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Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Wellness Program Celebrating Real Meaning of Wellness for 20 Years

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Be well. Hope you are well. Wish you well.

Wellness is something we desire for others and ourselves, but what does the concept of wellness truly mean? It is a question the Illinois Wesleyan University Wellness Program has explored for 20 years.

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“Wellness is more than just the absence of disease,” said Missy Smock, director of the Wellness Program since 1990. “It’s all part of the equation of well-being.” For Smock, that means helping those at the University to strike a balance in life and work, and deal with the forces – such as stress, food, finances – that can tip a person out of balance.

“Wellness is more than exercise,” added Smock, “and wellness programs are more than aerobic classes.” In fact, there were several aerobic classes offered at Illinois Wesleyan in 1988, but the Wellness Program did not begin on campus until 1990 when Smock came to IWU as the first director. “There was a lot of pressure to make this work,” said Smock. “What the University wanted – and I wanted – was to see a program geared toward overall wellness, building on that fitness program.”

Smock jumped in, offering new activities on campus, from classes in Aikido to Indian cooking. “Our Indian cooking instructor brought yoga to campus for the first time,” said Smock, who also invited a tai chi instructor to hold free classes on the Robert S. Eckley Quadrangle that were open to the public.

The new activities caught on quickly. “This is an academic institution, so I sensed there would be an openness to offering a variety of programs,” said Smock, who noted the early 1990s was a time when many wellness concepts accepted today were still considered on the fringe. “I was doing a commercial for a wellness program just before I came to IWU, and the director stopped filming and asked if I would not say the word ‘meditation,’ because it sounded like something that was attached to a cult,” she said.

While she battled the image of wellness off campus, back at IWU, Smock battled her own impatience for the Shirk Center to be completed. “We were holding classes in the basement of what is now Hansen,” said Smock. When Shirk opened in 1994, the facility meant new equipment, rooms for classes, and the establishment of the Wellness Center on the main floor.

Throughout the 1990s, Smock and fellow Wellness employee Michelle Hart explored different ideas for the Wellness Program. One that was tried – and dismissed – may come as a surprise. “We no longer run traditional incentive programs,” said Smock, who initially sponsored competitions to lose weight and exercise. The results were initially strong, but not for the reasons Smock hoped. “What we found was that with incentives, people focus on the short-term goals only,” said Smock. “Often, when the incentive goes away, the behavior goes away as well.”

“I really think Missy has done things right,” said Jeremy Spencer, who replaced Michelle Hart in the Wellness Center in 2006. “She learns and progresses and adapts the programs. I had the same concerns she did when I was working in fitness. That we were only focusing on short-term outcomes as opposed to long-term health.”

Smock began to examine other cultures for ideas of wellness. She decided to pull her discovered ideas together into a Wellness Fair that started in 1997. As the years went on, the fair expanded as Smock explored the link between health and the environment. "I was reading more and more about different toxins in the environment and the concept of 'body burden,'" said Smock. Six years ago, the fair, which is held in Shirk Center, came the day before the local Ecology Action Center held their annual expo. "People came on the wrong days for each event because the themes were so closely tied," said Smock. "I went to [then Ecology Action Center Director] Michele Covey and said, 'I think we need to get our events married.'" The Illinois Sustainable Living & Wellness Expo was born. "It's all about sustainable living, from energy consumption to healthy eating," said Smock of the expo, which offered more than 100 exhibitors and 20 presenters at the 2010 event in April.

Today, more than 75 percent of the faculty and staff on campus take part in some aspect of the Wellness Program, whether it is receiving the monthly newsletter on healthy living, participating in health screenings, competing in healthy cook-offs, borrowing CD's on relaxation from the Wellness Center, or taking a class. "We try to keep things exciting," said Smock, who noted the addition of new classes like Zumba, and Spencer's work with triathlon training.

The next step for Wellness will come this fall as the joint childcare facility (link to Rogy's story) opens for employees of Illinois Wesleyan, Illinois State University and Advocate BroMenn Healthcare. "People might not think of child care as important to overall wellness, but it goes back to finding that balance in your life and work," said Smock, who served on the Child Care Committee. "People have to figure out not only how to do their job, but how to have a life outside the University."

Spencer agreed that Wellness and work go hand in hand. "We're not taking responsibility for 'fixing' anyone. Instead, we're helping them work from the inside out," he said. "And it's pretty incredible that a place where you work helps you think about that."

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960