



College Students Can Prepare for a Healthy Life

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The disturbing and dramatic trend downward in the health of Americans and the increase in chronic diseases have serious implications for our future. While health is not on the short list of academic priorities for most colleges and universities, we need to change that. We are in a unique position to become active partners in reversing the trend of unhealthy living for students as they grow into the next generation of responsible adults.

Research indicates that poor nutrition and health can compromise learning for children. At any age, nutritional deficiencies can impair cognitive performance. In college, stress is also a factor, as more than 30% of college students indicate that stress affects their individual academic performance. Given the alarming statistics about our nation's health, colleges are challenged to help students make sound health choices for a lifetime of learning.

College leaders, health educators, and medical directors have a responsibility to work with colleagues across the country to help students become healthier adults than the previous generation. We must turn out graduates with academic and professional knowledge and skills who also have the understanding and motivation to maintain the healthy lifestyle essential for full, active, and productive lives. This also has the potential to carry on to the next generation, as the children of today's students can be raised in households with good health habits.

Through education, we can arm our students with knowledge about health, while we also model an environment on our campuses that provides underpinnings for a healthy life.

Alarming and Irrefutable Health Statistics

Eighty-five percent of Americans believe that obesity is an epidemic in this country, according to a poll conducted by Trust for America's Health (TFAH) in 2007. They are correct. As a nation, we are overweight

and unfit, youth and adults alike. According to national health studies, the percentage of young people who are overweight has more than tripled since 1980. One-third of U.S. teens are physically unfit. More than 4 out of 10 male college students and 3 out of 10 female students are overweight or obese, according to the 2007 results of the National College Health Assessment survey sponsored each year by the American College Health Association (ACHA). In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent study on *Obesity Among Adults in the United States* (2007) points to "alarmingly high rates of obesity in all population groups" – 34% of adults aged 20 and over are obese.

There is powerful evidence that the increase in overweight and obesity is spawning a generation prone to serious health problems later in life, which can include increased susceptibility to type 2 diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, and many forms of cancer. The illnesses that lie in wait for unfit young people as they move through adulthood will cost them, their families, and our national health care system dearly. Consider, for example, that the American Medical Association estimates the cost of diabetes in the United States for 2007 at \$174 billion, an increase of \$42 billion since 2002.

"Shortfalls in health take years off the lives of all Americans and hurt our nation's economy," according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), as it recently launched a nonpartisan Commission to Build a Healthier America. The RWJF report to the new commission points to research findings by the University of California, San Francisco, indicating that an individual's health in this country is determined by social factors such as level of education, income, and living environment. These factors keep our citizens from being as healthy as they could be. In the preface to the RWJF report, *Overcoming Obstacles to Health*, Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, President and Chief Executive Officer of RWJF, challenges the commission "to identify solutions that will work, partners to mobilize, and actions to take now that will alter the trajectory of the health and well-being of the nation."

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We all must take this challenge to heart. Unhealthy lifestyles are a major public health issue. Rather than blaming individuals, we must approach the problem by creating environments that promote and support healthy behaviors, and by educating and motivating individuals and groups.

Promoting Healthy Lifestyles

Who we are as a nation today, and in the future, depends on the health of our citizens – and the majority of Americans understand this. A 2008 TFAH poll found that 57% believe that investing in preventing disease and promoting healthy lifestyles, in tandem with diagnosis and treatment, is the best way to improve the health of Americans. (The poll also showed that 7 in 10 Americans want the federal government to invest more in disease prevention and healthy living.)

Organizations whose mission is “good health” have begun a full frontal assault on the problem through prevention and social marketing programs that promote healthy living. The American Diabetes Association, American Heart Association, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and an army of government, private, and corporate groups are urging Americans to change their lifestyles. At the government level, “Developing Healthy People 2020” is a broad-based public initiative of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, which establishes science-based, 10-year national objectives for promoting health and preventing disease – inviting public input and stakeholder dialogue through regional meetings and other venues to ensure transparency and relevancy.

Forward-looking (and dollar-conscious) corporations increasingly now provide incentives for employees to become and stay healthy. They motivate employees to consume a good diet, refrain from smoking and other high-risk behaviors, and maintain appropriate levels of physical activity. The health of organizations is shaped by their employees – and tomorrow’s employees. For example, Virgin Life Care, a part of Sir Richard Branson’s Virgin Group, has developed a HealthMiles rewards program that companies can implement to help people improve their health by living more active lives.

Yet leaders of colleges and universities, whose job it is to turn out graduates with the knowledge and skills

to lead full, active, and productive lives, have largely been silent. That is not to say that we have been idle. Many colleges have developed programs and approaches to help their students live healthier. Yet the circumstances are ideal for us to accomplish so much more. Students attend college during highly formative years; they go through enormous personal changes and growth, testing and choosing who they are and who they want to be. Colleges can and should be incubators for young adults to develop good health practices, educating and motivating students about the best choices for a healthy “mind and body” lifestyle to benefit them and their future families.

