

Confronting the Wellbeing Crisis: Supportive Communication as a Tool in Creating Healthier Philippine Universities

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ABSTRACT

Communication is key to achieving wellbeing. In higher education communities, it is critical to thrive and survive. However, in recent years, health and wellbeing have been deteriorating in many universities worldwide, including the Philippines. Despite the evidence, wellbeing remains marginalized as a topic in many universities.

In this essay, I argue that the wellbeing crisis in higher education is not just a health issue – it is a communication problem. Philippine higher education institutions have an opportunity to create a culture and environment that foster good health and wellbeing, yet most universities fail to communicate the value of wellbeing for all, nor is it prioritized in the higher education agenda. We are already seeing its negative impacts on quality of life, education, and academic reputation.

Viewing wellbeing and communication from the lens of a communication scholar and a trained yoga teacher, I present a case for action and support to create healthier universities. I examine and criticize the culture of unhealthy universities, advocate the value of communicating good health and wellbeing, and propose ways university leaders can use supportive communication to create healthier university communities.

This essay calls on Philippine higher education institutions to rethink strategic priorities by emphasizing wellbeing in higher education conversations, leaders to practice supportive communication and champion wellbeing practices, and encourages communication scholars contribute to wellbeing research and dialogue in the country.

Keywords: *supportive communication, communicating health and wellbeing, health communication, leadership communication, Philippine higher education institutions*

Introduction

Poor wellbeing is one of the most crucial challenges facing Philippine higher education institutions today (Mendoza, 2023; Alejandria et al., 2022; Embalsado, et al., 2022). This is critical because the wellbeing of student, faculty, and staff directly impacts the quality of education, performance, outputs, and reputation of an academic institution (Dooris and Doherty, 2023; Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Jayman et al., 2022).

In a recent study of university students in the Philippines, it was found that majority experienced severe levels of both depressive and anxiety symptoms (Bangalan and Claudette, 2024). Corpuz (2023) examined the rising stress and burnout levels increase in suicide rates among college students in the Philippines and called for immediate action. Faculty members should also be included in this action, as they have been found to have high levels of psychological stress (Satparam, 2023). This is not surprising, as teachers have always experienced high stress levels and are highly vulnerable to mental health issues (Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017). Even educational staff is not spared, since they were also found to be suffering from poor mental health and stress (Jayman et al., 2022). Guilaran (2024) notes that while there are systems in place for student wellbeing, support for faculty wellbeing remains inadequate. Increasing demands in faculty functions have been found to be associated with burnout (Dinibutun et al., 2020; Sabagh et al., 2018 in Guilaran, 2024), and faculty members often have to seek help mental health support outside the university (Guilaran, 2024).

Despite these glaring issues and increasing calls for higher education institutions to address them, we do not communicate about wellbeing enough. The literature is rich with evidence of the wellbeing crisis in universities in the Philippines and abroad, but according to Dooris and Doherty (2023), health and wellbeing remains “largely marginal to the core mission and organization of higher education” (para 1).

In this essay, I argue that poor wellbeing in higher education is not just a health issue – it is a communication problem. I view the wellbeing issue in universities from a unique lens. Aside from being a communication scholar, I am also a yoga teacher trained by internationally certified yoga teachers who are clinical psychologists by profession. In recent years, I have witnessed an increase in mental health problems, chronic health conditions, unhealthy lifestyle choices, and the rise of burnout in my own university. I am concerned about the declining state of wellbeing in academia because I believe good wellbeing is critical to quality teaching and education, and crucial in sustaining universities.

Wellbeing, in my view, is more than just the absence of disease; it is about the flourishing or optimal functioning of people. I look at wellbeing from a culturally

responsive perspective, understanding that wellbeing in higher education settings cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and political realities that shape university members' experiences. I, therefore, tackle the health and wellbeing crisis in Philippine higher education from a critical standpoint, focusing on the university culture that creates the conditions for poor wellbeing.

