

## ***Centro de Bienestar Universitario: una alternativa de Universidad Saludable***

### ***University Welfare Center: a Healthy University Alternative***

**Beatriz Estupiñan-Pérez; Evelyn Fernández-Castillo; Yohandra Rodríguez-Martínez**

Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas. Villa Clara, Cuba

#### **Correo(s) electrónico(s)**

beestupinan@uclv.cu

efernandez@uclv.edu.cu

yohandrarm@uclv.edu.cu

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#### **Resumen**

El movimiento de "Universidades por la Salud", constituye un proceso de impulso al fortalecimiento de la salud escolar; se erige el Bienestar Universitario como eje transversal que mediatiza todos los procesos de la vida universitaria la metodología se aplicó y se ha venido gestando y perfeccionando en el proceso de su implementación. La evaluación es reconocida y avalada por la comunidad universitaria, así como por otras instituciones y organismos del ámbito nacional e internacional. De esta manera, se constata el valor de la propuesta y la pertinencia de su generalización a otras instituciones de Educación Superior del país.

**Palabras clave:** Promoción de salud; Bienestar universitario; Universidad saludable; Educación para la salud

#### **Abstract**

The movement of "Universities for Health" constitutes a process to promote the strengthening of school health; University Wellbeing is erected as a transversal axis that mediates all the processes of university life. The methodology was applied and has been developed and improved in the process of its implementation. The evaluation is recognized and endorsed by the university community, as well as by other institutions and organizations at the national and international level. In this way, the value of the proposal and the relevance of its generalization to other Higher Education institutions in the country are verified.

**Key words:** Health promotion; Welfare University; Healthy University; Education for health

## Introduction

Along with the challenge of getting professionals and individuals trained and competent to shape progress societies, Universities have a challenge to face: to be a living environment that contributes to a better quality of life. Preparing a competent professional for life means influencing your health and the full enjoyment of your well-being. In the goal towards a healthy university, a University Wellbeing is established as a cross-cutting axis of university life. Undoubtedly in this challenge, university researchers and teachers assume a complex task (Beltrán, Torres, Ayiulia, Lin and Barrientos, 2011).

In this work, the general guidelines of the methodology established by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to join the movement of Universities for Health are exposed, as well as theoretical methodological elements of university well-being as an essential element of a Healthy University. Similarly, the experiences developed at the "Marta Abreu" Central University of Las Villas from the implementation of a University Wellness Center (CBU) are exposed. In this regard, its mission, objectives, the methodology on which it is based, its working principles and the results of its evaluation after 8 years of the officialization of the CBU are specified.

## Development

### **The movement of "Universities for Health"**

The 20th century witnessed considerable changes regarding the notion of health, both in its understanding and in the ways of approaching it. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as "... a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not only as the absence of disease or illness" (2001, p. 3). "From a salutogenic perspective, health is conceived as a wealth that is created and lived in the contexts of people's daily lives, such as universities, for example" (Antonovsky, 1996, p.6).

The movement of "Schools or Universities for Health" constitutes a process of promoting and strengthening the work of school health whose genesis is the initiative of healthy communities, stimulated by PAHO. A health promoting school is defined as a school that constantly reinforces its capacity as a healthy place to live, learn and work.

For this movement, the most important thing is that the collectives assume their desire to change to improve and prepare to do so; when this happens, the bases are given to start the process; therefore to join it is not necessary to have achieved certain requirements, any center can do it; Assuming the need for change and the decision to bring it about is the first important step in health.

This work must encourage the participation of all students, education workers, health and others who work in the educational institution, developing a personal commitment to each of the processes of self transformation and improvement of living conditions, as well as of human growth, both individually and from the collective point of view.

