

Expanding Nursing Faculty Development Through a Fitness Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Background: Prioritizing fitness in the workplace can aid in promoting a more contemporary view of faculty development. As a result, a workplace fitness initiative was developed in a Southern college of nursing to address the physical activity of faculty and staff during work hours and to promote a more contemporary view of faculty development.

Aim: This study examined perceptions of the fitness initiative and explored opportunities for improvement.

Methods: Faculty and staff completed a survey about the fitness initiative including perceptions of workplace fitness, motivation to join, most enjoyable aspects of the fitness initiative, and opportunities for improvement. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative responses were coded and analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Results: One hundred percent of survey respondents ($n = 35$) believed in the importance of workplace fitness. Four themes were identified related to the perception of workplace fitness: workplace fitness can increase self-reported movement and productivity and support personal goals. Survey respondents also appreciated the comradery, connection, and team-building that the initiative created. However, time was a barrier to engagement.

Conclusion: As nurses are urged to model health-promoting behaviors, a college fitness initiative should be considered for encouraging and normalizing workplace fitness and promoting a more contemporary view of faculty development that focuses on factors outside the traditional faculty role. Our fitness initiative demonstrated that such programs are feasible, well-accepted, promote fitness in physical or virtual workplaces, and help to build connection and comradery among faculty and staff.

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, cardiovascular disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes are among the top causes of death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021a). Even though regular physical activity (PA) plays a role in promoting wellness and preventing these diseases, inactivity remains a challenge for many, including healthcare professionals. Nurses are not exempt from physical inactivity and do not always follow the advice they give (George et al., 2021). Nurses understand the importance of health promotion in leading to healthier patient outcomes, but they do not always reflect these behaviors in their own habits (George et al., 2021). This can lead to high rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and hyperlipidemia found among nurses (Jahromi et al., 2017), and can contribute to musculoskeletal disorders (Tavakkol et al., 2020), gastrointestinal disorders, anxiety, and depression that are also prevalent among nurses (Koh et al., 2014; Maharaj et al., 2018).

Time restrictions often prevent busy nursing professionals from exercising or achieving the American Heart Association's recommended 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic PA each week (American Heart Association, 2018) or engaging in a more holistic approach to track physical activity such as the 24-Hour Activity Cycle (Rosenberger et al., 2019). However, exercise in the workplace is a strategy that may enable more nurses to engage in its health benefits. With American employees spending approximately 8 hours/day in the workplace, this setting is unique to promoting health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021b). Regular PA in the workplace improves social relationships, morale, and work performance and reduces sickness and absenteeism (Masala et al., 2017). This has been confirmed among nurses as nursing workplace wellness activities have led to increased exercise levels (Brunet et al., 2020) and an overall improvement to well-being (Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). Nurses have also reported an improved state of health if they believe their work organization is supportive of their physical health (Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

When considering the concept of PA in the nursing workplace, particularly in nursing academia, prioritizing this concept as a form of faculty development is essential for well-being. Oftentimes, faculty development in nursing academia has focused on professional roles and responsibilities such as professional development, instructional development, leadership development, and organizational development (Wilkerson & Irby, 1998). There has been less focus on the more "contemporary view of faculty development that focuses on the individual faculty member as a teacher, scholar, professional, and person" (as cited in Foley et al., 2003, p. 228). However, focusing on the person allows the concept of faculty development to be more contemporary and considers how factors outside of the faculty role may impact faculty development (Hubarrd et al., 1998). In a study that evaluated the effectiveness of a faculty development program among nurses and physicians, one theme that unexpectedly emerged was the idea of self-care and how this contributes to overall well-being in the workplace (Fornari et al., 2018). Participants highlighted that self-care promotes resiliency in the workplace and helps with finding or maintaining the meaning of work and adjusting to work demands (Fornari et al., 2018).

This expanded definition of faculty development is not novel as it was when described by Hubbard and Atkins in 1995 as a method of recognizing the professor as a person. Hubbard and Atkins (1995) recommended that health promotion programs be included with faculty development and employee assistance, but nearly 30 years later, this is still not a priority in faculty development. Even in a 2003 study that determined nursing faculty development needs, well-being or self-care was not listed or ranked as an activity or area of importance (Foley et al., 2003).

It is vital that self-care and physical and psychological well-being be included in faculty development programs as they can decrease stress and burnout and lead to personal and professional growth (Kennedy et al., 2022). To address the physical and mental health of nurses and to adhere to a more contemporary perspective of faculty development, a workplace fitness initiative was created in the Fall of 2019 in a nursing academic institution. This initiative was implemented to target the health and well-being of faculty and staff during work hours and to serve as a component of contemporary faculty development. This study examined faculty and staff perception of the workplace fitness initiative, and subsequently, its impact on faculty development.

