

**Building Bridges:  
Community Outreach Programs are the Treasures  
of the Community College**

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“Reaching for the world, as our lives do,  
As all lives do, reaching that we may give  
The best of what we are and hold as true;  
Always it is by bridges that we live.”

Philip Larkin, “Bridge for the Living”

From its inception in 1988, the Wellness Center of Shelton State Community College has taken as its guiding trope the kind of “reaching for the world” that the great British poet Larkin invokes. At the time that Dr. Milady Murphy was tasked with setting up a Wellness Center in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, many community college wellness programs were relatively self-contained entities (sometimes defensively so) whose primary constituencies were faculty, staff, and traditional students. She decided, however, that for the Center to pursue seriously its central mission, she would not only have to broaden her target populations to include every kind of person already associated with the college, but she also would have to take health education and activities out into the wider community of West Alabama. In other words, from the start the Wellness Center saw itself as being, among other things, in the community outreach business.

It quickly became clear that creating curricular bridges to the community beyond the campus could best be accomplished by constructing sturdy spans across the institutional rivers and gorges that invariably structure the work of academic (and most other) institutions. Accordingly, she strove to establish sound working relationships with a variety of other programs and divisions within the college to enhance maximal institutional and community participation in an elective Health and Physical Education program. She embraced this strategy to attain two inextricably intertwined goals: first, to fulfill the original mission of a wellness program by bringing quality health education to as many constituencies as possible and, second, to insure the Wellness Center’s future. It quickly became

evident, especially when budget crunches actually presented themselves, that forming partnerships, both inside the institution and beyond, was crucial to attracting students of different ages, physical abilities, educational interests, and professional aspirations. Once they are in place, people quickly become very fond of their bridges and they do not easily countenance them being taken down.

Of course, constructing institutional bridges requires serious administrative support. The Wellness Center found key allies in the form of Camille Cochrane, Dean of Instructional Services and President. With the president's support, the dean not only facilitated the establishment of good working relationships with other units of the college, she was also instrumental in developing a curricular strategy for delivering outreach programs to the community beyond the campus. Key to the strategy was the design and continued implementation of a certificate program in *Wellness Exercise Instruction*. This certificate requires health, nutrition and physical education classes, with an apprentice teaching component that helps students gain experience and confidence before seeking employment after graduation. The program has not only been very successful in preparing our graduates for the personal trainer and exercise instructor employment market, it also provides us with very well trained instructors for our community outreach efforts.

Let us now turn to a description of our latest and most successful community outreach programs, a *Wellness Initiative for Assisted Living and Nursing Home Facilities*. Dr. Murphy worked closely with David Cochrane, the Director of *Life Long Learning*, to design and implement exercise programs appropriate for nursing homes and assisted living facilities in the Tuscaloosa area (Reicherter and Greene, 2005). The Wellness Center provided certified exercise instructors and *Life Long Learning* handled all of the administrative details involved in the college presenting, free of charge, these services to citizens who, all too often, are overlooked in health and fitness programs (Khoury-Murphy and Murphy, 1992). It has generally been assumed that people who are placed in nursing homes are there to live out the rest of their lives in a kind of declining holding-pattern of steadily diminishing capabilities. Accordingly, the physical activities provided by most facilities were minimal and generally lacking in the kind of research-informed design structure that might actually *improve* the fitness and levels of mobility and independence of participants. Under circumstances like these it is no wonder that quality of life inevitably declines while health care costs just as inevitably soar.

Institutional pessimism about the role carefully designed physical education activities can play in slowing down the deterioration of nursing home patients was challenged in the early 1990s, when studies were conducted in nursing homes to determine just what physical activities could and could not do for their residents. The work of Prof. M. A. Fiatarone (1994, 1995) and her colleagues have demonstrated vividly that properly constructed exercise programs can not only

significantly improve the strength, muscular endurance and mobility of elderly patients, they can also enhance their attitude, morale and general quality of life.

Heartened by this encouraging research, we developed a format of two forty-five minute chair workouts per week. The workout consists of warm-up exercises, stretching, light (1-2 pounds) hand weight exercises and a cool down routine which involves additional stretching. Participants are seated at all times, thereby eliminating the risk of injury and loss of balance. Our chair routine is offered in ten-week segments, three times per year during the college's semester sessions. [A more complete description of the chair workout can be found at <http://www.sheltonstate.edu/content.aspx?PageID=381>.]

This exercise program was an instant hit. Starting with three nursing homes, we quickly added four more because of demand for what we could offer them. Additionally, we have added two assisted living facilities to our list of clients. Since Shelton State offers this program without charge to these facilities, further expansion is conditional on additional funding.

Without the assistance of *Life Long Learning*, the Wellness Center staff would not have been able to handle the additional administrative burden of this program. By working with the Wellness Center, *Life Long Learning* acquired knowledgeable, committed exercise instructors who were well prepared to teach special populations.

Working with patients in nursing homes and the residents of assisted-living facilities, structurally complements another important feature of the Wellness Center's philosophy. The Wellness Center strives for program integration which, among other things, is characterized by an intergenerational approach to teaching. For example, the Wellness Center encourages students of all ages to exercise and attend theory classes together. In many classes senior citizens are working out and learning side-by-side with eighteen year olds. Not only has their participation improved the quality of life for all students, the congenially mixed atmosphere in the wellness center is itself motivational. One of the most serious obstacles to developing a flourishing health and exercise program is the P.E. "jock" atmosphere common to the gyms often preferred by young athletes. A thriving Wellness Center must create an atmosphere that is welcoming to people of different genders, ages, and beginning levels of physical ability. Graduates of our Wellness certificate program are accustomed to working with and learning with people of all ages and physical conditions and this prepares them for our collaborative work with the Assisted Living and Nursing program of *Life Long Learning*.

Building one bridge leads to building others. Encouraged by the success of its Nursing Home/Assisted Living Fitness Program, the *Life long Learning Center* began to expand its outreach efforts by implementing a Water Color Art Program and painting classes for nursing homes, particularly for the Alzheimer patients at

Caring Days Adult Day Care Center, which provides services to people with early stages of memory disorder. These painting classes have garnered national recognition in part because most people believe that people who suffer from memory disorder are incapable of producing such extraordinary art work that in some cases stands entirely on its own merits. Some of this art has been displayed in community art shows and in church halls and hospital lobbies. The outstanding display of affection by the community for this surprisingly evocative art has also had the outstanding consequence of increasing community awareness about the aging process, making the wider community more sensitive to the needs and abilities of its seniors.

With two clear outreach success stories under its belt, *Life Long Learning* quickly expanded into other areas, offering its constituents a wide array classes in such fields as computer science, digital photography, gardening, art, gourmet cooking, antiques and gravestone studies. Indeed, an outreach entity that began with the idea of servicing senior citizens has now expanded to including educational programming for youth and young and middle aged adults. More bridge-building is on the horizon.

The partnership of the Wellness Center and Life Long Learning, forged by their directors under the guidance of the dean of instructional services, allowed them to reach out to the community to provide needed educational programming to an underserved segment of our local community. This partnership has not only improved the quality of life of its participants, it has created job opportunities (and enriching life experiences) for some of our students. Moreover, the college has received extremely positive publicity about this effort in the local electronic and print media. The success of this collaboration has not only improved the productivity of both the Wellness Center and the Life Long Learning Center, it has also endeared us to the community that we serve. For them, we are bridge builders.

### References Cited

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