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Illinois State University's Student Health Agenda

Cecilia Montesdeoca

This essay is a short study of Illinois State University's (ISU) student health agenda. The study examines ISU's perspective and approach on student health efforts, infrastructure of health departments on campus, and ongoing Health Promotion and Wellness programs and their impact on campus and in the local community. Methods used include interviews with faculty in the Department of Health Wellness and Promotion, ethnographic observations of peer-to-peer health promotion programs, review of Department of Health Promotion and Wellness sponsored materials, and health behavior data. The principle finding is that the University's agenda and value of health reflects national cultural trends in that health is taken for granted and not a priority issue.

Note: This paper was completed for the course Anthropology 302, Ethnography, in affiliation with the *Ethnography of the University Initiative*, www.eui.uiuc.edu. Research was conducted in compliance with IRB Protocol #2012-0267 at Illinois State University.

HEALTH & THE UNIVERSITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Illinois State University (ISU)'s campus is in the twin-city community of Bloomington-Normal near the geographic center of the state of Illinois. The university is one of the twelve public universities in Illinois and serves 18,207 undergraduate students and 2,295 graduate students. Nearly 61% of undergraduate students are from the Chicago area, and another 21% from the local county and surrounding area. Its academic departments offer more than 160 major/minor options and 41 master's, specialist, and doctoral programs.

The University cares about students' health because of its positive correlation with academic success (Almeda 2011, Skorton 2012). But to what extent are they advocates for promoting healthy behaviors in their students? Universities may struggle between health promotion and treatment/medical services. In American culture, health is taken for granted. One is presumed *healthy* until they are sick. America spends much more on treatment than prevention (Scott 2009). Universities are embedded within the same culture and structure, while they can also be models for society and could be on the front lines of creating a different culture of health care. On a health continuum, health education/promotion lay on one end, and tertiary health (diagnosis, treatment, etc.), lay on the opposite. This project examines ISU's perspective of health and where it lays on the continuum.

I had made the following assumptions as to why the University would invest in health promotion and wellness. The University is there to serve students. While the University must also tend to the health needs of faculty and staff, students are the University's priority population. Health and well being are a strong foundation for student's academic success. There exists a positive correlation between healthy students, and well achieving students. By integrating positive health behavior messages into the University's culture, inevitably a healthy student population would emerge. Lastly, health promotion fosters knowledge seeking skills. These are transferable skills that enhance self-efficiency and are beneficial to a student beyond college.

METHODS

Four interviews were conducted in this research project. Three of the four were with faculty of the Department of Health Promotion and Wellness. These faculty members were the director of Health Promotion and Wellness and the two coordinators of the department. The fourth interview was with a current ISU senior who is a member of the Student Wellness Ambassadorial Team. Ethnographic observations at the peer health program GSPOT were also conducted. A review of Health Promotion and Wellness produced materials were also evaluated. An examination of the institutional report from the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) was also conducted.

BACKGROUND

HEALTH ISSUES FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS NATIONWIDE: WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS?

HOW DOES ISU MEASURE UP?

The American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) is a nationally recognized research survey that assists in collecting precise data about students' health habits, behaviors and perceptions. A comprehensive picture of student's health is necessary because college students are a diverse yet distinct population with specific health risks and needs. Having current, relevant data about students help universities to enhance campus wide health promotion and prevention services. Each year the ACHA-NCHA compiles an institutional report for participating universities, which usually number around fifty institutions. The report is a result of a survey that focuses on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, sexual health, weight, nutrition, exercise, mental health, and personal safety and violence.

A summary of findings is included in each institutional report. ISU has consistency fallen in the average range of national result. In looking at sexual health at ISU several important issues were highlighted. First, most students are not having sex (22%) or they are having sex with only one partner (46%) in the last 12 months (Almeda 2011:13). This is contrast to the perception that most students are having sex with more than one partner. This information is being used in social norms messages to show that ISU students are having sex and they are not having sex with a lot of partners (Almeda 2011:13). Second, consistent condom use during vaginal intercourse appears to have increased significantly from 2005 (50%) to 2011 (68%) (Almeda 2011:13). Looking at the most commonly used drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana, the percentage of ISU students who reporting using these in the last 30days decreased significantly since 2002 for tobacco use, stayed about the same for alcohol, and decreased for marijuana through 2009 before slightly increasing in 2011 (Almeda 2011:13). Health issues that have the most negative impact on academic performance at ISU (may lead to a student receiving an incomplete in class, dropping a course, receiving a lower grade on an exam, project or course) are: 1) stress, 2) sleep difficulties, 3) anxiety, and 4) cold/flu/sore throat.