“Healthy people in every stage of life” is how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines the health objective for Americans. For college students, that translates into learning how to *achieve health independence* so they can make sound decisions toward leading long, healthy, productive, and satisfying lives.

An Environment for Healthy Students

Some colleges have had student health programs for a long time. Yet generally, they have had limited impact on prevention and healthy lifestyles, and need to be integrated with the curriculum and student life initiatives. It is essential to provide effective health education that will help students make choices to become healthy and remain so throughout their lives. Think of the possibilities in establishing a benchmark for all U.S. colleges with programs adaptable to the culture of our individual schools – incorporating a range of strategies like the following...

Modeling environments to support healthy living. Whether consciously or not, colleges influence the lifestyles that students take with them. So we need to achieve a college environment where students (as well as faculty, staff, and administrators) can embrace choices that will promote healthier minds and bodies. Imagine a setting where the choices about living, studying, and working are healthy ones. Given the demanding lives of students, this will be a major challenge. Educational institutions must also devote more resources to educating students about the health consequences of the choices they make in such areas as nutrition, physical fitness and sports, sleep, risky sexual behaviors, alcohol, and drugs.

Students will require convincing evidence for behavior change. My own experience in public health has taught me that achieving behavioral change is not easy and requires great effort and persistence, with multiple sources of messages and support. The programs we implement must have a strong evidence base and be developed by nutrition, public health, and health education experts. The CDC's Task Force on Community Preventative Services publishes *The Community Guide* (thecommunityguide.org), which provides evidence-based recommendations for programs and policies to promote population health. The guide is an important source for making decisions regarding which intervention is most likely to be effective, and can help guide college and university administrators.

Simmons College students take part in the ACHA's National College Health Assessment survey, which offers us a perspective on our students and those in other schools or settings similar to ours. The survey provides a benchmark and also enables students to understand and measure their own perceptions and risks against those of their peers, both when they first arrive on campus, and as they change in subsequent years.

Parents have an important role because they determine their own family's approach to healthy living and influence their lifestyle choices. As they prepare their daughters and sons for college, parents hope that they have provided them the guidance they need. As far as health-related behavior, this is often not the case. Colleges have a unique opportunity to keep parents engaged in the learning process for a healthy lifestyle.

Widening the net for education and learning.

Good health should be made part of the learning fabric. Colleges can build into their curriculums health education programs that are interesting, science-based, and taught by top faculty to engage students in analyzing health and science issues, and lifestyle and cultural implications. The learning net can be widened by college-wide events and by collaborative discussions with students, faculty, and staff. It is important to encourage students to sponsor health, nutrition, physical and mental abuse prevention, and fitness campaigns that engage the entire college community in learning and action. It is particularly gratifying to see student ideas and efforts give birth to

sustainable programs. I have vivid memories of my own daughter, at 19, explaining that her friends thought smoking was "cool" until she told them that it gave them bad breath and could affect sexual function in men. Students often know best how to talk with their peers.

At Simmons College, the "Clothesline Project" is the public face of peer counseling throughout the year, focusing on working through prior physical, sexual, and mental abuse and learning to recognize and avoid abusive behavior in the future. T-shirts decorated by an abuse survivor or a loved one to tell a personal story are hung on a clothesline during a ceremony that also features music, readings, poetry, education, and words of hope – a powerful way to learn from life-changing experiences.

In the Health Education Program at Simmons, students learn lifetime strategies around nutrition and healthy eating, exercise, sleep, stress, time management, self-esteem, responsible drinking, preventive health, and putting an end to smoking. Part of the student residence hall orientation for first-year students is "living healthy as a college student," which also includes information on violence and abuse prevention. Our student health educators are often nursing majors.

The peer education program at Simmons trains students to be active listeners (peer-to-peer, friend-to-friend), and to organize programs that feature specialists in a variety of topics essential for healthy living. Because of their recognized value on our campus, the number of student peer educators at Simmons has grown from five a few years ago to 50 today.

A visit to Duke University's Student Health Center website provides a look into the school's supportive and engaging health promotion programs. Its peer educators (the Healthy Devils) focus on "promoting a positive campus community that reflects the attitudes, behaviors, and values of a healthy lifestyle." A wide range of programs (both standard and customized), counseling services, events, the *Well Devil* E-Newsletter, and other resources are available to encourage students to make healthy lifestyle choices that will lead to "comprehensive mind/body wellness." Students can even download health information from Duke's iTunes site to their iPods.

The University of South Carolina has set up a National Healthy Campus Clearinghouse, which is a

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database for colleges and universities to use as a resource to access the health promotion programs and resources that other colleges and universities offer their students – while uploading their own programs onto the database in return.

