

Promoting Employee Wellness in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *This is an action research on the enhancement of the well-being of employees of Mabalacat City College through the Employee Wellness Program composed of a well-coordinated set of activities—physical, social, technical, and personal-psychological. The extents of participation of the employees and the program's contribution in promoting the well-being of the employees have been analyzed through the program monitoring forms and interviews. The findings showed that the program provided opportunities and experiences to the employees to learn, enjoy, relax, recharge, and reconnect with other employees and they are looking forward to joining in more wellness activities. The employees cited relief from stress, increased camaraderie and interaction among colleagues as top benefits of engaging in wellness program activities. The most participated activities are playing board games, karaoke, and dance fitness.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Employee Wellness, Pandemic

1. Introduction

An employee usually spends more time in the workplace. For this reason, it is necessary for the workplace to be an advocate for employee well-being. According to a study done by Patterson, Smith and Hostler (2016), wellness programs prevented cardio-vascular emergencies in employees, saving lives and money. In the United States, wellness programs improved employee productivity and reduced health care-related expenses (Sabharwal, Kiel & Hijal-Moghrabi, 2016).

Wellness programs are usually popular and prioritized only in developed countries (Schulte, O'Donnell, Kastner, Schidt, Schafer, et al; 2014), but it is the developing and low income countries who are in much need of these types of programs in order to support or make up for the insufficient health care programs available in their countries (World Health Organization, 2013).

Government funding in health care for developed countries is considerably higher compared to that of a developing country. Taking the case of United States funding compared to the Philippines, the U.S. spends 17.9% of its GDP in healthcare, while in the Philippines it is only 3.3% of its GDP (Co & Hechanova, 2018). Because of insufficient resources, the weight of caring for the well-being of employees is now placed on the shoulders of employers and concerned people.

Workplace wellness programs are designed by organizations in the hope of promoting and improving the physical and mental health of its people. During this time of Covid-19 pandemic, the workplace has posed both risk and challenge due to changes such as the implementation of health protocols and safety measures that hamper social interaction and may increase stress in the workplace. Covid-19 does not just affect people's physical health but also significantly impacts their mental health and can bring on bouts of anxiety and depression (Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, et al., 2020).

At Mabalacat City College (MCC), an Employee Wellness Program was developed aimed at enhancing the well-being

of its employees. It started its implementation in September 2020. From then on, MCC personnel were given about a couple of hours every Friday to engage in wellness activities which included Zumba sessions, sports activities, chess and other board games, cooking lessons, nap and stretching, individual and group counseling, among others.

The extent of participation of the employees and the benefits of the program have been analyzed and described after a three-month implementation of the program.

Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

- 1) What are the most participated wellness program activities by employees and the extent of engagement of each office or unit of the College?
- 2) How do the employees describe their experiences in the wellness activities?
- 3) What are the employees' bases in choosing the wellness activities to engage in?
- 4) How did the employees benefit from engaging in the wellness activities?
- 5) What are the employees' suggestions for the improvement of the Wellness Program?

Method

This study is an action research to describe the employees' engagement or participation in the Employee Wellness Program and its benefits to the employees. Thematic analysis was used to analyze and interpret the data.

Sources of Data

Data was collected through monitoring forms, observation, and interviews.

Participants

The participants in the interviews were selected through random sampling. Participants were chosen through fishbowl method. There were 10 wellness program activities offered by the college, thus 10 participants were chosen. Each participant has engaged in a specific and different wellness activity from the other participants. The interviewees were six (6) males and four (4) females who came from different administrative offices and institutes in

the college, representing both teaching and non-teaching personnel.

Data Collection and Analysis

Wellness participation monitoring forms and Interviews were used to gather data. The participants were invited to talk about their experience and participation in the college's wellness program activities. The issues explored in the interviews were: experience during participation in wellness activities, personal benefits of joining in wellness activities, and suggestions or recommendations to improve the wellness program. Filipino, English or a mix of both languages were allowed in the interview depending on what language the participants were comfortable with. They were informed on how the data they have provided will be used and that they will remain anonymous in that their names will not be identified in the study.

The data gathered from the interviews and the monitoring forms were analyzed using a thematic analysis. It is a flexible way of data analysis to generate themes gathered from interview data. It is simple but rigorous enough to gain meaningful information (Braun and Clarke, 2015). For the tables and figures, frequency distribution, percentages and averages were computed.

