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Gabriele Ciciurkaite

Utah State University, gabriele.ciciurkaite@usu.edu

Sandra H. Sulzer

Utah State University, sandra.sulzer@usu.edu

Emma Parkhurst

Utah State University, emma.parkhurst@usu.edu



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Extension Employee Health Behaviors, Needs, and Interests: A Utah-Based Survey

GABRIELE CICIURKAITE¹, SANDRA H. SULZER, AND EMMA PARKHURST¹

AUTHORS: ¹Utah State University.

Abstract. The goal of our study was to better understand the health and wellness practices, needs, and interests within Cooperative Extension. We used a Qualtrics web-based survey to collect data from Extension employees at Utah State University. Extension employees demonstrated interest in making healthier lifestyles a priority through Extension-specific wellness programs focused on exercise and physical activity, promotion of optimal mental health, and opportunities for personal development. Extension leaders and administrators are encouraged to offer targeted programming to enhance health and wellness within Cooperative Extension.

INTRODUCTION

With increasing recognition of the role that social factors play in explaining the persistent inequalities in health, social researchers and governmental agencies have called for interventions and programs focused on promoting change not only at the individual level but also at community levels (Rosich & Hankin, 2010). Cooperative Extension, which functions as a network of educators across the country, has been increasingly recognized as a vital asset in addressing health disparities through its educational programming (Rodgers & Braun, 2015). However, some evidence suggests that despite the assets that Cooperative Extension provides to address the health and wellness needs in local communities, Extension educators' wellbeing is not well promoted or supported through existing employee wellness programming (Burczy & Bowin, 1994; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Isreal, et al., 2021; Kroth & Peutz, 2010; Place & Jacob, 2001). Further, research focused on these issues within Cooperative Extension remains scant and outdated. To address this gap, we conducted a survey examining the health and wellness behaviors, needs, and interests within the Utah State University Extension system. This pilot evaluation study could be easily modified to conduct similar assessments at other land-grant universities and could provide Extension leaders with the necessary tools to create more inclusive employee wellness programming that is better aligned with the unique work characteristics and preferences of Cooperative Extension.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON EXTENSION HEALTH & WELLNESS

Cooperative Extension varies in implementation by state but generally includes a network of local faculty and staff who provide regionally-based instruction and a campus infrastructure of scientific experts. For our purposes, we examined all of these categories of personnel collectively, as they are geographically dispersed but operate within a unified system of Extension educators.

Research on health and wellness needs and interests among these educators has been conducted in several states over the past few decades, but the findings underscore ongoing challenges and unmet needs. For instance, in their review of existing studies on work stress in Extension, Fetsch & Kennington (1997) noted that stress was present across diverse programming areas, and prolonged exposure to stress was associated with negative psychological and physiological symptoms and had a negative effect on their relationships. Struggles with work stress and work-life balance were also noted in more recent studies within Cooperative Extension (Bradley et al., 2012; Harder et al., 2014; Harder & Narine, 2020; Hodous et al., 2014; Kutilek et al., 2002, Place & Jacob, 2000; Israel, et al., 2021). It is noteworthy that while Extension employees are generally satisfied with their professional careers (Forstadt & Fortune, 2016; Harder et al., 2014), they also report having high levels of work stress (Place & Jacob, 2001), being overworked (Forstadt & Fortune, 2016), lacking a separation between personal and professional lives (Vines et al., 2018), and having difficulties incorporating adequate

sleep into their personal lifestyles due to long work hours, which are deeply embedded within the Extension role (Harder & Narine, 2021). Most recently, an evaluation team at the Southeastern Coastal Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (SCCAHS) organized a collaborative group of evaluators who surveyed Extension professionals about health and safety in 18 states in the context of COVID-19. Out of 1,393 respondents, 58.2% reported experiencing difficulty in balancing professional and personal needs and 45.3% in balancing remote work and family needs. About third of the sample (34.4%) also reported feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge (Israel et al., 2021). Finally, employee turnover due to job-related stress, especially in the early stages of the career, has also been recognized as a significant problem within Cooperative Extension (Bradley et al., 2012; Vines et al., 2018).

