The health of those who study health

Behavioral scientist Warren Holleman spent much of his career serving the homeless at a community health center, but about 5 years ago he began serving a different population: university faculty. As the director of the Faculty Health & Well-Being Program at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, “I went from encouraging homeless people to take better care of their health to encouraging doctors and scientists to take better care of their health.” Sometimes, he adds, “the homeless people are easier to access because the doctors and the scientists are so busy.”

Academic life can be hard: Extreme pressure to publish and an exceptionally competitive funding environment can cripple morale, Holleman says. But there’s not much information about how faculty members are faring physically and mentally. “It seems so ironic to me that biomedical scientists, the people who study the health of everybody else, … have barely had their own health studied,” Holleman says.

The Faculty Health & Well-Being Program was created in 2001 after a faculty member died by suicide. Shortly after Holleman took the helm, he interviewed 19 department chairs to learn how the faculty was doing. The answer: Stress was high and morale was low. He tried to expand his work by collaborating with scientific societies, but the three he approached turned him down. “It seems to me that there might be a sense in which they really don’t want to know what the situation might be,” he says.

The primary underlying issues—scarce funding, publish-or-perish culture, bureaucratic challenges—are systemic and beyond the scope of what a single person, study, or institution can solve, but Holleman believes his program helps by promoting better health and well-being practices among faculty members. Some of the events—lectures, panel discussions, and workshops addressing work-life balance and resilience—are typical fare for an academic campus. Others, though, may raise eyebrows: weekly meditation, yoga, and tai chi classes; “stress-buster” concerts; faculty art shows.

“Some programs will help some people; others will help others,” Holleman says. For Pratip Bhattacharya, a professor of cancer systems imaging, attending yoga and meditation classes about once a month is “an effortless stress relief” that provides “an overall sense of being centered and focused.” The program, he says, “allows me to be more creative at work, more effective at time management, and to develop better interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.”

Beyond the specifics of each event, the social contact can have a positive impact, Holleman says. “Social connections help people cope with stress and be satisfied with their job.” Scientists, though, may miss out on these benefits because they “tend to be introverts, and their work tends to isolate them to some extent in their labs. … We keep trying to come up with ways to encourage social connection.”

“I think there are a lot of people who would benefit from our programs who don’t come,” Holleman continues. But he believes the benefits of his efforts will be felt beyond the immediate participants. “I feel that [our events] have an overall benefit of encouraging everybody to find what works for them. … A big part of what we do is being kind of a beacon for culture change in the area of work-life balance and good physical and mental health.”

“I think many faculty [members] would like to participate in theory, but they haven’t managed the time to figure out how,” Bhattacharya says. “I guess it’s not very high on the priority list of most faculty [members], who are very preoccupied with day-to-day work.” For those who are having a hard time tearing themselves away from the lab, Holleman emphasizes that burning the candle at both ends is “just not sustainable. You’ll be less productive in the long run, as well as less happy and less healthy.”

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