

# An innovative program to promote health promotion, quality of life, and wellness for School of Nursing faculty, staff, and students: Facilitators, barriers, and opportunities for broad system-level and cultural change

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Members of the nursing profession are often challenged by attempts to engage in personal health and well-being practices because of their dedication, commitment, and passion for improving the lives of others through engagement in practice, research, service, and education. Research reveals disproportionately high rates of emotional distress and depression among nurses (Letvak et al., 2012), coupled with challenges relative to work environment and culture as well as with prioritizing self-care. Distress and burnout among nurses are associated with compassion fatigue, poor sleep, trouble concentrating, limited performance in mental or interpersonal tasks, time management challenges, work-place bullying, lower productivity, chronic absenteeism, increased turnover, and compromised quality of care provision (Drury et al., 2014; Ekici & Beder, 2014; Kelly, 2020; Roelen et al., 2014). Focusing on the well-being of nurses is a quality and safety imperative to improve the lives of nurses and for the people they serve. Accordingly, the authors of the Quadruple Aim posit that to promote optimal patient outcomes, cost-effective care, and patient satisfaction, we must also prioritize the well-being of providers (Bodenheimer & Sinsky, 2014).

## Burnout

Although wellness and self-care among nurses has been a focus of attention in recent years, almost 20 years ago, Fagin et al. (1996) suggested the need for research to identify and implement interventions to successfully reduce the impact of work-related stressors on nurses. Research conducted over the past two decades identified *modifiable* factors that are associated with nurse burnout. Potential targets of nursing well-being intervention include negative perceptions of support and value in the workplace, inadequate academic preparedness to meet professional challenges, inadequate coping skills, and negative interactions with co-workers who are experiencing significant emotional demands (Fagin et al., 1996; Edwards et al., 2000; Letvak, 2013; Shering & Knight, 2009).

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## Stress reduction and improved quality of life

More recent research on strategies to improve quality of life among nurses has focused on workplace wellness and mindfulness-based strategies to enhance coping and self-care. Participation in wellness activities, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zin, 2013), is associated with reduction in stress, increase in successful coping strategies, and improved empathy among nurses and nursing students (Magtibay et al., 2017; McConville et al., 2017). Specifically, nurses and nursing students who participate in mindfulness courses have reported improvements in well-being, relaxation, life and job satisfaction, as well as reductions in anxiety, perceptions of time pressure, emotional exhaustion, and burnout symptoms (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2006; McConville et al., 2017; Spadaro & Hunker, 2016). Qualitatively, nurses have reported enhanced patience, presence and caring, greater ability to engage in self-care, and enhanced ability to react less and look at the big picture more when solving problems (Cohen-Katz et al., 2005). Subsequent feedback on mindfulness education included feeling “more aware of my feelings and thoughts during stressful events” and “clearer in my statements of my own needs” (Cohen-Katz et al., 2005, p. 82). In addition, to mindfulness and other strategies to manage stress in workplace wellness programs, focus on other major areas of health can help to promote quality of life. Targets of wellness programming can also include the promotion of physical activity, healthy nutrition, and socialization or enhanced collegiality and support among workplace community members (Amaya et al., 2016).

## Program description

The year 2017 was declared by the American Nurses Association (ANA) as the “Year of the Healthy Nurse” (ANA, 2017), despite the fact that the average nurse was at that time (and still is) overweight and experienced unacceptably high rates of sleep deprivation, inadequate

intake of fruits and vegetables, and inadequate aerobic and strength-training physical activity. ANA emphasized that focusing on health for nurses was “in recognition of the impact that increased nurse health, safety, and wellness has on patient outcomes, quality of care, and overall nurse satisfaction and quality of life” (ANA, 2017). In consideration of the ANA’s findings on the state of nurses’ health during that time, this 2017 initiative highlighted health and wellness-related themes monthly, including (but not limited to) worksite wellness, cardiovascular health, nutrition, stress management, happiness, moral distress, cancer awareness, and mental health. Despite the growing body of literature and well-resourced initiatives emphasizing the importance of nursing wellness initiatives, there is a critical need to optimally, broadly, and sustainably translate this work into system-wide programming in Schools of Nursing to improve the health and wellness of nursing faculty, students, and stakeholders so that a culture of wellness can be adopted and sustained in the nursing profession.

This article provides a brief description of an innovative program designed to advance health promotion, quality of life, and wellness for School of Nursing faculty, staff, and students. Facilitators, barriers, and opportunities for a broad system-level and cultural shift to maximize health and well-being among nurses will be discussed.