In this sense, Thesauros, coordinator of the Healthy Cities Project and representative of the WHO European Office, points out:

Universities can do many things to promote and protect the health of students and the university team; to create living, learning, and working environments conducive to health; to protect the environment and promote sustainable human development; to promote health promotion in teaching and research; to promote community health, and to be a resource for community health; and be a resource for the health of the community. (2000, p. 7)

### **University Wellbeing: essential element of a healthy university**

An important element in any study on health and quality of life is undoubtedly well-being. During the last decade, numerous researches on well-being have been developed (Diener, ET. Al., 1999) that have considerably expanded the conceptual map of this construct. Ryan and Deci (2000) have proposed an organization of the different studies in two great traditions: one fundamentally related to happiness (hedonic well-being), and another linked to the development of human potential (eudaimonic well-being) (Blanco and Díaz, 2005). While the tradition of subjective well-being has shown special interest in the study of affects and satisfaction with life, psychological well-being has focused its attention on the development of capacities and personal growth, both conceived as the main indicators of positive functioning. It is precisely to this last position to which the authors of the present work join.

The mostly shared meanings about the University as an educational context, both for those who are inside and for those who look at it from the outside, are organized around its mission in the training of professionals from the most dissimilar specialties of science and technique. In this social representation, the relationship between professional training and human development is often seen, but the potential of the university context as an opportunity for health promotion and risk prevention based on well-being and quality of life of young people and adults who operate in it (Nieves, Molerio, Herrera, Otero and Quintana; 2008).

The young university student is in a complex stage of the life cycle, associated with the resolution of new tasks in a context with a higher level of demand and challenges typical of a very different educational system (Coll, Palacios and Marchesi, 1993), in which the conjunction of individual and contextual characteristics can affect

psychological well-being (Martínez, 2007). The university context can play a role in generating health or illness in its students. Identifying the particularities of the determinants of mental health and promoting psychological well-being in the university community, approaching them from a promotional perspective, constitutes an undeniable need.

The University Well-being includes the conditions in which the processes of satisfaction of the needs that arise from the recognition of the interests, desires, shortcomings and possibilities of development of the community in the context of university life are carried out, contribute and support. It involves a process of enhancing human capabilities in which each person can choose and increase life options, but in turn can live a life of respect for the other. Stimulating University Well-being is defining and executing the principles, criteria and policies of institutional well-being aimed at maintaining an adequate institutional climate that favors personal and group growth, promoting the consolidation of the university community and improving its quality of life.

Addressing well-being as the cross-cutting axis of all the processes on which university life is based, means putting emphasis on the human dimension as an essential element of the Universities. Although this humanizing perspective has been incorporated into the discourse of our decision-makers and teachers, and furthermore, explicitly formulated in the policies and programs of the Ministry of Higher Education, its intentional implementation from daily action has been complexed in some cases by the lack of understanding and on other occasions, due to the limited theoretical-methodological preparation to face this complex challenge.

There are many concerns that have been expressed in relation to university well-being, as it has wanted to give importance as a dynamic element within the educational community.

### **University Wellness Center of the Central University "Marta Abreu" of Las Villas**

If universities are seen as environments of daily life, in which people are educated, work and coexist, it can be understood that in their daily dynamics environments that influence the quality of life of their members converge while constituting ideal contexts for carry out health education.

This implies approaching an existing imaginary of what would be a "healthy University" that we aspire to have and maintain. A healthy institution is one whose operation provides all the possibilities so that man and the human groups that exist in it are healthy, full and can develop their capacities to the maximum; healthy educational institutions with healthy workers and students. A healthy institution teaches how to solve the problems that arise and learns to solve its own for what its members contribute, providing the possibility of a positive emotional flow of them in the implementation of the organization of their work and ensuring adequate communication between the different levels of management-subordination.

From this perspective, universities should assume the purpose of becoming a medium for health promotion and education activities. Starting from the thesis that considers the University as a context of training, development, and health, the University Well-Being Center (CBU) was created in the Faculty of Psychology of the Central University "Marta Abreu" of Las Villas, on 17 November 2010 and made official in January 2011, but whose background is the diversity of projects, actions and efforts of its faculty for decades. As the main result of its work and of the scientific research carried out, a methodology for the promotion of health and personal development has been designed and perfected in its implementation process since the conception of a University Wellness Center that integrates all the programs, services and events that take place from the different areas of the institution.

