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DREXEL UNIVERSITY EMPLOYEE HEALTH PROGRAM

Vic Tringali Director, University Wellness

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- TOP 10 MISTAKES WELLNESS PROFESSIONALS MAKE
- A WINNING HEALTH PROMOTION INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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Drexel University Creates a Dynamic Environment for Employee Health

Two years ago, Drexel University in Philadelphia faced a problem experienced by many large organizations: rising costs in employee medical claims. But they also had a senior vice president with a vision — and a wealth of resources in place to reverse that trend.

"We wanted to enhance this already positive work culture. Our goal was to create an environment where people enjoyed working and knew their employer cared about them."

According to Vic Tringali (Director, University Wellness), "This was a very dynamic time for us. Several things were happening at once. Along with the installation of our new president, the campus was going through many changes. New buildings and campus renovations were under construction and the wellness program, A Healthier U, had just been launched. The entire university was being transformed — all at the same time, yet in different ways."

While you might expect a university with over 100 years of tradition to be very rigid, employees at Drexel embraced these changes. Vic believes this openness is a unique characteristic for Drexel. "We wanted to enhance this already positive work culture. Our goal was to create an environment where people enjoyed working and knew their employer cared about them."

A Healthier U has 5-year goals focused on physical activity, nutrition, and smoking cessation. Vic says keeping it simple is important: "We want to encourage the positive lifestyle behaviors that most affect our medical costs and disease. Toward that end, our objective is to integrate wellness activities and policies into our environment so lifestyle behaviors that create or cause chronic illness are, by default, avoided. We want to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Our approach emphasizes the environment over the programs themselves."

Drexel boasts an 80,000 square foot state-of-the-art recreation center, covering an entire city block.

This multimillion dollar facility has received national awards and is within steps of 90% of the university's 4500 employees. Drexel is also home to multiple game fields and courts along with a large armory for numerous activities and intramural sports. New buildings being constructed on campus are designed to encourage stairway use. Other environmental features include:

- Healthy options in vending machines
- A walkable campus that accommodates bikers and skateboarding
- No smoking within 30 feet of any university buildings.

A Healthier U is directed by the Office of University Wellness. Human Resources and Recreational Athletics are major contributors to the program as well. Vic often taps into the accumulated expertise of the university's Colleges of Public Health, Nursing and Health Professions and College of Medicine. "These experts have such a deep understanding of health and health research, which makes them an invaluable resource."

To control medical claim costs, Vic feels becoming self-funded was an important first step for the university. "Since Drexel employees have a stake in what our medical claims should be, we are highly motivated to work toward suppressing that trend wherever possible."

A Healthier U activities and programming revolve around 3 primary well-being issues: physical, emotional, and financial.

Physical Well-Being

Because of its impact on medical claim costs and productivity, the highest priority is placed on physical health. Throughout the year, A Healthier U provides a rotating series of web-based campaigns developed by Health Enhancement Systems dealing with a variety of physical activity and healthy eating behaviors.

A university walking club meets twice a week and is open to faculty as well as students. Walking leaders take the group on a 30-minute walk around the campus and neighboring area. At the end of the walk, participants are treated to a fruit buffet.

Vic considers the annual Employee Olympics to be one of Drexel's most popular initiatives. "With the help of our recreational athletics team, who coordinates the entire event, employees create their own teams and compete in such competitions as dodge ball, basketball, walk/run relays, tennis, volleyball, and an obstacle course. The biggest event is the softball tournament. Just like in the Olympics, we have opening ceremonies as well as a closing ceremony where the gold medals are awarded."

To make healthier eating choices easy, Drexel launched a new Selections initiative in their dining areas last September. A heart-shaped menu prompt with an "H" in the middle identifies options that meet criteria set by volunteers in public health, nutrition sciences, and food service plus 3 registered dietitians.

"Just like you need to be physically fit, you want to be financially fit. Our Financial Fitness Series includes programs on budgeting, taxes, managing credit, buying a home, preparing for retirement, and estate planning. We gear them to the needs of different age groups and life stages."

Vic is excited about A Healthier U's new 8-session weight management program. "The model is similar to Weight Watchers®, but ours is supervised by Drexel's Nutrition Sciences department. Consequently, many counselors leading our workshops and supervising the program have PhDs."

A staple of Drexel's wellness program is a healthy lifestyle rewards program tied to their health insurance provider. Employees can receive reimbursement for products or services such as gym membership or a bike helmet.

A similar concept is now available to employees who would like to see \$150 discounted from their medical coverage premium. To qualify, they must:

- Fill out a health risk appraisal
- Attest to be tobacco free for 6 months or complete a tobacco cessation program.

Vic anticipates a significant spike in overall participation in A Healthier U as this program becomes more widely known.

Emotional Well-Being

A Healthier U's focus on emotional issues centers on work/life balance, giving employees access to:

- Counseling and professional advice in a wide variety of areas.
- A free 5-minute massage every month.

- Seminars where professional speakers discuss how to manage a variety of life stresses and personal crises. Working with other University departments, including the Office of Disability Services, these have included a comedian, an author on meditation and dealing with stress, and an individual who faced a devastating physical challenge but went on to lead a fulfilling life.

Financial Well-Being

Vic points out that with today's slumping economy, A Healthier U's financial fitness programming is particularly valuable. "Just like you need to be physically fit, you want to be financially fit. Our Financial Fitness Series includes programs on budgeting, taxes, managing credit, buying a home,

preparing for retirement, and estate planning. We gear them to the needs of different age groups and life stages. For instance, we offer retirement planning for ages 25-35, a separate session for ages 35-45 who are later in their career, and a third program for those closer to retirement. In addition, we offer retirement counseling as a general benefit to everyone."

While the program is still relatively young, employee enthusiasm is high. Vic looks forward to the day when a planned tracking system is in place, but individual successes and testimonials are already filtering in. "The challenge lies in getting the word out to such a large population. We're still learning what is effective when it comes to communicating and marketing our programs. But I do believe our focus on the environment and supportive policies may be more important than any individual program. We looked at our healthcare cost drivers and went forward from there. We've also learned that creativity and innovation are not something to fear... we're not afraid to do something that's never been done."

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