My positionality is anchored on Carey's (2008) work on communication as culture, which emphasizes that communication shapes society and is integral to human action. I share Carey's view that communication plays a huge role in fostering democracy and creating a good society—in this case, good, healthy universities—through person-to-person interactions. I try to adopt a contextually sensitive approach when discussing the problem of wellbeing and encourage reflection on the important role of communication in the development of a culture of wellbeing in our universities.

I understand that embedding a culture of wellbeing into the consciousness of universities is challenging. However, given the enormity of health and wellbeing issues described in literature, I am concerned about the lack of communication and action to address these problems. Literature on poor wellbeing clearly shows that there is a need to communicate the value of good health and wellbeing for all, and *communicate it well enough* to be a priority in every university's agenda. We need to rethink health and wellbeing as topics important enough to be discussed, prioritized, and even funded. Good health and wellbeing is, after all, one of the sustainable development goals of the United Nations that the Philippines has yet to achieve.

Worldwide, there is already a growing recognition of the need for a comprehensive whole-system approach to improving health and enhancing wellbeing within higher education settings. However, there are significant challenges in integrating health into a 'non-health' sector and in securing sustainable cultural change (Dooris and Dooherly, 2023). To achieve this, we need to take a closer look at the culture of our universities, appreciate the critical role of communication in achieving wellbeing, and call on university leaders to communicate and embody the value of health and wellbeing for all. In writing this, I present a case for support and action to create healthier universities.

I found myself looking at Philippine higher education institutions and their burnout culture not only with concern, but also but also with a sense of potential. I saw an opportunity for communication experts and scholars, particularly those interested in health communication, to put their expertise to work. We are faced with extremely difficult challenges in communicating health and wellbeing, but we are also uniquely capable of responding to them.

In the next section of this essay, I first examine the culture in Philippine universities. I discuss communication as a culture and the features of hierarchical culture, then talk about unhealthy, greedy universities. I analyze the health of academics, staff, and students, the lack of available support, and the consequences of failing to understand how health can affect the entire university community.

Then, I focus on the role of leaders in shaping wellbeing culture and how they can use the power of supportive communication in demonstrating and embodying good health and wellbeing in their daily practices and interactions. Finally, as I envision healthy universities, I look at the future with hope and call on university leaders and communication scholars to work together to create healthy universities where everyone can thrive, support each other, and succeed together.

Communication as Culture and Hierarchy Culture in Higher Education Settings

Communication is integral to wellbeing (Day et al., 2014). James Carey (2008) emphasized the integral role of communication in shaping societal structures and relationships in his concept of communication as culture. He posits that communication is not merely a means of information transfer but a ritualistic process that fosters community and democracy. This perspective shifts the understanding of communication from a mere exchange of information to a foundational element that shapes culture and society itself. Carey's concept of communication as culture provides a framework for decision-making, communication, and problem-solving that influences how employees, or members of higher education institutions interact with each other, their stakeholders and the wider community. This view, which positions communication as both a structure of human action and a set of social relations, is extremely useful in analyzing the organizational culture of higher education institutions and how the culture creates the conditions for good health and wellbeing.

Organizational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and customs that shape an organization's actions and decisions. According to Alkhodary (2023), understanding the role of organizational culture in promoting employee wellbeing and organizational success is critical, particularly in the education sector. Effective organizational culture is one of the main prerequisites for ensuring a good working environment (Makaryan, 2023), which is a necessary condition for promoting good health and wellbeing.

In his exploration of the organizational culture of two state universities in the Philippines, Villanca (2019) observed that, in recent years, state universities have developed unique cultures as part of their mandate and branding. Hierarchy

culture, which is common among higher educational institutions, emphasizes on structure, order, and rules. In this culture, faculty performance is greatly influenced by cultural consistency and work motivation, but this type of culture also suffers from communication issues due to different factors, including the dynamics of operation. Villanca (2019) and McMahaon (2022) identified some of these common issues as ambiguity, poor communication, and inconsistent leadership behavior, which can all contribute to a hostile and unpleasant work environment.