2. Results and Discussion

Most participated wellness program activities by employees and extent of participation per unit/office

Table 1 is a summary of wellness engagement activities and the number of participants in each activity per office or unit. It showed that in the month of January 2021, there were 10 wellness activities offered to employees. These activities were: dance fitness, fitness vibration (exercise equipment use), iTherapy (equipment use), board games, karaoke, nap time, Zumba, Chinese garter, Mobile Legends and talk therapy (individual or group counseling). The employees who participated in the activities comprised the 18 different offices or units in Mabalacat City College. It can be seen from the table that all 18 offices or units participated in the wellness program activities. The activities catered to different interests, preferences and/or needs of the employees/participants. Some activities are mentally engaging like the board games and mobile games, while others require movement and physicality like the dance fitness activity, Zumba and the use of exercise or fitness equipment (Fitness Vibration). Some activities are for bonding and relaxation like the iTherapy, nap time and karaoke. According to Jones, Molitor and Reif (2018), quality wellness activities combine different activities that promote a healthy lifestyle by encouraging behaviors such as stress management and fitness, as well as promotion of holistic health.

Table 1: Summary of Engagement to Wellness Activities Per Office/Unit

Office/Unit	Dance Fitness	Fitness Vibration	iTherapy	Board Games	Karaoke	Nap Time	Zumba	Chinese Garter	Mobile Legends	Talk Therapy
CEO	2	1		4	3	1	3	2		
CESO	3	2	1	2	1					
HRMO		3	2	5	1	1				
HSU	2	2		3			1			
IASTE	24									
IBE		1	1	1						
ICS		1		1	3	2				
IHTM		2	2	7	2					
Library		2	3	12	2	3				
MIS				10	11				1	
OCP			2	3	2		1	2		
OSCA	1	1		2	3					
OVPA			4	10	3	3		1		
QA		3	1	2		1				
RDO		2		3	1					1
Registrar			3	4	2					
SAS		1	3	2		1				2
VPAA		1	2	4	4	1	1			
Total	32	22	24	75	38	13	6	5	1	3

Figures 1 and 2 show the frequency and percentage distribution of wellness activities participation of employees. The choices of activities of the employees reflect the need for socialization and human connection, more keenly felt during this season when the new normal includes quarantine and social distancing (Naser, Al-Hadithi, Dahmash, et al. 2020). The most participated wellness activity of the month is playing board games, with 75 participants coming from 17

out of 18 offices or units in the college. Playing board games have many benefits including providing opportunities for socialization, improving brain functions such as intuitive decision-making, promoting healthy brain-aging, and facilitating therapeutic effect similar to that experienced during art therapy (Nakao, 2019).

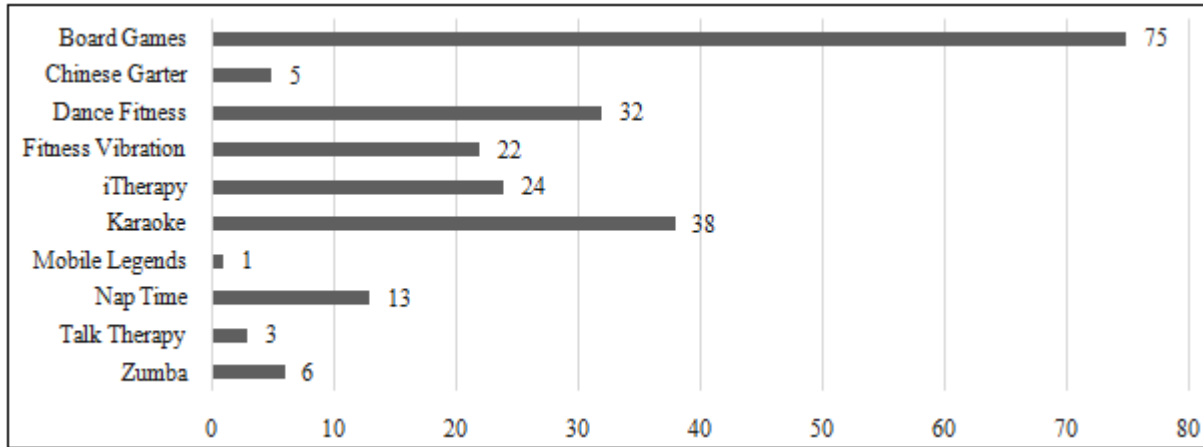


Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Participated Wellness Activities