In the year 2000, Melissa LeVine and her husband, Harry LeVine, contributed funding to create the LeVine Wellness Program at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Nursing. Mrs. Levine, a dual-degree graduate of the School (1977 and 1981), developed a commitment to helping nurses live healthier lives. Specifically, she aimed to help faculty educate, lead, and practice nursing gracefully and efficiently and to be better examples of healthy living for students and for the public, who see nurses as role models for health promotion. The initiative initially began with activities and programming to promote healthy lifestyles for both faculty and staff. The LeVine family worked with the School of Nursing’s development staff to contribute funds to support exercise and nutrition screening and support. Funds also supported a dedicated space for exercise – a fitness facility named the LeVine Wellness Room. As time progressed, the LeVine family desired to make a greater impact on the quality of life, health promotion, and wellness, thereby focusing their giving to directly support activities for students, as well as faculty and staff. Thus, they expanded their generosity and commitment to the School of Nursing in 2016 by contributing funds to support the inaugural Melissa and Harry LeVine Term Professorship in Quality of Life, Health Promotion, and Wellness at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The vision was to support a faculty member to promote *nurses’ personal health and wellness, teach the next generation of “Carolina Nurses” and engage in scholarship and develop initiatives to enhance the curriculum, culture of the School of Nursing, and ultimately the overall health of the state of North Carolina and beyond*. The LeVine family’s vision aligned with a broader call to action to boldly bring a culture of wellness to academic settings (Amaya et al., 2019; Melnyk, 2017; Owens et al., 2018).

### LeVine Wellness Program objectives and activities

To date, the major objectives of the LeVine Wellness Program include multifaceted stress-management strategies and efforts that promote holistic aspects of well-being, such as healthy eating, physical activity, reflective practice and socialization/camaraderie among School of Nursing community members. Examples of LeVine Wellness activities include, but are not limited to:

1. Total You Tuesdays, which include days dedicated to wellness programming;
2. Morning mindfulness-base stress management sessions for faculty, staff, and students;
3. A Mind-Body Skills® training course for faculty and staff;
4. Hallway posters that encourage using the stairs instead of the elevator to promote cardiovascular health;

5. Wellness presentations at new student orientations
6. Wellness guest lectures in required courses
7. Development and formal implementation of a for-credit mindfulness course for nursing students (in collaboration with medical students in the School of Medicine);
8. Monthly mindfulness sessions at PhD Doctoral Student Organization meetings
9. Campus-wide walk/jog events;
10. Workshops on reflective leadership;
11. Wellness moments at faculty and student committee meetings and gatherings;
12. Salad socials & informational health workshops during lunchtime;
13. Yoga classes provided in collaboration with the Campus Recreation Program;
14. Zumba classes provided in collaboration with the Campus Recreation Program;
15. Chair massage wellness days for faculty and staff;
16. A Tai Chi series facilitated by a staff member who is a former Tai Chi master;
17. Zentangle® reflective practice sessions facilitated by a certified faculty member;
18. A coffee, tea, fruit, and dark chocolate social event for faculty and staff;
19. Vision board parties for students, faculty, and staff; and
20. Mindfulness training and self-care letters to self, conducted at separate student and staff events.

Program evaluation feedback solicited via post-event surveys indicates satisfaction with programming. Faculty and staff feedback describe wellness events as refreshing and community-building. For example, a few faculty and staff commented that, before their attendance at chair massage sessions, they never personally employed massage as a healing technique to reduce stress and promote self-care. Rapid filling of available time slots of massage sessions demonstrate the popularity of chair massage events among faculty and staff. In fact, the chair massage has proven to be *the* leading preferred wellness event among them.

### Facilitators of wellness programming

The development of the Melissa and Harry LeVine Professorship resulted in a rapid expansion of programming and events to promote wellness in the School of Nursing. Facilitators of success included dedicated faculty time and funding to support the program, in addition to creatively cultivated administrative support to the faculty member in the form of a volunteer graduate assistant during the first two years of the program, a federal work study student undergraduate assistant during the third and fourth years of the program, and a part-time graduate assistant during the fifth year of the program. Additional assistance from student assistants provided necessary logistic support to facilitate wellness event planning (e.g., conducting preliminary literature searches to support program planning, booking speakers and organizing supplies, scheduling rooms for wellness events, creating and distributing communications about events, tallying evaluative feedback). The support of the administration in the school was also a key factor to program success. Faculty, staff, and students were not discouraged from participating in wellness events that happened during the workday, and faculty members set aside time for wellness presentations in relevant courses. In addition, one faculty member with HRSA-funded Nursing Workforce and Diversity grant wrote wellness events into the project activities for BSN students, which further institutionalized a wellness culture among students, faculty, and staff. The PhD student leaders of the Doctoral Students Organization have implemented wellness in their monthly activities. Mindfulness meditation sessions occur every second Tuesday, and other wellness topics are

addressed as needed.