Kuo (2011) asserts that culture is a fundamental context that helps to shape both the individual and the environment, influencing how people cope with stress. Chun, Moos, & Cronkite (2005) support this assertion, emphasizing that the ongoing environmental context influences the occurrences of transitional life events, as well as how individuals appraise and cope with the events. Literature is rich with stories of stress and coping in academic environments. My intention here is to explore why faculty, students, and staff experience stress or need to cope focusing on the culture within universities.

The current organizational culture of most Philippine higher education institutions, particularly state universities, is characterized by the form and intensity of control and a focus on policy, branding, marketization, and strategy. While we understand the functions and mandate of higher education institutions, this focus often disregards wellbeing. In my interviews and conversations with faculty members, I found that they share a common concern: the failure of university leadership to ask fundamental, caring questions. *Do they ask how is everyone doing? Are they genuinely concerned about what employees need? Is there even an effort to listen and to meet these needs?* Most people may view wellbeing as focused on individual feelings and functioning, but we need to remember that social organizations and communities to which individuals belong greatly impact their health. In the next section, I examine the concept of greedy universities and the unhealthy environments they create, which impacts overall wellbeing.

Unhealthy, Greedy Universities

Universities are in a unique position to help shape beliefs about wellbeing, mental health, mental illness, recovery, healing, and transformation. However universities have thrived for centuries on competition, profit, performance, and rankings.

The university environment today is characterized by many internal stressors, such as arduous workloads, lack of autonomy, and a culture of performance management, all exacerbated by the strain of adapting to new ways of working (Bhui et al., 2016).

The demanding work environment, the need to balance personal and professional duties, and the constant pressure of productivity while navigating multiple tasks all impact mental health and overall wellbeing (Halat, et al., 2023). This blurring of boundaries between work and personal life can lead to feelings of overwhelm and stress, making it a challenge – even an impossible dream – for many university employees to achieve a healthy work-life balance (Corpuz, 2023).

In a Canadian study, the “nefarious effects of embodied work conditions within the neoliberal University” were highlighted (para 8). The researchers argued that overwhelming demands exact an “isolating psychological and physical toll that is neither reasonable nor sustainable” (Mountz et al., 2015 in Jayman et al., 2022, para 8). With more students, faculty, and staff experiencing stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression being reported at an all-time high in the world and in the Philippines, there is an urgent need to reflect on the consequences of these tensions and extrinsic pressures. These are happening in what Jayman et al. (2022) describe as an “ill-fitting and dysfunctional consumerist model of higher education.”

The current situation in many universities also brings to mind Lewis Coser’s (1974) concept of “greedy institutions”. Greedy institutions are those that demand exclusive and undivided loyalty from those who voluntarily devote themselves for exclusive benefits that are only granted to loyal followers (De Ocampo, 2013). Scholars have argued that higher education is a greedy institution that monopolizes employees’ time and energy (Nichols, 2021). Coser cautions against the control universities have over their faculty and staff, detailing the personal, professional, and often health-related sacrifices they make as members of a university (Currie, et al., 2000).

While schools and universities often talk about supporting their faculty, staff, and students, the university environments and even our curricula are rarely holistic or health supportive. In my experience, the concept of health and wellness in universities is often limited to health benefits – paid sick days, financial support for sickness, or other sickness-related assistance. You get support *when* you get sick, but none to prevent it in the first place. Wellness programs and opportunities are often optional, sometimes for a fee, and require faculty, students, and staff to take an interest and get involved on their own initiative. A wellness activity here, a webinar or seminar there – at best, they are one-time activities, happening only once a semester or once a year, often tied to another university event.

Using the individual self-care approach is good, but it does not address systemic issues. The system needs to change because the “individual resilience

narrative” (Thompson, 2023) is allowing the system to remain toxic. Everyone acknowledges that health is wealth, but in actual practice, the demands of work place individuals in a situation where they are forced sacrifice their health – pushing their bodies and minds to the limit just to get the job done.