HEALTH SERVICES AT ISU: STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES & HEALTH PROMOTION AND WELLNESS

Illinois State University is a public institution that was founded in 1857 as Illinois' first public university. The University offers a number of student services including nonremedial tutoring, women's center, health insurance and health series. As with other universities, ISU has always had a Department of Student Health Services for vaccinations, examinations and treatment. The mission of Student Health Services at ISU is to enhance the health and wellness of their students, individually and as a campus community, in order to enrich their education experiences and future lifestyles. In 2009 the Department of Health Promotion & Wellness was established to focus on promotion positive health messages for behavior change occurring on the individual and community level through educational and

environmental strategies. The mission of Health Promotion and Wellness is to foster a thriving, engaged campus community that advances wellness at all levels. While Student Health Services is more aligned with focusing on individual students health through tertiary care, Health Promotion and Wellness is geared to the masses and looks to reach out to the entire campus community.

Prior to 2009, faculty working around issues of health promotion and wellness were through a sector of the department of human resources. However, even though faculty was working through human resources, they were considered part of Student Health Services. While not much data regarding the emergence and founding of Health Promotion and Wellness can be found online, the interviewees described this split as a need for two different units. That Student Health Services, to an extent, overshadowed health promotion efforts. One of the ways this was most evident was through funding. Faculty found it difficult to constantly compete for funding when the tertiary care was favored.

FINDINGS

FUNDING AND PRIORITIES FOR TERTIARY CARE

The reason of competing for funds being behind the establishment of a department for health promotion is a reflection of America's perspective on health. Both coordinators expressed in their interviews how as a culture we tend to ignore our health behaviors until we become sick. And in many cases, even when people begin to realize they are not in adequate health, don't act on it until they are in a worsened condition. This is possibly because of how individuals define health. Health is generally viewed as not being sick rather than holistically. The physical aspect dominates the other dimensions of health; intellectual, emotional, social, vocational, environmental, and spiritual health.

This to me is not surprising, nor is the reasoning for the separation of Health Wellness & Promotion and Student Health Services. In the United States, only three cents of every dollar spent on healthcare goes towards prevention efforts. This is fascinating, as well as discouraging considering the seven out of

ten disease can be prevented through lifestyle health behaviors. One of the coordinators described the situation as, “When push comes to shove, health is usually not a priority.”

Many institutions have adopted a philosophy of freedom with responsibility and giving students the freedom to choose their own actions but holding them responsible for the choices they make. It is important that colleges and universities must do more to promote health and wellbeing of students. As self-reliant as they may seem they are still being molded into young adults and are susceptible to peer pressure and inclined to engage in risky behavior (Skorton 2012). While it is impossible to remove all potential risks from college life, colleges and universities need to think creatively about the nearly intractable challenges of risk behaviors. While students will always be faced with risky choices, college can and should fulfill their educational missions by promotion safety through education and the provision of support services that will assist students in exercising their freedom responsibly (Skorton 2012).

THE VALUE OF HEALTH AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL: DIFFERENCES IN FACULTY OPINIONS

The difference in faculty opinions regarding the value of health at the university level is perhaps my most interesting finding. Both coordinators expressed how they continue to make sincere efforts in health promotion, yet they are faced with many challenges. They argued that there needs to be support for health promotion on all levels at the university, with people in higher positions taking more initiative. When I asked how do you handle situations when others aren't open to promotion health, their response was, “It's like water on a stone. You keep repeating the message.” Both of the coordinators spoke on the topic with a passion of being advocates of health promotion, sincerely believing through consistent positive health behavior message, they could create enhance the quality of health in students

health. Not only that, but they are providing them with the knowledge seeking tools and resources that are going to give students an advantage beyond college to make healthier lifestyle choices..

The director of the department was no less sincere in her approach to health promotion at the university. However, what did significantly differ was her perspective on how the University values health. She made the argument that student's are the University's priority and so is their health, and that they didn't have to sell anybody on it. So goes on to describe how there are no problems with funding, that that is why they ere created. She mentions that them being their own department, and having that type of visibility is a extension of how the University values health.

I found these clashing opinions on how the University values health difficult to analyze. I assume that the two coordinators work closely with the director, and are as informed about issues regarding the department. Yet why such different answers? One conclusion that I came to was in regards to the dynamics of power and representation. The director is the main face of the department. This being the case, perhaps she sensors her responses about the University more intensely. In my interviews I found that she paused to collect her thoughts before answering. Was she using that time to reflect on the question? Or a perfect answer?