With respect to Extension educator interest in employee wellness programs, one study was conducted among University of Vermont Extension faculty and staff (Buczynski & Bowin, 1994). Specifically, 93% of Extension employees expressed interest in a wellness program, and 91% said they would participate in one if it were offered. Research participants indicated they would mostly benefit from exercise and fitness activities, seminars on mental and emotional health, and lifestyle enhancement workshops. With respect to educational programming, Extension employees indicated a need for work and leisure balance, stress management, and relaxation training.

There is some evidence to support the success of stress reduction and work-family life balance programs within Cooperative Extension; however, the majority of them were implemented a few decades ago. For instance, Fetsch and colleagues (1984) documented a significant reduction in stress levels among Extension agents in Kentucky one month after a two-day stress-management workshop. Further, Fetsch and Kennington (1988) reported an increase in life satisfaction and improved family relationships among Extension agents in Colorado three months following participation in a day of Balancing Work and Family workshops. Fetsch and Pergola (1991) observed similar results five months later among Extension faculty in Florida who participated in Balancing Work and Family workshops. Specifically, study participants reported a decrease in burnout and an increase in personal life satisfaction (Fetsch & Pergola, 1991). More recently, Forstadt and Fortune (2016) reported positive changes in organizational culture associated with increased work-life balance, collegiality, and connection after a two-year Personal Sustainability Program in 2012 at the University of Maine Extension. Further, Case (2010) demonstrated improvement in exercise and weight management seven weeks following participation in an Oregon State University workplace wellness program, while Donaldson and colleagues (2016) reported that 90% of Marathon Month—a worksite wellness

program for Extension employees in Tennessee—participants completed a full or half a marathon and 31% reported weight loss.

Despite the importance of these research findings, our understanding of health practices, needs, and interests within Cooperative Extension remains limited. We argue that with the national Extension programming priority shifting toward health and wellness, addressing issues related to quality of life among Extension faculty is of great importance and urgency.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of this study is to better understand the health behaviors and practices as well as health-related needs and interests among Extension employees by conducting a pilot evaluation survey at Utah State University (USU). It is important to note that USU offers an Employee Wellness program for its campus-based faculty and employees, including physical activity classes, nutrition and financial counseling, and stress management. USU employees are even provided financial incentives to sign up for the Be Well Rewards program. However, county Extension faculty whose job schedules include inconsistent hours and require extensive traveling across Utah cannot take advantage of many aspects of these programs. A better understanding of employee behaviors and barriers to activating healthy practices within a specific organizational context is pivotal for implementation of employee wellness programming efforts better aligned with Cooperative Extension needs in Utah and nationwide.

The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. Describe health behaviors and practices within the USU Extension system.
2. Identify health-related needs and interests within the USU Extension system.

METHODS

SAMPLE

The first step in this project included building a database of all Extension employees working across the state. There are 29 counties in Utah; however, there is no Extension office in Daggett County, and some counties, such as Uintah and Duchesne, share a Family and Consumer Science or Home and Community faculty member but retain separate Agricultural faculty. The typical model for each county is to have two faculty: one in family and consumer sciences (FCS) and one with an agricultural focus. Some counties, such as Salt Lake and Utah County, have four to six faculty and a similar number of support staff. The USU Extension website lists 104 Extension faculty members with slightly less than half working as campus faculty. We identified a full list of

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Extension faculty and staff by visiting each county's website and reaching out to all Extension employees via phone or email. The final database consisted of 212 individuals who received an email invitation to participate in our research project. Prior to data collection, we obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board of Utah State University.

DATA COLLECTION

The survey instrument contained a total of three sections. In the first section, we focused on health and lifestyle behaviors. We asked respondents about smoking, alcohol, fruit and vegetable consumption, hydration, physical and sedentary behavior, mindfulness, and meditation. We also included an Employee Burnout Assessment (Kanter & Sherman, 2016) and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (Kroenke et al., 2001) to evaluate levels of depressive symptomology. The Employee Burnout Assessment is comprised of 23 statements about work stress symptoms in the following domains: physical and emotional health, signs of cynicism and detachment, and signs of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Each statement is scored between (0) not at all and (4) very often. The total burnout score is based on the sum of responses ranging from 0 and 65. The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) is a nine-item screening instrument asking questions about the frequency of symptoms of depression (i.e., feeling down, having trouble sleeping, feeling tired, etc.) over the past two weeks. Response categories for the nine-item instrument range from (0) not at all to (3) nearly every day. The total depression score is based on the sum of responses, ranging from zero to 16.

