

Viewpoint

Colleges and Universities Should Give More Broad-Based Attention to Health and Wellness—At All Levels

Charles E. Kupchella, PhD

Abstract. Higher Education needs to give more broad-based attention to health and wellness. Our graduates will all have to deal with the facts that the general state of health of Americans is not good and our national health care system is badly in need of reform. We should offer innovative approaches to helping our graduates establish positive, lifetime health habits and we should demonstrate to them our own model approaches to promoting health and wellness through more effective health insurance and worksite wellness programs.

Recently I retired from the presidency of The University of North Dakota and although, at age 66, I am no longer at risk of dying young, I find myself thinking more about health and wellness lately. I have come to the conclusion that higher education should give more attention to health and wellness—at all levels in multiple ways.

Perhaps too many of us in higher education carry part of the problem around with us as our memory of yesterday's health and physical education courses—which many universities once required and then dropped. Many such courses were taught as sidelines by those who may or may not have been health-educated themselves. Too many of these "courses" consisted of changing into and out of shorts and playing at some sport for what was left of 50 minutes. Because it appears that, whatever the reason, health-courses are now absent from the general education programs in many schools, I have to wonder. Surely health is still near the top of the list of things the "whole person" needs to know about and appreciate.

I am aware that we already try to wedge too much into general education. But not only is good health directly and fundamentally important to all graduates, it also has very much to do with the entire purpose of education. Whatever it is that we intend for our graduates to be able to do and

Dr Kupchella served as president of the University of North Dakota from 1999 to 2008. He is also a past President of the American Association for Cancer Education. He is an active member of C-Change, a national collaborative striving to eliminate cancer as a major killer at the earliest possible time.

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risk reduction, early detection and quality care. The group should then be working to ensure that the resources of early detection, less would be spent later on expensive treatment and lost productivity. The Foundation also established an accreditation process by which organizations could have their worksite wellness programs evaluated and accredited if they met the criteria. The University of North Dakota was the first to be accredited. The Foundation also has a health and wellness center in North Dakota and is working to expand its work to other states and by addressing all areas of health and wellness, including physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions.

For a number of good reasons, I believe we can and should give more attention to health and wellness in higher education. We should consider ourselves to promoting both personal and public health in such an integrated way that the conceptual, structural, and policy dimensions of our programs and work practices, together with the culture of our institutions, will be able to appreciate, they will obviously be able to do and appreciate better if they live full, healthy lives.

Perhaps an even more fundamental reason—to all of us—for increased attention to health for our students is their future role as civic and professional leaders. According to various polls over the last decade, health care policy is consistently among the top two or three issues of concern to the public—to all of us.¹ Clearly health care and health care costs remain one of the biggest issues for corporations and for government at every level. Because health care is coming to be seen more and more as a right, public treasuries will likely carry more and more of its cost. Health issues will have to be faced by those we educate, no matter where they go and no matter what they do after graduation, and there is quite an array of issues:

- According to U. S. Census data, nearly fifty million Americans were without health insurance in 2004 and the number was getting bigger.^{1,2} Millions more are said to be underinsured.
- Americans are not healthy.³ Too many of us are overweight or obese. Our high-fat diets put us at extra risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. We are not active enough. We drink too much and eat too much. This presents an enormous public health problem and creates burdensome budget-problems for governments, corporations and individuals.
- The cost of health care is out of control and what we get for the money is not impressive. Although our health care at the advanced-treatment end of the health care spectrum is said to be the best in the world, and while our health-care costs are the highest in the world, our state of wellness doesn't even get us into the top twenty countries by some health-status measures.^{4,5}
- Our current health-care system pays too little attention to preventing disease. Our system often pays for the enormous costs of "high-tech" procedures but often fail to