As a result, individuals often fall silent, choosing not to communicate about their mental, physical, or emotional states because of shame or fear of being seen as weak or not being a team player. This self-silencing has severe consequences to one’s health, particularly for women (Maji and Dixit, 2018). I believe we should start discussing how individual internal regulation affects individual performance, and, ultimately, the entire university system. In fact, affect-regulation strategies can potentially impact relevant outcomes in organizations, including employee wellbeing, performance, and the quality of customer-service interactions (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015).

In a study that examined university employees’ perceptions about health and wellness programs, participants expressed concern that seeking support for one’s own mental health concerns was “managerialized” (Morrish, 2019). It required a meeting with a manager, followed by a referral to occupational health professional, with a report sent back to the manager. Participants argued that this approach does not work because it creates worry and anxiety about how their data could be used, not to mention the stigma it creates. Instead, participants preferred honest, private dialogue, where they can communicate their concerns to a manager in an environment free of judgment. This is just one of the many studies that reveals how universities perceive and value wellbeing. If anything, it seems tokenistic, reducing wellness efforts to meaningless procedures. It also reveals a lack of clear communication and compassion, including lack of understanding of the real, tangible impact of the wellbeing crisis and how best to address the problem.

We are already seeing the dire consequences of burnout, pressure, and exhaustion: educational quality drawbacks, poor mental and social emotional health, and quiet quitting, among many others. While substantial gains have been achieved in the sector, critical issues persist (Bayudan-Dacuycuy, 2023). There seems to be a deliberate disregard for the health crisis in higher education because demands remain high, the pressure to perform persists, and workloads continue to bear its weight on academic staff. The lack of action on these issues raises that question of whether wellbeing will ever find its place at the core of university values, or if efforts are being made to communicate its importance at all.

This is unfortunate, as higher education has the opportunity and institutional structures to strongly support the health and wellbeing of its community.

According to Pedroso et al. (2023), higher education invests heavily in the development of critical thinking, leadership skills, performance, and outputs, but falls short of investing in resilience or the ability to cope while maintaining similar levels of functioning. We can no longer afford silence, nor continue to suffer the lack of structures and systems that promote mental health, adaptability, and resiliency. After all, the work of our universities — and every single person in it — is sustained by the kind of communities that we build within our walls.

Leaders as Champions of Wellbeing Communication

Georgia University President DeGuioia (n.d.) talks about our ability to create intentional communities of care in our universities. I think it is a beautiful concept, and one that requires a significant mindset shift in Philippine higher education. It also requires effectively communicating the value of investing in health and wellbeing efforts to create healthy learning and working environments.

Comprehensive policies and practices that promote good health and wellbeing are needed. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the wellbeing crisis in higher education. Every university culture is unique, so before we can even begin to design and implement wellness programs and activities, we need to consider how they can be culturally and contextually appropriate, as well as inclusive. I share Arday's (2021) view that there is a need to diversify and modernize approaches to accommodate the needs of expanding, diverse university communities. While ultimately students, faculty, and staff will make their own choices about their health, creating the conditions for healthy behaviors sends a powerful message that health and wellbeing are valued across the institution.

Leaders hold the power to initiate change in internal practices and approaches, and therefore have the authority to establish wellbeing as a central value. Transformational leaders recognize that organizations are living networks where information and change emerge from communication — the real work within any organization. After all, communication and management are complementary disciplines. The role of communication as a management tool is to facilitate relationships between people and establish an environment beneficial to the wellbeing and internal development of the organization. A leader or manager should, therefore, be the first to establish bridges between the members of the organization through careful and effective communication (Bucata and Rizescu, 2017).

As heads of the university, colleges, and departments, they are responsible for setting cultural expectations and norms. They both model and enforce

what is permissible and what is not. While wellness is relevant for everyone regardless of position or status, it is of particular importance to leaders because of their role in establishing, maintaining, and normalizing culture (Kennedy, 2022). If Philippine higher education universities are serious about developing and embedding a culture of wellbeing, there is a need to create and establish a supportive environment through its leaders.