We assessed employee wellness needs and interest in employee wellness programming in the second section. Specifically, we asked questions relating to types and components of wellness promotion programming, access to employee wellness information, delivery method, format and timing of employee wellness programming as well as barriers to program participation. In the final section, we collected demographic information, such as respondent gender, age, role within Extension, Extension position, time in the position, and location (rural, urban, or both).

We collected all the data between June and July of 2019 using the Qualtrics web-based survey. The full survey included 53 questions and took about 25 minutes to complete. All study participants provided consent before accessing the survey. The final analytical sample for this project included 99 individuals who had complete data for at least half of the survey items, yielding a survey response rate of 47%.

DATA ANALYSIS

We present results for descriptive analyses in Tables 1 and 2 as well as discuss them in text. Table 1 provides data on employee health behaviors and general well-being, and Table 2 provides data on employee health-related needs

and programming interests. We report frequencies, means, standard deviations, and ranges for continuous variables as well as frequencies and percentages for categorical variables.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The demographic data collected from the respondents indicated that 21.21% of the respondents were aged 30 years or younger, about 53% of them were aged between 31 and 60 years, and 14.14% of them were aged 60 years or older. Further, 71.72% of the sample were females. Administration comprised 13.13% of the sample, while 53.53% were county faculty, 8.08% were campus or regional faculty, and 11.11% held the role of specialist. Fewer than half (40.40%) of the respondents were tenure track professors (including Assistant, Associate, Full, or Professional Practice), 6.06% of them were Extension Educators, 18.18% of them were Program Coordinators, and 17.17% of them were Staff Coordinators. Around 53% of the respondents were in their Extension role for fewer than five years. Finally, 29.29% of the respondents worked in urban counties, 43.43% of them worked in rural counties, and 16.16% served both.

HEALTH BEHAVIORS, WELL-BEING, AND HEALTH-RELATED NEEDS AMONG USU EXTENSION EMPLOYEES

USU Extension employee health behaviors and well-being are presented in Table 1. The vast majority of Extension employees were nonsmokers and did not consume alcoholic beverages. A large proportion of them also met the recommended guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption. Further, while an average Extension employee engaged in some type of physical activity several times a week, they also reported extended periods of uninterrupted sedentary and screen time during the workday. When asked about health status, an overwhelming majority of Extension employees rated theirs as excellent or very good/good. Further, responses to the PHQ-9 depressive symptom screener indicated no or minimal depression severity, suggesting little risk for depressive symptomology. However, based on the workplace burnout instrument, Extension employees were in the beginning phases of job-related burn out.

Data on USU Extension employee health-related needs and interests are presented in Table 2. More than half of the Extension educators indicated that they either already have or are interested in making changes towards a healthier lifestyle. To ask about health-related programming that Extension employees would like to see, we provided a list of 19 response options (with an option to choose as many as applicable), but we report only the results for the 10 highest ranked activities. Extension employees were particularly interested in physical activity and nutrition coaching sessions; online health assessments; programs focused on mental health, stress

Table 1. USU Extension Health Behaviors

Survey items	Number of respondents	%	M (SD)	Range
Smoking				
No	98	98.99		
Yes	1	1.01		
Vegetable consumption				
One serving or less	28	28.18		
2–3 servings	28	28.28		
4 servings or more	43	43.43		
Fruit consumption				
One serving or less	26	26.26		
2 servings	44	44.44		
3 servings or more	28	28.28		
Fast food consumption				
None	2	2.02		
1–2 days per week	39	39.39		
3–5 days per week	35	35.35		
6–7 days per week	22	22.22		
Water consumption (glasses/day)	99		5.25 (2.32)	1–8
Alcohol consumption				
No	80	80.81		
Yes	19	19.19		
Frequency of engagement in physical activity (times per week):				
20 or more minutes of vigorous-intensity PA	87		3.36 (2.00)	1–7
30 or more minutes of moderate-intensity PA	88		3.44 (1.92)	1–7
30 or more minutes of walking	85		4.42 (2.26)	1–7
Hours spent sitting at workplace	88		5.78 (2.17)	0–10
Number of times sitting is interrupted by standing up				
Less than 5	36	36.36		
6–10	39	39.39		
11–20	8	8.08		
20 or more	6	6.06		
Number of hours looking at screen/day (computer, phone)				
1 or less	1	1.01		
1–5	37	37.37		
6–10	50	50.51		
10 or more	1	1.01		
Practice of mindfulness and meditation				
No	28	28.28		
Yes, but rarely	44	44.44		
Yes, 2–3 times a week	17	17.17		