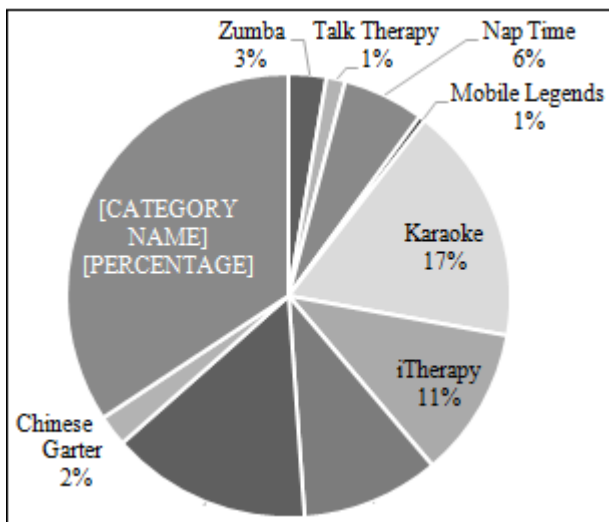


Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Participated Wellness Activities

The love of Filipinos for karaoke (Askins, 2007) is evident even in the MCC wellness program being the second most participated activity with 38 participants from different offices or units. Karaoke is popular because aside from expressing love for singing or music, it provides a sense of community and camaraderie among the participants. It also boosts self-confidence and gives empowerment as others respond to what an individual does (Lamb, Burns, Scaffidi & Murdock, 1994).

The third most participated activity was dance fitness with 32 participants from 5 different offices or units. Similar to playing board games and karaoke, dancing for fitness as a group has many benefits. This includes opportunity for physical activity, emotional expression, socialization, relief for stress and creative expression (Svobodova, 2017).

The use of iTherapy equipment is the fourth most participated activity with 24 participants from 11 different offices or units. Fifth is the use of Fitness Vibration equipment with 22 participants from 13 different offices or units. In the sixth place is nap time, with 13 employees from 8 offices or units. Seventh is Zumba with 6 participants from 4 offices or units. In the eighth position is Chinese Garter with 5 participants from 3 offices or units. Ninth is Talk Therapy with 3 participants from 2 offices or units. Coming in at tenth position is playing online/mobile game with 1 participant from 1 office or unit. A quality workplace wellness program provides accolades and rewards participation from employees (Swayze & Burke-Smalley, 2013). It will be hard to regard a wellness program as successful without gaining participants in its program offerings.

Meanwhile, the extent of engagement of the units/offices of the College in the wellness activities is shown on Figure 3. The extent of engagement was derived by dividing the number of activities engaged in by the number of employees of that unit/office. Figure 3 displays the extent of engagement of employees to wellness activities in the month of January 2021 according to office or unit. The office or unit that participated the most was the College Library with 3.67 average monthly engagements. This means that the employees of the College Library have an average participation of 3.67 of the wellness activities. The second most participative office or unit was the Office of the College President with 3.33. The third most participative office or unit was a tie between the Office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs and the Institute of Hospitality and Tourism Management. Gaining the support and/or participation of the head or supervisors in an organization is an important factor for the success and effectiveness of a wellness program at workplace (Co & Hechanova, 2018).