The mission of the University Well-being Center is the integral formation, personal and collective development of the university community through the fulfillment of programs, health, social and educational services in order to promote health, prevent the development of diseases, promote internalization of values, developing life skills and promoting personal growth; all of which will result in the improvement of the well-being and quality of life of the university community.

From an organizational point of view, the University Welfare Center constitutes an officially recognized working group under the protection of a Rectoral Resolution that includes it, 1) a management group made up of professors from the Faculty of Social Sciences, 2) collaborating university bodies participate central the role of the University Board of Directors and those responsible for prevention of the Faculties, 3) institutions of the health system also collaborate, among which the Provincial Center of Promotion and Education for Health stands out and 4) they play an important role, the students University students of the Psychology degree trained as health promoters and teacher guides through the Vice-Rectorate for University Extension.

Developing a culture of health promotion at the university level requires institutional political will that is translated into policy formulation. For this reason, the University Welfare Center is a fundamental component of the University Prevention Commission, which is chaired by the Rector and made up of the Deans, directors of youth and political organizations, from which the approval, coordination and support of all your actions.

The University Wellness Center works as a group with multiple functions, which are integrated in the fulfillment of its mission. Among them we highlight:

- **Coordinating unit:** the CBU coordinates all activities related to health promotion and education.
- **Assistance unit:** the attention of those students, teachers and workers who present problems related to mental health.

- **Research unit:** assumes psychological well-being and mental health as a central line of research.
- **Multidisciplinary unit:** different levels of the university community work in coordination.
- **Extension unit:** in charge of coordinating the different health programs that are implemented in the educational institution: Drug abuse prevention program, STI / HIV / AIDS prevention program and National Tuberculosis Control Program
- **Teaching unit:** students from the Careers of Psychology and Social Communication are linked to it with the aim of developing pre-professional practices linked to the solution of problems identified in the university community.

It is important to point out that the concept of a health promoting university does not only imply laying the means that lead to health education and the promotion of the health of its workers and students, but also involves integrating health and well-being into culture university, in the processes and in the university system (Thesauros, 2000).

Hence, the work methodology assumes a series of principles that have integration and participation as the central axis. Other defined principles are: comprehensive training, community building, mainstreaming, systemic approach, accessibility, availability, facilitation, intersectoral collaboration, teamwork, empowerment for health, communication, and learning focused on professional practice and efficiency.

To achieve the sustainability of this strategy, human resources are required, not only well prepared, but sufficiently motivated and committed to this task, which requires sensitization, training, and demonstration of benefits.

On the other hand, the design of health education programs necessarily implies a prior investigation of the protective or risk behaviors that members of the university community adopt on a daily basis, this guarantees the relevance of the actions to be implemented. It is for this reason that in its logical methodological conception, the work of the CBU is based on the research-action methodology from the comprehensive educational model, which facilitates the achievement of the goals set, conferring scientific rigor to the proposals for strategies, resources and actions. that are implemented from it.

The elaborated methodology covers various programs and lines of research: Mental Health, Health Promotion, Disease Prevention, Psychopedagogical Advice, and Psychological Intervention in health problems, Environmental Education, Human Development and Communication for Health; among other.

Among the services offered, the following stand out: specialized psychological consultations, professional and psycho-pedagogical orientation; development of workshops on mental health, training for professors and university workers in health and quality of life issues; delivery of training courses for health promoters; development of health workshops, guidance and advice on the prevention and management of addictive behaviors, service of "Línea Amiga" through the university chat; among others. In addition, various projects are developed such as the Accompaniment to new foreign students and the Harmonic Coexistence University Project. Likewise, work is done on the design and validation of communication products and psychoeducational programs for health promotion and disease prevention. Scientific-methodological workshops have been held annually as part of the permanent improvement process of the assumed work methodology. Some of the main actions and results over the years at the CBU are shown below:

- The specialized psychological care service has been guaranteed in response to the demands of the university community.
- Greater systematicity and effectiveness have been achieved in the methodological advisory work of the University Prevention Commission, highlighting the link with those responsible for prevention in the faculties as well as with the leading teachers and educational instructors.
- Various university-wide health days have been developed, such as the University Day for Mental Health, the University Day for the prevention of STI / HIV / AIDS, the University Day for the prevention of drug abuse, the University Day for detection and prevention of the cultivation of marijuana. Recently joining the University Conference on the fight against smoking, the University Conference for Blood Donations and the University Conference for Harmonic Coexistence. It is to say that all of them have had a program of awareness-raising activities and training with a broad university impact.
- Communication products have been developed and psychoeducational program have been validated to be used as part of the systematic actions that are carried out.
- Postgraduate courses have been developed in the area of training, highlighting among them the Health Education course where professionals from different provinces of the country and abroad have been trained, the Addictive Behavior Prevention course and the "Psychopedagogical Intervention" course from the university context", given to instructors from the Student Residence. Likewise, training courses have been developed on various priority topics such as the prevention of STIs / HIV / AIDS, Tuberculosis, and addictions, in which specialists from all the municipalities of the Villa Clara province have participated. On



the other hand, more than 180 students have been trained as peer promoters in courses co-sponsored with the Provincial Center for Health Promotion and Education.

- In the field of scientific research, to date a total of 23 degree theses have been developed, 11 Master's Theses. Currently, a total of 3 Doctoral Theses and 7 Diploma Papers are being developed on topics related to the subject, all contextualized at the university level.
- The scientific results obtained have been socialized in national and international scientific events and published in scientific journals.
- In the last three years, health diagnosis has been implemented in new students. The results are presented to the head of the Basic Work Group of the Ministry of Public Health.
- Research is carried out aimed at diagnosing protective and risk factors, risk perception and consumption in university students, which includes samples from higher education centers in the province.
- The Questionnaire for the evaluation of well-being in university students was validated to incorporate it into the CBU methodology and extend it to other universities.
- Work was done on the computerization of psychological assessment instruments used as part of the preventive actions developed by the CBU, with the help of students from the mathematics-physics-computing faculty, specifically an application for self-diagnosis of alcohol addiction or drugs.
- The number of students linked to the scientific group advised by CBU specialists has increased, achieving high levels of satisfaction and quality in the work they have carried out as part of it.
- High levels of satisfaction have been achieved by students of Psychology and Social Communication who have joined the CBU during periods of Production Practices and / or Social Work.

There was a very favorable assessment of managers, those responsible for prevention in the Faculties, educational instructors of the University Student Residences, guide teachers, students trained as health promoters and in particular of the students who have benefited from the psychoeducational activities carried out. The criteria issued by external evaluators both nationally and internationally also demonstrate the value of the methodology designed for health promotion and personal development from the conception of a University Well-being Center.



However, there are still challenges to face in order to advance in this project of building a healthy university. In this regard, it is necessary to delve into the theoretical methodological order in terms of promoting health, quality of life and well-being, complementing the traditional vision focused on the preventive perspective that is fundamentally aimed at reducing risks and problems; towards a perspective more oriented to the promotion of the positive resources of the people and groups that make up the university community. Likewise, it is considered that although various university areas already have awareness and training activities in their programs with objectives that contribute to university well-being, it should be possible to broaden the participation of teachers as well as student leadership. In this regard, it must be a priority of work to establish synergies and spaces of complementarity between all levels of the University.

## Conclusions

The experiences developed by the University Welfare Center during these years have served as motivation to advance the project of building a Healthy University that is consistent with the principle of comprehensive training. The logical methodological design supported by the action research methodology from the comprehensive educational model, facilitates the achievement of the goals set, conferring scientific rigor to the proposed strategies, resources and actions deployed. The relevance and effectiveness of the work of the University Wellness Center has been validated based on the results obtained and the assessment issued by evaluators from the university and health fields, both nationally and internationally; however, it must continue to be perfected day by day. The way forward may not be easy, but the challenge must be assumed with the participation and collaboration of the entire educational community.

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