

Heart of a Tiger: FHSU's Well Tiges Program cultivates wellness and work-life balance

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. -In today's fast-paced world, finding a balance between work and life can often be a challenge. However, Fort Hays State University has taken steps towards prioritizing the health and happiness of its staff, faculty, and students. Through its innovative wellness initiative, Well Tiges, FHSU fosters a healthier working environment and creates a community dedicated to holistic wellness.

Well Tiges was launched by our Student Affairs Division last year with the aim of creating a supportive and vibrant working environment. This program has since grown into a diverse community of wellness seekers, benefiting all faculty and staff members at the university. The initiative focuses on the full spectrum of well-being, incorporating mental, physical, social, occupational, financial, and other dimensions of whole-person wellness. Monthly educational meetings serve as a cornerstone, providing participants with practical knowledge and strategies to apply daily. "The initiative encourages camaraderie and mutual support among employees, fostering a sense of community as different departments unite their efforts to enhance their health and well-being," shared Kelly Meyer, an online admissions advisor, and a Well Tiges steering committee member.

The success of Well Tiges is demonstrated in the improved wellness of its participants and the overall sense of support and accountability within the community. The program recently expanded to include every faculty and staff member at FHSU, further solidifying the idea that a healthy and happy team is crucial for the success of any institution.

Robyn Brungardt from Financial Aid shared her positive experience with Well Tiges:

"Last year, Student Affairs launched the Well Tiges program, and I chose to participate. It required me to be accountable and gave me the tools to keep track of my mind, body, and soul. We often think of wellness as just an activity, but it is so much more. Well Tiges made me think about reading for fun, working on my finances and budget, and my overall well-being. My son was getting married in the spring, which helped me lose weight and feel better for the big event. It is always more fun to exercise with friends and colleagues. I am so glad it is a campus-wide initiative now and am thankful the university supports me in this journey."

At the core of the Well Tiges program lies the belief that small, sustainable changes can significantly impact personal well-being. Drawing inspiration from James Clear's book, *Atomic Habits*, the initiative encourages participants to build their wellness path using a habits and systems-based approach. By developing new habits, individuals can modify their behaviors and reshape their identities.

Jess Albin, Interim Director of Counseling Services and a Well Tiges steering committee member, shared the following example: suppose a person is trying to quit smoking. When offered a cigarette, a person focused on behavior modification might say, "No thanks. I'm trying to quit smoking." A person developing a new identity might say, "No thanks, I'm not a smoker." Consequently, part of the Well Tiges program includes the distribution of "Identity Stickers" at events where participants can complete the following sentence, "I am the type of person who....."

Well Tiges is an optional, year-long program designed to accommodate individual preferences and schedules. Participants have the flexibility to choose events that align with their interests and goals. The program emphasizes developing and maintaining unique habits that contribute to personal health and happiness, providing participants with the tools necessary to create their own positive and fulfilling lifestyle. Or as described by Jess, “Well Tiges provides the hammer, it is up to each employee to decide where to put the nail.”

The Well Tiges steering committee selects a specific dimension of wellness each month and then creates themed group events and activities. Weekly events such as Park Further Friday, Walk and Talk, and a biking group offer additional opportunities for physical activity and socialization.

Additionally, Well Tiges encourages participants to engage in actions that promote well-being, such as checking in on loved ones' mental health on World Mental Health Day. The program also includes special events like Well-Being Day, where participants can enjoy chair massages, healthy snacks, and a hydration bar provided through a collaboration with the FHSU Massage Clinic.

A student wellness companion, introduced by faculty from our health and human performance (HHP) department, “Exercise is Medicine on Campus” (EIM-OC), is a program developed by the American College of Sports Medicine. The expansion of Well Tiges in this manner further supports the university's commitment to wellness. The vision of this program is to see students discover, share, and adopt behaviors to promote a culture of physical activity and chronic disease prevention and management.

“Physical inactivity is a fast-growing public health problem and contributes to various chronic diseases and health complications. HHP professionals love creating relationships with people that facilitate positivity and joy around physical activity and movement,” shared HHP assistant professor Emily Washburn.

This program will also offer HHP undergraduate and graduate students first-hand experience facilitating EIM-OC program elements.

Well Tiges offers a personalized approach to well-being, encouraging participants to make sustainable lifestyle changes and create a positive impact on their overall quality of life. Fort Hays State University's Well Tiges program is a testament to our university's dedication to the health and happiness of its employees. By fostering a supportive and vibrant working environment and promoting wellness, FHSU is setting a remarkable example.

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