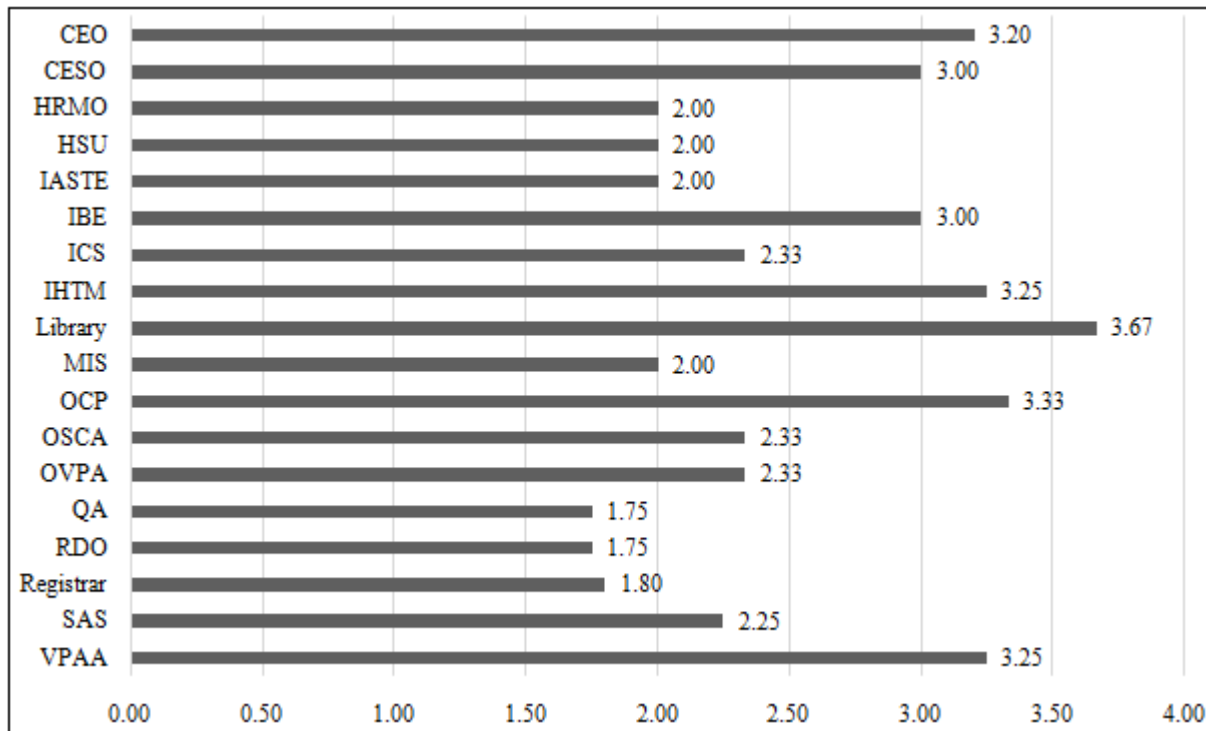


Figure 3: Average Monthly Engagement to Wellness Activities (According to Office/Unit)

Employees’ experiences in the wellness activities

Table 2 describes the experience and the emotional feedback of employees who participated in the different wellness activities. A total of 9 out of the 10 participants (90%) said that the activities were fun and enjoyable to them. On the other hand, 7 out of 10 participants (70%) described their experience as exciting and that they are looking forward to participating in wellness activities. Meanwhile, 5 out of 10 respondents (50%) said that they felt relaxed while engaging in wellness activities. The fourth most frequent response is the wish for more time allotted for wellness activities with 3 out of 10 participants (30%). Lastly, 1 out of 10 (10%) employees felt hesitant to try at first, but after the activity, was glad to have participated in it.

Table 2: Experience and Emotional Response to Engagement in Wellness Activities

Experience/Emotional Responses	Frequency	Percentage
I enjoyed the activities.	9	90%
I felt relaxed.	5	50%
I am excited and looking forward to it.	7	70%
I was hesitant to try it, but afterwards I was glad I did it.	1	10%
I wish there was more time for wellness activities.	3	30%

Employees’ bases in choosing the wellness activities to engage in

As can be gauged on Table 3, the basis of employees’ decision-making regarding which wellness activities to participate in. More than half (60%) or 6 out of 10 participants based their decisions on personal interest and inclination. This is the foremost basis for decision-making. The other 30% or 3 out of 10 participants chose based on what their officemates or group preferred. Joining or going with the group is also a way for employees to fast decisions. While 10% or 1 out of 10 participants chose based on natural competency or skills. People do have a tendency to

make decisions based on personal interest and tastes, and they may do this quickly or they can spend some time trying to weigh all the choices based on personal preferences or values. Another way to make decisions especially if the person is unsure is to get the input of a group of people around and get their advice or idea (Hu, 2015).

Table 3: Basis for Choice of Wellness Activity to Engage In

Basis for Choice of Wellness Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Personal Interest and Inclination	6	60%
Area of Competence or Skill	1	10%
Group Preference	3	30%

Employees’ benefits from engaging in the wellness activities

Table 4 enumerates the different personal benefits the employees have experienced as a result of their engagement in wellness-promoting activities. The topmost benefit of engagement was camaraderie and interaction among employees; and relieves stress and promotes peace of mind. These two benefits are tied at the top answer with 90% of the responses (9 out of 10 participants). In second place was the promotion of work-life balance (40% or 4 out of 10 participants) wherein wellness activities participation provided a sense of fun and doing something not work-related and taking time to have a breather. Third from the top is the promotion of physical fitness (30% or 3 out of 10 participants) since some of the wellness activities required movement. Coming in at fourth place (10% of the responses or 1 out of 10 participants) are the promotion of mental alertness, make work enjoyable, revive interest in leisure activities and hobbies, and confidence booster.