PEER-TO-PEER EDUCATION KEY HEALTH PROMOTION ON CAMPUS

SWAT and the GSPOT are the most visual of Health Promotion and Wellness programs. SWAT, Student Wellness Ambassador Team, is a registered student organization striving to promote healthy behaviors and lifestyles to ISU and the local community through a variety of programs and services. SWAT members are a diverse group of ISU student volunteers from all majors with diverse backgrounds. As members, they are required to attend a weekend training retreat and weekly training sessions during the fall and/or spring to learn the latest information and research on health issues. These members are trained by Health Promotion and Wellness staff to promote and talk to fellow students about a variety of health issues. They help staff the

GSPOT, a portable gazebo that is set up around campus. The gazebo travels to various locations on campus each week to provide wellness and health information, materials on a large variety of health topics, condoms, and fun giveaways for ISU students, faculty and staff.

As a student I have witnessed the popularity of the GSPOT on campus. I had done some ethnographic observations of the GSPOT and every time there was consistent traffic throughout the gazebos time on campus. The GSPOT appears in various locations on campus on different days of the week, enhancing their chances of utilized. In an interview with a SWAT member she described the purpose of the GSPOT as a place for students to feel comfortable to talk about health related topics, especially sex. She describes how there isn't even much dialog exchanged between students who stop by and SWAT members, it's about the atmosphere. The member explains how at the GSPOT different ages interact with the gazebo differently.

"Younger aged students tend to come in pairs or groups. Most people who ask questions tend to be younger student, and ask questions timidly. Sometimes younger guys come and ask questions just to be funny, as if it were a dare. In cases like that we just are sure to give information objectively. Seniors usually just come take condoms and leave."

In the interview with the student I asked what made SWAT/GSPOT successful and/or not successful. Regarding success she said,

"The program creates a comfortable vibe. Instead of a lecture where you're just sitting and listening, you can ask your own questions. And because it's student's talking to students it makes things easier to talk about. For example, someone asked my why we provide lubricant. We explained that it helps to not break a condom. And that was it, and they walked away question answered. I think that's much better than having to raise your hand in a classroom and ask in front of others. I think a lot of people don't want to admit that they don't know."

In terms of not successful, she describes issues regarding age and generation. "...Well older adults sometimes come by, most of the time seem judgey. They have the mentality that sex is not okay until marriage and here we are saying that it is okay... Get's awkward sometimes. But we know what we stand for and as long as students are safe and healthy and we promote that,

we don't feel intimidated. It also throws things off when adults stop by. It stops students from approaching the booth." Overall the student expressed how SWAT/GSPOT was a value to the ISU community. It was a way to get teach involved with students, and in turn have those students pass on knowledge to their peers.

Peer health education on college campus has shown to impact health behavior (BACCHUS 2012). Many universities, including ISU, participate in BACCHUS (Boosting Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students) and other peer health education programs. Organization like BACCHUS work to actively promote student and young adult based, campus and community-wide leadership on healthy and safe lifestyle decisions concerning alcohol abuse, tobacco use, illegal drug use, unhealthy sexual practices and other high risk behaviors (BACCHUS 2012). Peer health programs empower students and administrators to voice their opinions and needs to create a healthier and safer campus and community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Integrate the value of health into campus culture. This recommendation is a challenge. However, with the administrators being stronger advocates for health promotion, the process of integrating health promotion into the campus can be expedited. Initiatives on various levels should aim to integrate processes and structures within the university's culture and supportive of a commitment to health and health promotion. Health Promotion and Wellness could work with various other departments on campus for bi-monthly campaigns towards health issues.

Larger campaigns regarding health services provided by the university. Many students on campus are unaware of the health services provided by the university. One method in which this can be achieved is requiring students to do a campus scavenger hunt which allows them to at least become familiar with the location of the services. Another approach could be to require students to meet at least once with Health Promotion and Wellness, or counseling services. Just as students are

recommended to meet at least once a semester with their academic advisor and financial aid advisor to ensure that they are on track with where they want to be.

Identify and tend to needs of non-traditional students, veterans and students with disabilities.

More emphasis should be placed on recognizing that first year students doesn't mean only freshman.

The students listed above require an altered approach in tending to their health needs. Assessments should be conducted to examine what their needs are and how they perceive they are being tended to at Illinois State University.

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