College websites are sources of valuable health information, and also serve as a platform for providing Internet resources for health, fitness, and medical information, teaching students how to discern which information on the Web is *dependable*. The American College Health Association survey shows that more than 70% of students commonly get health-related information from the Web.

Each student’s visit to our health center is made a learning opportunity – and these visits change as students take on increasing responsibility for the choices they make. Their comfort in asking probing questions of health professionals will carry over into important and careful decision-making as adults.

Enriching the food and nutrition experience.

Greater varieties of healthful and attractive food, flexible food service hours (late hours on weekends and during exam periods), opportunities to eat smaller nutritious meals at odd times, midnight breakfasts, cultural foods, interesting salad bar choices, on-the-go food, and healthful food for seasonal or campus-wide celebrations such as the Super Bowl – these are all part of college food service today. Successful food programs evolve to meet the changing needs of students – and work closely with food and nutrition experts. In reality, many food service choices in recent years have come about because students asked for them.

Decisions vary by college. Some schools focus on ensuring variety in their common dining rooms and small-meal options, while others may focus on ensuring that food made available by commercial sources on campus will support healthy-living objectives. Whatever the food options, opportunities exist to improve the nutritional quality of food in basic ways, where choices are made for the students through ingredients and options provided.

Attending to health and fitness. Colleges are making significant efforts to provide students with fitness and physical activities, multi-level sports, and athletic training and counseling. Paying attention to cardio-

respiratory fitness when we are young significantly reduces the chance of developing diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease later in life.

Many schools never stopped (or have reinstated) a requirement for students to participate in sports for a couple of semesters and today offer a wider range of engaging activities. In fact, full access for all students to well-equipped resources and facilities is important for varsity, intramural, and club teams, scheduled courses, and individual interests alike. From basketball to kick-boxing, to swimming or tap dancing and even ultimate Frisbee, the options are vast.

Convenience is important to students on both small and large campuses. Wherever the sports/fitness resources are housed, in a central location or campus-wide and in dorms, ease of access is essential. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* some months ago attracted my attention as it described the vitality of the new athletics center at Kenyon College. The center’s director was quoted as saying: “We didn’t want our varsity teams to go in there and lock the doors... We envisioned a wellness center for everyone on the campus. Today half the college’s 1,600 students play intramural sports – compared with 100 students before that center was built.”

Our own LEAP (Lifelong Exercise and Activities) Program at Simmons is dedicated to helping students, faculty, staff, alumnae, and nearby schools to ground their lifestyles in physical fitness and healthy choices. Program offerings include workshops, field trips, recreational activities, and classes in recreational sports, emerging fitness disciplines, and much more.

Focusing in on Alcohol, Behavior, and Risk.

College drinking is a difficult problem for most schools, and one that receives a great deal of attention on campuses nationwide. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, about 25% of college students report some academic consequences of drinking, from missing classes to doing poorly on papers, or affecting their grades overall. Virtually every student on college campuses is affected by drinking, even students who choose not to drink. A Boston University study noted that an estimated 2.8 million (one in four) college students say they drive while intoxicated, and they binge drink (for men, consuming five or more drinks at a sitting; for

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women, having four or more drinks at a sitting) on a regular basis. Not only does excessive drinking put students at physical risk, it also can contribute to health issues related to unsafe sex, potential police involvement, and academic problems.

This is another area where peer counseling is essential. Students need to discourage their peers from binge drinking, form designated-driver programs, and encourage responsible use of alcohol for those of legal age to drink. A tall order, but students who have experienced tragedy related to alcohol abuse may be the first to speak up, along with students who plan careers in health.

Risky sexual behavior and vulnerability to sexual abuse are also issues for college students. This country has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the Western industrialized world, and teen pregnancy costs the United States at least \$9 billion annually, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. The CDC recently estimated that while young adults represent 25% of the sexually active population, these 15 to 24 year olds acquire nearly half of all new STDs – and teens of color are disproportionately affected. Moreover, college-age women are four times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault, according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. A study sponsored by the Department of Justice in 2000 on the “Sexual Victimization of College Women” found that 20-25% of college students nationwide report experiencing completed or attempted rape. These difficult challenges require intervention on many fronts.

Leading a Campaign for Better Health

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,” said anthropologist Margaret Mead, who was my professor and mentor in both college and graduate school. Institutions of higher education need to join forces with others at the national, policy-making, and local levels to lead a campaign for better health. And colleges need to devote resources in their own areas of responsibility, to design a holistic approach to educating students that recognizes the importance and inter-dependence of the mind and the body.

We need more evidence on strategies that work on college campuses. It will be important, as we move forward, to develop and test specific campus-wide intervention models: a range of models, tested on multiple campuses, with good pre- and post-evaluation. We all can learn from each other if we approach this task with the same precision and determination as our best faculty members approach their intervention research.

Through individual, group, and institutional efforts combined, many more college students could earn a 4.0 in healthy living.

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