Table 4: Benefits of Wellness Activity Engagement

Benefits of Engagement	Frequency	Percentage
Promotes mental alertness	1	10%
Makes work enjoyable	1	10%
Revives interest in leisure activities and hobbies	1	10%
Foster camaraderie and interaction among employees	9	90%
Relieves stress, promotes peace of mind	9	90%
Promotes work-life balance	4	40%
Promotes physical fitness	3	30%
Confidence-booster	1	10%

Employees' suggestions for the improvement of the Wellness Program

Table 5 discusses the suggestions of employees to improve the wellness program in the college. Most of the participants (30%) suggested including more team-building and bonding activities among employees. This stems from the desire to mingle with and get to know more people in the institution. Another popular suggestion was to include more physical and sports activities (30%) to encourage exercising and promote fitness. Meanwhile, 20% of the participants advised for additional hours or minutes for wellness activities. Another 20% of the participants noted the importance of encouraging more employees to participate in the wellness activities. Some of the other suggestions include having more cooking lessons and free snacks to be served for employees during wellness activities. Another 10% of the participants expressed support for the continuous provision of wellness activities to employees.

Table 5: Suggestions for Improvement of Wellness Program

Suggestions for Improvement	Frequency	Percentage
Increase time allotted for wellness activities	2	20%
Encourage more employees to participate	2	20%
Include more physical and sports activities	3	30%
Include more cooking activities	1	10%
Provide free snacks	1	10%
Include more team building and bonding activities for all employees	3	30%
Continue providing wellness activities	1	10%

3. Summary of the Findings

- 1) The most participated wellness program activity by majority of the employees was playing board games. This is followed by karaoke activities dance fitness activities.
- 2) The College Library is the most participative unit in the wellness activities, followed by the Office of the College President, and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs.
- 3) A total of 90% of the participants enjoyed the wellness program activities provided by the college. 70% said that they are excited and are looking forward to joining in the activities; 50% of the participants said that they feel relaxed after engagement in wellness activities; and 30% of the participants desired for more time to engage in the activities.
- 4) Majority of the participants chose wellness activities to engage in based on their personal inclinations and interest.

- 5) Almost all the participants considered that the topmost benefits of their wellness engagement are relief from stress, peace of mind, and increased camaraderie and interaction with fellow employees. Some of the participants suggested to include more physical and/or sports activities, and team-building and bonding activities among employees.

4. Conclusion

Playing board games which is a brain-exercise has been found to attract the interest of most of the employees. This activity is mentally stimulating and relaxing, hence it supports the finding that the participants consider the wellness program as stress-reliever. The Employee Wellness Program has been initially conceived to enhance the well-being of the employees in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It may thus be inferred that it meets its objective. Physical fitness and dancing activities have also been most preferred by the participants. Since these activities are done in groups, they have thus promoted camaraderie and interaction with fellow employees, while observing protocols. Since the pandemic had caused limitation in social interaction, it can be concluded that the participants had satisfied their longing to enhance their interpersonal relations.

The wellness activities have been most actively participated by the units- College Library, Office of the President, and Office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs. It may be noted that the Offices of the President and the Vice-President for Academic Affairs are the top management units of the College. This implies that there is adequate support from the administration which can set a pace for the other units to emulate. It may be concluded that this may encourage increased participation from the other units.

Meanwhile, there is evident success of the Wellness Program since majority of the participants expressed excitement in joining the activities and look forward to joining them. This gives credence to the implementation of the program and the rationale to sustain it.

Majority of the participants' preferences on wellness activities was based on their personal inclinations and interest. Thus, the most participated wellness activities may serve as basis in selecting the future activities of the program.

The Wellness Program has promoted the well-being of the employees, most especially in enhancing their mental and social-interpersonal aspects. Some of the participants suggested including more physical and/or sports activities, and team-building and bonding activities among employees, which may also be considered in future wellness activities.

5. Recommendations

- 1) Plan and implement a rewards program to employees who participate in the wellness program activities to encourage them to continue, and also to motivate other employees to start engaging in the wellness activities.

- 2) Encourage more office/unit heads to communicate and show their support in the wellness program activities.
 - 3) Create a mechanism or process for gathering employees' feedback to inform planning and implementation of wellness program activities. This will facilitate in choosing and providing appropriate and desired activities to employees.
 - 4) A rewards program for participative employees is a good way to motivate more employees to continue engaging in the wellness program.
 - 5) Conduct further studies on the need and the feasibility of allotting more time for wellness program activities.
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