The Fitness Initiative

The fitness initiative, “CoNGo,” which stands for **College of Nursing- Staying Active and On-The-Go**, initially started with a variety of monthly fitness activities on campus at the nursing academic institution. These activities included a stair-climbing group, a campus walking group, and 30-minute express fitness classes that were designed specifically for CoNGo. College of Nursing faculty and staff were assigned as accountability partners and leaders each month to serve as a point of contact for each fitness activity and to encourage others to join. The calendar of workplace fitness activities along with activity leaders changed on a month-to-month basis to offer a variety of activities and leaders.

CoNGo officially launched in September 2019 and had excellent initial participation. However, six months later, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the workplace dramatically. Faculty and staff were suddenly required to work from home while simultaneously learning to cope with the reality of a global pandemic. To continue meeting the health and fitness needs of the college while working remotely, the CoNGo initiative created virtual walking challenges using Pacer, a pedometer and fitness app that allows individuals to join and compete in virtual group walking challenges. The CoNGo initiative also began offering virtual meditation sessions.

METHODS

To better understand the perception of workplace fitness, an electronic mixed-methods survey was distributed to faculty and staff nine months after the start of CoNGo. It was assessed for content validity by a qualitative expert. The survey was also open to all, even those who did not participate in CoNGo, to identify barriers to joining and suggestions to improve participation. Demographic data were not requested to promote comfort in providing honest feedback. Interested participants entered a drawing for a \$25.00 e-gift card using a separate survey link to enter contact information. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and answers to open-ended qualitative survey questions were analyzed for themes using thematic content analysis, a process of searching for patterns and themes in the identified codes across the various survey responses. To ensure the qualitative research process was trustworthy, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for ensuring rigor in qualitative research were addressed by employing the following strategies:

1. Six phases of thematic content analysis, obtained from a psychology framework, were used as a step-by-step guide by two qualitative researchers to help facilitate this process: familiarizing self with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke,

2006). This consistent process of following the step-by-step guide and writing notes about the data analysis and interpretation process helped to ensure confirmability in qualitative research.

2. Thematic content analysis was performed separately by the two qualitative researchers, and after themes were identified, similarities and differences were reviewed before producing the final qualitative report. The use of two researchers, one who was external to the study, was used to ensure credibility and dependability of the qualitative findings.

The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board and participant consent was obtained.

RESULTS

A total of 35 faculty and staff participated in the study (20% of the faculty and staff roster). The survey sample represented those who participated in at least one CoNGo activity (69%) and those who never participated (31%). The majority of CoNGo participants (51%) were members of the virtual walking group that was developed due to COVID-19, but members also participated in campus fitness activities pre-COVID-19 (i.e., express yoga and circuit classes [21%], stair climbing [18%], and a campus walking group [10%]). All 35 survey participants believed that having fitness activities during work hours could improve overall fitness and well-being. Thematic content analysis revealed four themes regarding perceptions of the fitness initiative, motivation to join, most enjoyable aspects of the fitness initiative, and opportunities for improvement.

Theme 1: Workplace Fitness Increases Movement and Productivity

PA in the workplace was increased during the workday through planned CoNGo fitness activities. In addition, adding activities to a monthly calendar and disseminating this to faculty and staff gave everyone an opportunity to plan for fitness in the workplace and “motivated us to get up and get involved.” One participant admitted to being a “workaholic who sits in front of the computer and doesn’t move,” but the CoNGo activities motivated the participant to “leave work for a minute and move a bit.” If the activities were planned and were easy to attend, faculty and staff participated, and this inevitably increased their PA routine during the day. The PA also improved mental movement as “wellness activities break the monotony of work by clearing the mind and freeing more space for more productivity and creativity.” Participants attributed mental clarity during the day to PA breaks and mentioned that it gave them “more energy to complete the workday.”

Theme 2: Joining and Staying Engaged in a Workplace Fitness Initiative is Strengthened by Personal Goals to Improve Well-Being and Connect with Colleagues

One theme around motivation to join the initiative was an improvement to overall well-being. Participants joined the initiative because they wanted to see a change in themselves and having fitness activities in the workplace provided a convenient opportunity for them to do so. When asked what motivated them to join, statements such as, “I knew I needed to exercise,” “I wanted to improve my mental and physical wellness,” and “I joined to become healthier and stay active” all supported a need to focus on personal self-care and an improvement to overall well-being. Connection

with colleagues was also identified as a motivating factor to join the initiative, and terms such as “fellowship,” “comradery”, and “networking” were used to describe what participants were seeking from the workplace fitness initiative. After joining the initiative, connection with colleagues was also considered the most enjoyable aspect of the initiative.

Theme 3: Workplace Fitness Supports a Dedication to PA

As participants remained engaged in the workplace fitness initiative, they identified a dedication to PA as an observed personal change. Some participants were more aware of their movement during the day, or lack thereof, and attributed this to the virtual walking challenges during the pandemic. These walking challenges, with the use of a mobile app, provided real-time updates on the number of steps that were acquired throughout the day. Seeing 3000 steps one day and 12,000 steps another day encouraged participants to strive for more 12,000-step days. Some participants got additional trackers such as Fitbits and Apple watches to more accurately “count steps and strive for more active goals.” Some even found themselves more dedicated to PA when they would normally give in to their thoughts to quit and found that this mindset of dedication helped to improve their PA, “I love to walk and even when my body hurts or says, ‘let’s rest today,’ I still go exercise now. My stamina has increased greatly. I went from struggling to walk one mile to easily walking three miles.”