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Table 1. (continued)

Survey items	Number of respondents	%	M (SD)	Range
Self-rated health				
Excellent	42	42.42		
Good/very good	39	39.39		
Fair/poor	8	8.08		
Depressive symptoms (PHQ-9) ^a	89		3.84 (3.73)	0--6
Workplace burnout ^b	88		27.49 (16.97)	0--65

Note. Frequencies may not add up to a 100% due to missing data.

^a Scoring: 1–4: minimal depression; 5–9: mild depression; 10–14: moderate depression; 15–19: moderately severe depression; 20–27: severe depression.

^b Scoring: 0–22: passion driven; 23–44: passion waning; 45–66: passion challenged; 67–88: passion depleted.

management, and work-life balance as well as flu vaccinations; subsidized memberships to off-site programs; and workplace massages. Almost half of respondents indicated that they would be interested in such programs occurring during lunch time, and an overwhelming majority of them specified that such activities should last up to 45 minutes. Finally, when asked about barriers to participation in wellness programs, a little fewer than half of the respondents marked time as the major obstacle. Only small minority of them mentioned motivation as a key barrier to employee wellness program participation.

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cooperative Extension plays a vital role in addressing health disparities in local communities; however, evidence suggests that the health-promotion needs and preferences among Extension educators are not well addressed with employee health programming. The main focus of our study was to better understand the health and wellness practices, needs, and interests within Cooperative Extension at Utah State University. Our study is the first, to our knowledge, to provide a comprehensive assessment of health behaviors and well-being as well as health and wellness needs and interests among Extension employees in Utah.

The evaluation of Extension employee health behaviors and well-being shows that even though the majority of USU Extension employees rate their health as very good or excellent and make an effort to engage in certain healthful behaviors, they do spend a large proportion of their workday sitting and looking at a screen with limited interruptions. More importantly, they report experiences of job-related burnout. It is encouraging, however, that the USU Extension employees are as healthy as or healthier than the general public in the United States. Specifically, they report engaging

in health-damaging behaviors, such as smoking or alcohol consumption, at lower proportions and engage in health-promoting behaviors, such as physical activity or fruit and vegetable consumption, at higher proportions than the general public (Pickens et al., 2018). It is possible, however, that our study population *may appear* healthier due to self-selection bias in the sample given the topic of this research project.

With respect to wellness needs, our findings demonstrate that USU Extension employees want to make healthier lifestyles a priority and show considerable interest in Extension-focused wellness programs. The wellness components that were of most interest to Extension employees included exercise and physical activity sessions, activities promoting optimal mental health, opportunities for personal development and lifestyle enhancement, and activities addressing nutritional issues. Interest in physical activity, nutritional counseling, and stress reduction is not unique to Extension employees and has been reported in other organizational settings (Bright et al., 2012; Hibbs-Shipp et al., 2015; Trapps et al., 2016). Further, it is also not surprising that psychological well-being and personal development were some of the top priorities given the documented job burnout and work-life balance issues (Fetsch & Kennington, 1988; Russell & Liggans, 2020). Research suggests job burnout, a response to prolonged experiences of job-related stress, is associated with depression and physical disorders as well as negative organizational outcomes, such as employee turnover and lack of commitment (Forstadt & Frotune, 2016; Harder et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to recognize that individuals who are developing and implementing health and wellness programs across the state may find it difficult to serve as role models in local communities and enhance public welfare unless their self-care and well-being is recognized as an integral part of their culture and work environment.