Finally, university leaders must be responsive to conditions that create burnout which the World Health Organization (2019) defines as “a syndrome ... resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”. Top management communication that is disconnected from employees’ daily reality has always been identified as a negative for wellbeing in academic settings. Faculty and staff members complain about not being consulted, and decisions are made *about* them *without* their input. When individuals start to feel unseen, exhausted, disinterested, undervalued, and disrespected, this is how environments become toxic. In her book, *How to Do the Work* (2021), clinical psychologist Nicole Lepera emphasizes that when people are in careers that do not value them and drive them to exhaustion, the body’s stress response triggers a corresponding immune system response, which makes people sick. Surely, we do not want the health of the members of our universities to deteriorate.

Supportive Communication and Wellbeing

Michael (2014) defines supportive communication as discourse that builds relationships. Supportive communication is also a form of social interaction that produces resources to solve situational problems and manage emotional strain (Mikkola and Valo, 2019). Mikkola and Valo’s definition is valuable, as it highlights the power of communication in creating conditions for good wellbeing.

The World Health Organization (2022) defines wellbeing as a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. It encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose.

It is linked to success at professional, personal, and interpersonal levels, with individuals high in wellbeing exhibiting greater productivity in the workplace, more effective learning, increased creativity, more prosocial behaviors, and positive relationships (Ruggeri et al., 2020). Focusing on wellbeing supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving, and sustainability (World Health Organization, 2022). This is especially applicable to universities, where wellbeing is key pillar to achieving sustainability.

Individuals need support from their environment for good wellbeing, and in order to survive and thrive. This is supported by the Supportive Environment

Theory (SET) which posits that supportive environments are crucial for people to maintain their health (Malve-Ahlroth, 2020). It is especially critical for those with lower physical or psychological wellbeing who require more support. Individual wellbeing impacts endurance and work performance, so leaders who possess supportive communication skills can make a positive impact on the wellbeing of his or her team members.

Studies of supportive communication revolve around verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are enacted with the primary intention of improving the psychological state of another person. Because the goal of supportive messages is to relieve difficult emotions, the form and content of supportive messages is emotion rather than problem-focused. According to Jones and Bodie, (2014) emotion-focused support messages fulfill two functions: a) to express care and compassion and b) to assist in the alleviation of negative emotions. In interpersonal communication and social psychology, supportive communication is enduring and impactful because expressions of care and compassion are integral to human survival (Jones and Bodie, 2014). Furthermore, this type of communication enhances the perception of personal control over life events and strengthens the perception of acceptance (Mikkola and Valo, 2019). It is enacted in the seeking of support, providing support, and in supportive listening as a form of emotional and informational support, giving rise to health and wellbeing promoting effects, which in turn influence feelings, behavior, and overall function (Malve-Ahlroth, 2020).

For university heads and leaders, what this simply means is being able to communicate in a way that fosters positive relationships, promotes open communication, and cultivates a culture of mutual respect and empathy. Being a supportive communicator means facilitating meaningful conversations, even when they are tough, recognizing that this is crucial to the success the organization. Needless to say, supportive communication may be the most important, direct, and immediate way that the any supervisor may demonstrate support for subordinates on a daily basis (Michael, 2014).

Demonstrating supportive communication

Leaders can demonstrate supportive communication in many ways, but they need to consider their own wellness and health behaviors first. Having worked with several university and corporate leaders in the past, I have found that they, too, struggle with their health and mental wellbeing. As in airline pre-flight instructions to put one's oxygen mask on before helping others, leaders need to reflect on how they are currently managing their own wellbeing.