Theme 4: Lack of Time is a Barrier to Engaging in Workplace Fitness

To keep participants engaged in the workplace fitness initiative and to encourage those who had never participated in the initiative to get involved, we asked about suggestions for improvement. Suggestions included offering a variety of virtual activities as the CoNGo initiative focused heavily on the virtual walking challenges, increasing awareness of the initiative through platforms such as social media to engage more faculty and staff, and placing a greater focus on healthy eating. For those who had never participated in the CoNGo fitness initiative, “time” or “scheduling conflicts” were identified as a barrier to participation.

DISCUSSION

This study examined a newly initiated workplace fitness program in an academic nursing institution which sought to gauge employee perceptions, discover areas for future program expansion, and promote a more contemporary view of faculty development that focuses on factors outside of the traditional view of the faculty role. Several positive themes emerged, including self-reported increased movement and productivity, improvement in health and well-being, connection with colleagues, and increased motivation and dedication. These findings are consistent with other fitness and wellness initiatives among faculty and healthcare professionals (Brazeau et al., 2022; Deinhart & Kennedy-Armbruster, 2019; Song & Baicker, 2019).

Motivation, whether extrinsic (i.e., rewards or consequences) or intrinsic (i.e., factors found to be personally valuable or worthy), can be potent predictors of longer-term activity involvement (Brunet et al., 2020), making increased motivation an important finding in this study. In addition, participants of our study placed emphasis on

connectedness as a motivating factor to participate in the fitness initiative, which is also an important finding to understand what helps to drive motivation.

Social connection as a motivation for workplace fitness involvement is consistent with other studies that reported the positive influence of peer and family support on health-promoting behaviors (Bell et al., 2022; Jirathananuwat & Pongpirul, 2017; Kiernan et al., 2012). Similarly, Wieneke et al. (2016) found that employees at a large healthcare organization who participated in an employee-sponsored wellness program were more likely to report improved health practices and to support each other in healthy lifestyle habits. This theme is particularly relevant regarding a more contemporary view of faculty development, as employers prioritize employee health, wellbeing, and social connection in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding that faculty and staff value social connection within a workplace wellness program promotes a model of contemporary faculty development that values the needs of the whole person, including those outside of the traditional employee role. Offering group activities (i.e., group fitness classes, campus walking partners, team challenges, etc.) with the goal of improving motivation, movement, and productivity demonstrate a dedication to wellness in the workplace.

Barriers to participation in the CoNGo fitness challenges included scheduling and workload conflicts. Such themes have also been found in other studies (Chau et al., 2019; Clancy et al., 2018; Mazzola et al., 2017; Planchard et al., 2018; Seward et al., 2019; Stankevitz et al., 2017). This underlies the importance of adequate institutional support for workplace wellness programs. Indeed, organizational investment in such programs has been found to improve employee participation in wellness-related activities, as well as perception of overall health and well-being (Brunet et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2021; Wieneke et al., 2016).

One weakness of this study includes the small sample size. However, it should be noted that the participants reflected 20% of the faculty and staff roster. A strength of this study includes it being one of the first of its kind to evaluate a newly developed fitness initiative in a college of nursing, particularly before and during the pandemic. As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee health and well-being are becoming more evident, workplace fitness programs can provide a valuable support for faculty and staff and can aid in promoting more contemporary faculty development.

The results from this study provided a foundation for future fitness programming, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic forced faculty and staff to work from home. The CoNGo fitness initiative continued regularly scheduled fitness activities, adding virtual options during the height of the pandemic. Programs included a variety of virtual fitness series offerings, including virtual walking challenges with activity trackers, recipe swaps, and socially distanced group walking excursions. Activity trackers were ranked as the #1 fitness trend in 2022 by the American College of Sports Medicine (2021), prompting a need to continue the use of smart watches and heart rate monitors in current programming and future programming.

The fitness initiative has continued even as employees return to campus post-COVID. CoNGo has become an essential part of the college of nursing community as it has also expanded to include nursing students. The positive outcomes of the fitness initiative are particularly important as self-care promotes resiliency in the workplace and helps employees to achieve or maintain their meaning of work (Fornari et al., 2018). Promoting self-care, particularly in the workplace, creates an environment in which a more contemporary view of faculty development can be acknowledged and prioritized by faculty, staff, and administrators.

As nurses are urged to model health-promoting behaviors to their communities, the implementation of a college fitness initiative should be considered as a way to encourage and normalize workplace fitness, boost comradery, and

promote a more contemporary view of faculty development. In the current climate of social distancing and remote work, these programs are particularly relevant and stress the importance of faculty development even when working remotely. The CoNGo fitness initiative in our college of nursing has demonstrated that such programs are feasible, well-accepted, promote fitness in physical or virtual workplaces, and add a new meaning to faculty development.

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Author's Note

We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.