students’ descriptions of their experience and the student development theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Therefore, a second future direction is to explore self-authorship as a conceptual framework for understanding the experience of students in wellness coaching. Although more work is needed to explore this connections, students may utilize wellness coaching because the external formulas that have guided their lives to this point are no longer sufficient to make meaning of their current experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Students at these transitional crossroads face significant challenges to their sense of

self and their hopes for the future. The relationships established in wellness coaching may facilitate self-authorship by providing holding environments where students can cultivate, nurture, and ultimately act upon their internal voices. The use of character strengths may support this process by challenging students to view themselves from a new, appreciative perspective, which can gently alter identities rooted in deficit perspectives. The coaches' use of Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) to evoke the student's own motivation for making changes in their life supports their autonomy in making decisions and taking action, while building competence for facing challenges throughout life. Further exploration is needed to more fully integrate this theory into an understanding of the wellness coaching process.

One final future direction is to assess the role that training, mentoring, and provision of wellness coaching has upon the personal and professional development of the student coaches. A process is in place to conduct a qualitative inquiry to better understand the experience of students who provide wellness coaching for others, which may generate important data, particularly for rising professionals within the field of higher education and student affairs.

Summary

Numerous organizations and research studies support the promotion of healthy behaviors on college campuses. Particular emphasis is currently directed toward promoting student mental health as a way to encourage academic success and lifelong well-being. Wellness coaching, a service grounded in positive psychology and wellness theory represents one innovative approach to address this need, while also preparing future generations of leaders with transferable skills contributing to personal and professional development. The goal of wellness coaching is to help students thrive (Schreiner, 2010), academically, socially, and emotionally. Initial findings from program assessment support wellness coaching as a distinctive model that is worthy of consideration on many university campuses as an effective and additive component of student support.

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