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ADMINISTRATION

Incentives for Healthy Habits

By *Kelly Field* | FEBRUARY 04, 2018

✓ PREMIUM

It's two weeks before finals at the University of Vermont, and James J. Hudziak, director of the Wellness Environment program, is showing off the dining hall in the program's fancy new residence hall. He points out the smoothie station, where students can earn 10 "WE coins" for choosing a kale smoothie over coffee, and the WE Chopped classroom, where they can get lessons from a local master chef, before reaching the fried-food station. Curly fries, Hudziak admits, are as popular as ever.

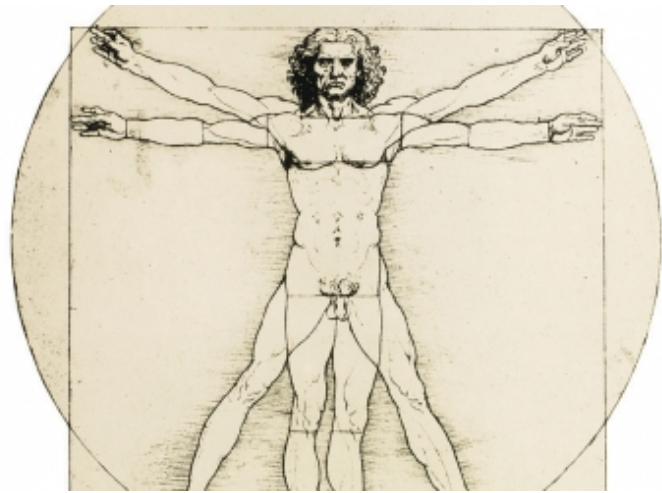
"We don't say you can't smoke, you can't drink, you can't eat curly fries," says the burly, genial professor of psychiatry and pediatrics. "We just don't reward you for eating curly fries."

"Still," he muses, "I wish they wouldn't smoke — it's so bad for this age."

Can a Wellness Program Curb Risky Behavior?

The Wellness Environment at the University of Vermont marries cognitive science to holistic self-care. The program is popular, growing, and shows preliminary signs of success. But some students resent it and find it divisive.

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Hudziak, who also leads the Vermont Center for Children, Youth and Families at UVM, ought to know. For 25 years, he's studied the developing brain as a pediatric neuropsychiatrist and researcher. He's published 180 papers and helps run a longitudinal study in the Netherlands that has tracked 10,000 children since birth. He's also the father of four children, two of whom attend Vermont this year.

Hudziak got the idea for Wellness Education when the older of the girls enrolled in college. She isn't a teetotaler, he says, but she was looking for an environment that "wasn't drug- and alcohol-riddled," and the only option was the small Sobriety House, as it was known.

"I thought there was so much more we could do," he says. "Universities have an obligation to invest in the critical development of the human brain."

At Vermont's youth center, doctors treat children and their families through a combination of therapy, medication, and less-traditional measures like music lessons, yoga, exercise, and meditation. Hudziak thought that same approach — minus the parents and pharmaceuticals — might work with college students.

He took his idea for a "neuroscience-inspired, incentive-based behavioral-change program" to campus administrators three years ago, and they agreed to try it. The program proved so popular that they asked Hudziak if he wanted to expand it from 118 to

almost 500 students the second year. Ever the researcher, he asked if he could house the new students in McAuley Hall, an older, remote dorm and the one with the worst drug- and alcohol-incident statistics on campus.

"I wanted to test if the model could work in a location that was not desirable," he says.

It did. One hundred and sixty students signed on to live in McAuley, and the rate of incidents there fell sharply.

The success of the wellness program has been gratifying, but Hudziak, 60, says it's taken something of a toll on his own health. A varsity tennis player in college, he's put on weight and is seeing a trainer who is trying to whip him into shape. "He's not kind to me," says Hudziak, over a small bowl of eggs and ham. "It's hard when you're not living one of the pillars of wellness."

The program has four pillars: fitness, nutrition, mindfulness, and relate, which has to do with relationships and mentoring. Students are encouraged to participate in all four and get WE coins for doing so, but they aren't required to take part in any.

"There's a misperception that you have to exercise or sleep a certain way," Hudziak says. "This is purely voluntary participation. You can smoke weed every day" (though he really hopes you won't, for brain-health reasons; besides, it's prohibited on campus).

Over the past two years, an anonymous donor has given thousands of Apple watches to the Wellness Environment program. Hudziak developed an app that students can use to collect WE coins and to track their own behaviors — healthy and risky — for a study he's conducting on the role of incentives in promoting healthy behaviors. Each night, students (WE and non-WE) in the study fill out a survey asking how much sleep they got, whether they exercised, how much they drank or smoked, and how they felt overall. If they complete 70 percent of the surveys, they get to keep the watch.

The surveys also provide students with a snapshot of what they did on days they felt happy and days they felt sad. "That's personalized medicine," Hudziak says.

Alistair Murphy, a freshman who is participating in the study, as well as in Wellness Environment, says the results confirmed what he had suspected: "Sleep is really important to me."

The feedback, he adds, has motivated him to meditate more often, to exercise more frequently, and to pick up the ukulele. (Violin lessons are free in WE, but he figured that ukulele would be easier.)

"It makes you look back at your day — you become introspective," he says. "It sets up this atmosphere of self-improvement."

Hudziak, who attends "a lot of dinners and receptions," says the app motivates him to eat and drink less at the events.

Like other campus administrators, he's also interested in the program's impact on student-success measures, like retention and grade-point average. Still, he's less concerned about students' grades than about their mental health and cognitive growth.

"Stats are important, but to me, it's really about changing the brain," he says. "I'd rather you get a B average and be well than an A average and suffer."

UVM administrators nixed one of his suggestion, though. In the Netherlands, they're doing microbiomic research; he asked if he could try it at Vermont.

"I said I wanted to collect feces," he recalls with a chuckle, "and they said no."

This article is part of:

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