

Toward a Culture of Self-Care

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Self-care -- maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle through individually determined activities -- has been found to improve productivity and a sense of well-being as well as physical and emotional health in a variety of work settings. Although it is still considered a somewhat controversial concept, many colleges and universities are now regarding self-care as essential for the optimal well-being of everyone in their community: faculty, staff, administrators, students, support personnel and others. The benefits of promoting self-care in the workplace are well documented.

Yet even in the face of high and increasing stress levels in all educational fields, self-care remains a low priority for many people in academic settings. In part, that is due to the traditional, culturally entrenched belief that faculty and staff members are expected to be concerned about the well-being of others -- often at the exclusion of their own well-being. Indeed, we contend that self-care has not been promoted as a universal component of educational programs because it is perceived by many people to be time off task -- and therefore detrimental to fulfilling "real" academic work commitments.

But if more colleges and universities implement self-care programs, the result will be more engaged campuses that are capable of promoting greater student success, producing higher levels of research and serving as exemplary educational models.

As an example, we recently implemented a self-care program for faculty and staff members in the Michael D. Eisner College of Education at California State University, Northridge. Our survey, observation and interview data indicate that the program is effectively making significant inroads toward a cultural shift in the perception of self-care.

Our first step in this process was to conduct an informal needs assessment about how faculty and staff members in our college were doing in the area of self-care. Independent conversations with different individuals suggested that, although most of them enjoyed their work, they often experienced stress and burnout on the job as a result of a heavy workload.

Our second step was to research successful self-care programs at colleges and universities throughout the United States. We discovered that engagement in self-care was highest when faculty and staff members themselves chose the activities and those programs were offered at convenient times and locations. Based on those findings and organizational change theory, we crafted the following operational definition for self-care: "taking responsibility for oneself to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle at work and in one's personal world through individually determined, proactive activities."

Using that definition, we then surveyed faculty and staff members about their self-care preferences and willingness to participate in any self-care programs. We analyzed the data to determine their preferences when it came to the number and type of activities, as well as the locations and times such activities were offered. Preferred activities included mindfulness meditation, nutrition and health, light exercise and walking, and beginning yoga.

Based on those preferences, we launched a self-care pilot program in spring 2015, offering activities around noon or in the early afternoon in the education building. Volunteer faculty and staff members served as activity guides. We shared information about those various activities via email blasts and on our [website](#). The program was informally named Self-Care for U at Northridge, or the SUN Program.

Program evaluation results showed that 44 percent of full-time faculty and staff members initially participated. More important, we saw significant positive changes in participants' engagement in self-care activities and in their sense of calm and well-being. Faculty and staff members said they valued the opportunity to gain helpful information about various types of self-care and to engage in these activities together within a supportive community. They liked the

short time frame of the self-care sessions, the freedom to choose which sessions to attend and the ease in learning from the well-prepared guides. They also indicated that they wanted the self-care activities to continue in future semesters.

Their responses suggested a real shift in the culture and values around the importance of taking care of oneself. The self-care program appeared to be a pipeline for faculty and staff members to engage in other self-care activities on the campus and in the community. More than half of the participants indicated that they were motivated to exercise more, eat better, get a regular health checkup and participate in other mindfulness and yoga activities. In addition, they reported a number of unexpected positive developments, including the formation of a universitywide mindfulness affinity group. Several guides also enrolled in additional self-care training, and other campus colleges started using our self-care program as a model for developing their own programs.

Based on feedback from surveys and focus-group interviews, we adjusted the times and types of activities and added new ones, including talks on sustainability, gardening, holistic health, and self-care and the arts. We continue to collaborate with various groups on our campus and to have discussions with representatives from other colleges about self-care programming.

In fact, as the program has evolved, we have become increasingly aware that a shared effort among faculty members and human resources and other administrators has been vital to its success. We have also recognized that the greatest challenge to our work has been promoting a cultural change within the college organizational framework and among the people who work there.

Now, in our third year, we are pleased to report that more than 60 percent of full-time faculty and staff members in the college are attending at least one self-care session. Through recent surveys and focus-group interviews, faculty and staff members have also told us that they engage in talk about self-care with colleagues and students more often after attending SUN Program activities and are now even integrating self-care information and activities into their classes and lessons. This highlights the expanding effect of a new self-care perspective and how it can create the cultural change within the entire college community that has been our ultimate goal.

If you are considering whether or not to implement a similar program at your institution, we recommend that the program design adhere to the following foundational guidelines:

- positive communication in a safe work environment;
- equal input among all stakeholders;
- voluntary faculty and staff participation;
- leadership by a committed facilitator-coordinator with gradual transfer to others; and
- ongoing evaluation, reflection and revision.

We also realized that commitment and support from top administrators was imperative for achieving significant, positive changes in participants' engagement in self-care activities and in their sense of calm and well-being, as well as bringing about many unanticipated, positive campuswide changes and beyond. Administrative buy-in should be demonstrated in a number of ways. As gatekeepers of university resources, administrators must provide support, such as facility availability and activity times during the workday for self-care involvement, with the knowledge that the return on the investment is well worth it. Administrators must also actively publicize their encouragement of self-care activities as a way of promoting involvement. Finally, administrators should engage in university self-care activities themselves to set an example that taking care of oneself in the work setting is a priority.

Once you start your program, you should encourage continuing input from participants and others about what works and what should change to meet their interests and needs. And, finally, the program must be institutionalized to ensure its sustainability. You can achieve such durability by making it part of an existing center or institute.

By investing in faculty and staff members' self-care, your institution will ultimately reap the benefits of highly engaged employees. Based on well-being research and our program findings, we posit that establishing faculty and staff self-care programs will promote high morale, facilitate student success, inspire innovative research and offer valuable role models for others in higher education settings.