

Universities as Healthy Work Environments

By Graham S. Lowe, Ph.D.

A healthy university rests on many pillars. Adequate funding is essential to meet progressively higher goals. Also crucial is its integration within local and global communities, especially by providing access to students from diverse backgrounds. A healthy campus community strives to promote health and wellness activities among its students and staff.

An equally necessary pillar of a healthy university is its culture – the values, behaviours and relationships that nurture an ideal learning and working environment.

The healthy work environment challenge

While there is increasing focus on the cultural features of a healthy university, more must be done to shore up this pillar. So far, Canadian universities have emphasized the learning environment. Many new initiatives in the past decade, including freshman orientation programs, course evaluations, graduate exit surveys, and expanded teaching and learning resources have addressed the learning context for students.

Now energies must be directed to the university's multiple work environments. A major challenge for universities in the coming decade is creating and maintaining healthy work environments for faculty, staff, graduate assistants, and contract employees. Increasingly, for a university to succeed in its mission, it must nurture a healthy physical, psycho-social and emotional environment for all these groups.

The World Health Organization's concept of 'healthy people in healthy organizations' helps frame a discussion of how universities as employers can expand the concept of health promotion to all aspects of the work environment and human resource management practices. Universities are society's premier knowledge-generating organizations. Only by redoubling efforts to create and maintain healthy work environments will innovation and creativity be sustained.

Like any knowledge-based, high-performing organization in the private sector, a university must strive for excellence in its people practices, embedding these goals within its overall business plan. This includes healthy workplace goals and actions. It is not enough to say that recruitment and retention are 'strategic priorities'. Far more effective is repositioning the long-range strategy of the organization so that it rests on a solid foundation of healthy and engaged employees. Organizations as diverse as the Mayo Clinic, FedEx and Nokia have demonstrated the power of this people-first approach.

Pressures for action

Universities face intense pressures to move in this direction. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, by 2011, Canada's universities must replace 20,000 faculty, and create and fill another 20,000 faculty positions to meet enrolment increases of between 20 to 30 percent. Faculty workloads have peaked; performance expectations have never been higher. Administrative and service employees have endured the upheavals of restructuring and often are expected to do more with less. These combined demographic, enrolment, performance and organizational change pressures give urgency to setting, and achieving, healthy work environments goals.

Universities need to carefully assess whether they are doing the right things to develop and sustain their human capacity. National studies of university faculty in Britain and Australia have documented high rates of job stress, which pose health risks to individuals and recruitment and retention problems for universities. Balancing career demands with family responsibilities – not to mention meeting one's personal needs and goals – is not getting easier.

Limited evidence, and lots of anecdotes, make it doubtful that the quality of work life among Canada's university faculty, research staff, graduate assistants and other members of academic teams would be any better. Several Statistics Canada surveys confirm that knowledge-workers – the mainstay of a university – are the most stressed-out members of the 21st century workforce.

An evidence-based first step

True to their values, universities should be making evidence-based decisions about their people practices. So a first step is to gather solid evidence about the work environment. What do health benefit utilization trends, especially prescription drugs and long-term disability, tell us about the health of the organization and its employees? Going further, what do employees tell us about their jobs, work environments, and career aspirations?

Universities can learn from the successes that many public and private sector employers have had in genuinely seeking employee's input, using surveys, town-hall meetings, and other consultation tools. Universities have taken decisive steps to improve the learning environment, using course evaluations, first-year experience surveys, and graduand satisfaction surveys. Lessons from these initiatives can be readily transferred to improving the working environment.

But good measures alone don't guarantee improvements. Universities must create performance accountabilities – especially for managers at all levels – for maintaining supportive, positive and healthy work environments. This requires accurately monitoring the drivers and outcomes of health at the individual and organizational levels. Again, these are areas where universities can benefit from leading practices in other industries. This expands the concept of a health promoting university from unidirectional knowledge transfer into the community, to two-way knowledge sharing.

A bold new vision

As employers, universities have unique strengths that will help to create a bold new vision of a healthy work environment, and to act on this.

When it comes to planning positive change, universities have a big advantage over any other organization: they have all the resident expertise they need to develop and implement a comprehensive approach to healthy work environments. This is an ideal opportunity for inter-disciplinary collaboration and knowledge application. Core values of collegiality and academic integrity guide the behaviours that underpin healthy work environments: trust, tolerance, and respect. And universities are far ahead of most other organizations in having on-site fitness, wellness and health facilities, which contribute to the health and wellness of staff and students.

Steady effort certainly is needed to expand each university's health promotion and fitness programs, and to transfer health promotion knowledge to society. But creating a healthy university requires more.

Above all, progress depends on clear commitment by a university's academic and administrative leaders to nurture the organization's people capacity through a healthy culture. Following through on this commitment, leaders must engage all employees in meaningful discussions of how they envision a truly healthy workplace. Doing so will reap healthy benefits for individual employees, universities, and society.

*This article is based on the author's keynote presentation at the 2nd International Conference for Health Promoting Universities, 4 October 2005, at the University of Alberta. It was published by the Canadian Association of University Teachers in the **CAUT Bulletin, Volume 52. Number 9***