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The leaders I personally know who have developed the habit of prioritizing their wellbeing had one communication trait in common: they were crystal clear in communicating the value of wellbeing – both theirs and that of those under their care. This, to me, has a profound impact on how leaders can view wellbeing and use their communication skills to create healthy working environments. After all, they are in an excellent position to cultivate a wellness culture within their respective offices, teams or departments.

So, how can leaders demonstrate supportive communication to help others feel empowered to prioritize their own wellbeing?

Demonstrate care and compassion. Expressing concern and compassion when subordinates or team members express exhaustion or feelings of inadequacy is one way to demonstrate support. Actively listening to opinions without judgment, as well as expressing praise and encouragement for job performance and work efforts, are also excellent ways to communicate support. Leaders can also be more explicit about the importance of health and wellbeing in the onboarding experiences for students, faculty, and staff. By communicating this at the beginning, everyone can work together in setting reasonable goals and targets that are manageable for everyone.

Normalize check-ins, create safe, open spaces. Supportive communication can be demonstrated through an open-door policy and regular check-ins to see how everyone is feeling about work and their personal lives. One of the recurring wellbeing issues in literature is the struggle for work-life balance. Employees often look to leaders to initiate conversations about overall life and job satisfaction, so dialogues about life in general, including those involving workload distribution, flexible working hours, and remote work options, matter. Querubin (2011) beautifully captures the value of doing this: “When leaders participate in supportive dialogue processes, they are essentially slowing down to see what emerges, and allowing the system to create change from within” (p.17).

Destigmatize self-care and boundaries. Self-care has long been of concern to helping professionals at risk for burnout or vicarious traumatization (Butler et al., 2019). Encouraging self-care and honoring boundaries is a form of supportive communication. Leaders can communicate the value of rest for better productivity by valuing weekends and personal time, avoiding work related discussions, or worse, assigning work during personal time. Thompson (2023) asserts that mental detachment from work is just as important, and that there should be no stigma around boundaries. This can be hard for some, but Witzel (2022) challenges leaders to make radical changes by focusing more on human relationships, kindness, fairness, and wellbeing. Honoring their own boundaries and those of others under their care is part of this radical change.

A Future Vision for Good Health and Wellbeing in Philippine Universities

Some universities in the Philippines have already implemented mental health and wellbeing programs during the pandemic. These programs aimed to promote mental health education and reduce the stigma associated with seeking help (Rungduin et al., 2023). A review of these mental health programs revealed that communication was at the core of the initiatives and recommendations — strengthening the social media or online and mobile communication components, designing a mental health literacy program, communicating the necessity of mental health literacy programs to faculty and staff, and communicating and collaborating with civil society organizations. It is a good start, but there is still more work to be done, and we have yet to receive evidence about the effectiveness and social validity of specific health and wellbeing interventions and initiatives.

Despite existing health and wellbeing campaigns, there remains low awareness about how Philippine university communities perceive wellbeing and/or wellness initiatives in their campuses, or the supports available across the Philippine higher education sector. These are areas ripe for communication scholars focusing on mental health and wellbeing research to examine. It also presents a fantastic opportunity for communication experts to design a clearly articulated health and wellbeing strategy across all levels of the university.

It is clear, though, that supportive communication presents itself as a valuable tool in confronting the wellbeing crisis in universities. Addressing health and wellbeing challenges in Philippine higher education will take time and require a communication approach that is comprehensive and multi-dimensional, but we need to communicate *why* this is critically needed in the first place.

Addressing the health and wellbeing crisis in our universities requires a cultural and mindset shift, and the determination and dedication to create safe, caring spaces where open, supportive communication is a daily practice. Leadership commitment to health and wellbeing is absolutely required, as many Philippine higher education institutions have yet to *discuss*, and more importantly, *act* on the wellbeing crisis in their own communities. If Philippine higher education institutions can prioritize and invest in the wellbeing of its members and its leaders can effectively communicate and embody the value of good wellbeing, I have no doubt that we can create healthy universities where everyone can collectively and collaboratively thrive. This is what is possible when we care for ourselves and the wellbeing others.

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