Table 2. USU Extension Employee Health & Wellness Needs and Interests

Survey items	Number of respondents	%
Place yourself in one of the categories		
Have made some health behavior changes but I still have trouble following through	42	42.42
I have had a healthful lifestyle for years	25	25.25
Planning on making health behavior change in the next 30 days	13	13.13
Been thinking about changing some behaviors	9	9.09
Which of the following would you like included in USU Extension health & well-being programming? (Top 10)		
Exercise/physical activity sessions	50	50.50
Activities that promote good mental health	47	47.47
Personal development opportunities for life skills	45	45.45
Health assessments – ‘online’	42	42.42
Flu vaccinations	37	37.37
Health coaching to address physical activity or nutrition issues	39	39.39
Work/life balance	39	39.39
Stress management programs and strategies	38	38.38
Subsidized membership to off-site facilities/programs	37	37.37
Workplace massage	36	36.36
How do you like to learn about health information? (Top 3)		
Brief YouTube videos (under an hour)	50	50.51
Via email	48	48.48
A designated website for health and wellness programs	37	37.37
When would you prefer these activities to occur?		
During lunch time	48	48.48
After work	22	22.22
Before work	10	10.10
On weekends	3	3.03
How often would you be interested in participating in a workplace health and well-being activity?		
Every day	8	8.08
A few times a week	25	25.25
Once a week	17	17.17
A few times a month	15	15.15
Once a month	15	15.15
Less than once a month	7	7.07
How long should a wellness activity last?		
Less than 30 minutes	41	41.41
30–45 minutes	41	41.41
60 minutes or more	4	4.04

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Table 2. (continued)

Survey items	Number of respondents	%
What factors would stop you from participating in workplace health and well-being activities?		
Time	44	44.44
Expense	16	16.16
Lack of management support	11	11.11
Reliable internet access	7	7.07
Out on the road/away from the worksite or office most of the time	6	6.06
Motivation	4	4.04

Note. Frequencies may not add up to 100% due to missing data.

While the work specificity and demands of Extension-based employment is unlikely to change, health promotion efforts could be adopted to better address the needs and interests of Extension employees. This could be achieved by either creating new Extension-targeted wellness programs or by incorporating certain elements to existing employee wellness programs that would make them more inclusive and easily accessible to non-campus employees (e.g., creating more content for online viewing). Our findings suggest that Extension employees are particularly interested in wellness programming that focuses on brief (under an hour) online videos that could be viewed during lunch time. Short face-to-face stress and burnout reduction programs proved to be effective in Kentucky, Colorado, and Florida (Fetsch et al., 1984; Fetsch & Kennington, 1988; Fetsch & Pergola, 1991). Similarly, engagement in physical activity-focused worksite wellness programs for Extension employees in Oregon and Tennessee led to increase in exercise and weight loss (Donaldson et al., 2016; Forstadt & Fortune, 2016). Thus, we encourage Extension leaders and administrators to recognize that improved quality of life among Extension faculty is crucial for the successful implementation of health education programming. With additional input from the university wellness coordinators and possibly allied university programs in social work, psychology, kinesiology, and public health, an Extension-focused wellness program should be delivered to meet the Extension health-related needs and interests. It is also noteworthy that implementation of such programming would be particularly timely given the increase in psychological distress associated with the global pandemic. Further, the implementation of such programming would further strengthen bonds between campus faculty and Extension implementors statewide. Finally, even though research on internet-based worksite wellness programs is emerging (for review, see Aneni et al., 2014), to our knowledge, no research exists on the effectiveness of Extension-inclusive or -specific wellness programs that would be delivered remotely, and we recommend expanding research in this area and conducting

periodic surveys to monitor Extension professionals' wellbeing over time.

Our study has some limitations that should be considered. First, the specific study population limits the generalizability of our findings beyond Extension employees; therefore, scholars and practitioners should take into consideration the fact that our results may not directly translate to other organizational contexts. Additionally, because we did not use established/validated measures in our survey instrument, not all of our findings can be easily compared with existing state and national data. Finally, the study was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is quite possible that the stress associated with risk of disease in combination with social distancing might affect responses if we repeated our study at a current time. As an illustration, Israel and colleagues (2021) reported an increase in stress and difficulty balancing personal and professional needs among Extension professionals in the context of the current pandemic.

Overall, our findings suggest that Extension employee wellness is an important area for future investigation and has the potential to make substantial contributions to the wellbeing of individuals who live and work in Utah. Improved understanding of the unique challenges and barriers to a healthful daily life within Extension will provide the first necessary step in developing, administering, and evaluating a pilot wellness program specifically targeting Extension within USU. Extension leaders and administrators at other land-grant universities are encouraged to conduct similar assessments and offer targeted programming to enhance health and wellness within Cooperative Extension.

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