### **Barriers to wellness programming and strategies to overcome them**

Despite the many positive facilitators for advancing wellness, several barriers persist and will need continued evaluation and strategies to overcome them. For example, time or perceived lack of time among faculty, staff, and students is one of the most identifiable barriers to the success of the wellness program. Adding extra activities to a workday already filled with obligations and expectations related to successfully meeting work-related challenges was perceived as challenging, including (but not limited to) multiple demands of course planning, teaching, grading, student mentoring, scholarly activities (e.g., writing manuscripts, writing grants), committee work, and curriculum planning and evaluation. Similarly, staff obligations related to management, coordination, and administrative work limit their perceived availability of time to engage in workplace wellness activities. Students are tasked with identifying strategies for sustaining their health and well-being while also juggling variable daily schedules, clinical hours, study time, and student life activities. Faculty, staff, and student also have limited time as a result of family and other personal commitments. Not surprisingly, there was limited time to schedule wellness events to accommodate all stakeholders. Creative evaluation and planning resulted in “taking the programming to the people” instead of expecting them to come to the programming. Strategies included embedding wellness content in faculty meetings, including wellness conversations through guest presentations in existing classes, and scheduling sessions strategically between two meetings that convened in the same room. Additionally, incentives—such as serving healthy food at events—helped to entice nursing school faculty, staff, and students to wellness events. Although funding was available to support events, a budget-conscious approach had to be employed to accommodate attendance by large groups of faculty, staff, or students. Therefore salad social events encouraged participants to bring salad toppings and sides to reduce the cost of purchasing items to create hearty lunch-time meals. Pizza, an affordable option for departmental events, was crafted as “healthier pizza” to meet the demands of budget consciousness and wellness. “Healthier pizza” included thin crust, vegetables, and minimal meat or fatty ingredients, completed with light cheese or no cheese at all. To ensure the wellness program is not cost prohibitive, the School has used creative approaches such as collaborating with the campus recreation program to provide more affordable Zumba and yoga classes, contracting with a local massage therapy school to provide chair massages (faculty come with students who need clinical hours to meet certification requirements), and soliciting faculty, staff, and students with training and certification in wellness interventions (e.g., Tai Chi, Zentangle®, yoga, and mindfulness) to facilitate sessions. Involvement of faculty, staff, and students from various programs and departments in the school also provided a more communal approach to wellness programming engagement. Subsequently, the more the School of Nursing stakeholders saw others engaged in the wellness programming, the more they perceived it as an integral and welcoming component of the School of Nursing culture.

### **Opportunities for broad-system and culture change**

The benefactors of the LeVine Wellness Program had a vision that the initiative would expand beyond the walls of the School of Nursing to influence health and wellness among nurses across the state of North Carolina. One major opportunity involved collaboration with the Area Health Education Center (AHEC). Once regional AHEC offices learned about the existence of the LeVine Wellness Program in the School of Nursing, they (along with other entities) reached out with invitations to the LeVine Wellness Distinguished faculty member to give presentations, share wellness messaging and health strategies, as well as conduct continuing nursing education seminars and workshops. This

statewide outreach resulted in more nurses becoming engaged in strategies to improve their own health and well-being at institutional and personal levels. Overwhelmingly, positive responses to this state-wide outreach resulted in consistent invitations to share the message of wellness with nursing staff, educators, and administrators.

Brief presentations by the LeVine Wellness Distinguished faculty member were made during nursing orientation days for students seeking a BSN, ABSN, MSN, DNP, and PhD degree in nursing. These presentations made them aware of the significant body of literature on health wellness, and evidence-based interventions that promote quality of life among nurses and in the environments where nurses work. Another opportunity for dissemination and broad-system and culture change in the direction of wellness has existed in the form of undergraduate and graduate student projects focused on well-being among nurses, including stress management, the use of apps to increase the feasibility of integrating mindfulness and other self-care practices into nurses’ busy work schedules, cognitive rehearsal to reduce horizontal violence reduction, self-compassion, compassion fatigue, and other integrative health interventions for nurses. Through their projects, students disseminated concepts and feasible strategies to implement and sustain wellness programming in various settings, including hospitals, Veteran’s Administration Medical Centers, and other patient care settings. This type of dissemination spread the message of nursing wellness far beyond what any one wellness program leader in the School of Nursing could do alone.

A third opportunity for broad-system and cultural change includes partnership with a university-wide initiative to promote health and wellness. The School of Nursing was one of a few departments on campus to have a wellness program with year-long activities and events. Strategies and lessons learned from the LeVine Wellness Program informed the implementation and expansion of the campus-wide wellness initiative. Thus, the original investment to fund wellness programming in the School of Nursing served as a seed to support the spread of wellness among all university faculty, staff, and students. In addition, the benefit of this collaboration is bi-directional. The new university-wide wellness initiative employs a federally-supported scorecard method to identify, understand and track progress on a variety of personal and system-level wellness metrics across time. For accountability purposes, it also requires the institution of a formal and active wellness committee in every participating school or department. As a result of the framework of the campus-wide wellness initiative, the LeVine Wellness Program (and other similar programs on campus) are supported to be robust, evidence-driven, and tailored to the specific needs of our stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past four years of the expanded LeVine Wellness Program, our school had the opportunity to implement a broad range of wellness programming and initiatives. We successfully obtained approval for an elective course that students at all degree levels (BSN, ABSN, MSN, DNP, PhD) can take to promote personal wellness, become more aware of the evidence on self-care approaches, and develop strategies for sharing this information with colleagues, as well as patients. Next steps include more formal assessments and evaluations of our program to inform expansion in ways that will optimally and feasibly address the needs of Nursing School faculty, staff, and students.

We are proud of our progress and our recognition by the North Carolina Nurses Association with the “Caring for Ourselves” Best Practices Award. We are equally excited about what the future holds for us and others as we continue to advance quality of life, health promotion, and wellness among the university’s faculty, staff, and students.

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