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WELLNESS WEDNESDAYS WITH FCHS: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMPLEMENTING AN ONLINE HEALTH EDUCATION PROGRAM

Jennifer Shukaitis, MPH
Christine Zellers, MPP
Alex Delcollo, MS, MCHES
Sara Elnakib, PhD, MPH,
RDN
Sharese Porter, PhD, MPH,
CHES
Rachel Tansey, MA

Jennifer Shukaitis, MPH
Assistant Professor/FCHS
Educator
Rutgers University
88 Lipman Drive
New Brunswick, NJ
848-932-3718
shukaitis@njaes.rutgers.edu



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Family & Community
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ABSTRACT

The Department of Family and Community Health Sciences of Rutgers Cooperative Extension created a weekly webinar series titled “Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS” soon after COVID-19 restrictions prevented in-person programming to ensure audiences had regular access to reliable health and wellness information. The program, now two years old, has reached over 5000 attendees and has been adapted to ensure effective delivery, marketing, and data collection. Lessons learned and best practices developed from this program may be useful to other Extension professionals looking to implement a successful online educational program.

In the spring of 2020, most in-person programming halted due to COVID-19 social distancing ordinances. The Department of Family and Community Health Sciences (FCHS) at Rutgers Cooperative Extension quickly realized the need to develop virtual programming that would keep its state-wide audiences engaged, connected, and well-informed. Research indicates that heightened stress is associated with behaviors such as increased sugar and fat intake, increased alcohol consumption, and decreased frequency of exercise (Gallagher et al., 2020; Leow et al., 2018). Recognizing that life during COVID-19 would likely increase stress for many, therefore potentially leading to a decrease in health-promoting behaviors (Fong et al., 2019; Wardle et al., 2020), FCHS faculty and staff conceptualized and implemented a program titled “Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS.” This program would provide a weekly webinar on topics related to nutrition, health, and wellness via a web conferencing platform and be available for anyone who registered to attend.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The purpose of Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS was to ensure that the department’s audiences had a consistent, reliable way to access evidence-based health and wellness information from the safety of home. Each webinar presented information on a specified topic, as well as practical ways to adopt and maintain health-promoting behaviors related to that topic; for example, fitting in more physical activity throughout the day, or understanding how to read the new nutrition facts label. Webinars were designed to appeal to a general adult audience.

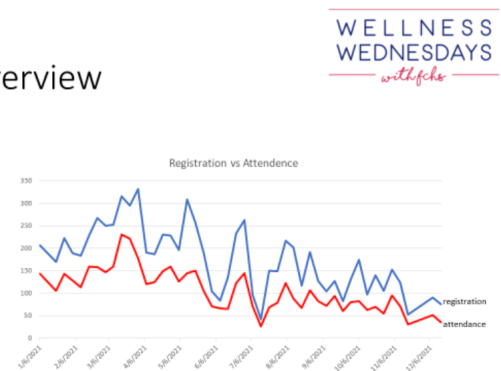
At the time, no one knew just how long COVID-19 restrictions would necessitate virtual programming. The first Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS webinar aired in May 2020; two years later, this program continues to provide free weekly webinars presented by all twelve FCHS faculty and staff educators, as well as guest speakers from other Rutgers departments, on a variety of relevant topics.

FIGURE 1

2021 Program Overview

- 47 presentations
 - Involved entire department*
- Total registrations – 8,272
 - 5,008 attended
 - 107 attendees on average per presentation
 - Peak attendance of 231

*SNAP-Ed did not present, as they are grant funded, supported in other ways



Between May 2020 and December 2021, 79 Wellness Wednesdays FCHS webinars were held. In 2021, an average of 107 people attended each presentation (Figure 1). Because this program was developed with some urgency and has continued for two years, FCHS adapted the program along the way to ensure effective delivery, communication, and data collection. Included here are lessons learned and best practices developed during the design, implementation, and evaluation of Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS.

FINDINGS

IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Virtual programming was a new educational approach for FCHS, and the department did not have any prior data on its impact. With the program's inception in May 2020, FCHS began to distribute polls and surveys to attendees to ascertain their opinions on the quality of the program; knowledge, attitude, behavior change; and demographics.

Survey results indicated that 88% of participants intended to change their behavior based on concepts presented in one or more Wellness Wednesdays webinars. Qualitative data from surveys included feedback such as:

“ I HAVE ATTENDED ALL OF THE WELLNESS WEDNESDAY FCHS PRESENTATIONS LISTED AND HAVE LEARNED SOMETHING NEW IN EACH PRESENTATION. I GREATLY APPRECIATE THE EXTENSIVE SCIENCE-BASED RESEARCH THAT EACH FACULTY MEMBER PRESENTS. SOME OF THE CHANGES THAT I HAVE INCORPORATED INTO MY DAILY LIVING INCLUDE DRINKING GREEN TEA MORE OFTEN TO REAP ITS MANY BENEFITS; INCORPORATING EXERCISE AND MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE DAY, RATHER THAN JUST AT A SPECIFIC TIME ONCE A DAY; ESTABLISHING A 'SLEEP SCHEDULE' OF GOING TO BED THE SAME TIME EVERY NIGHT; TAKING TIME TO INFUSE ECO THERAPY INTO MY DAY AND APPRECIATE NATURE, EVEN IF I'M JUST LOOKING OUT AT MY BACKYARD; INCORPORATING MORE LAUGHTER INTO MY DAY. ”

“ I LEARN SOMETHING FROM EACH SEMINAR THAT I CAN EASILY ADAPT TO MY DAILY LIFE. I FIND TOPICS SUCH AS ADDING FRUITS AND VEGGIES AND SEAFOOD TO MY DIET ARE THINGS I SHOULD DO BUT THE SEMINARS SERVE AS A REMINDER. THE RECIPES ARE NICE TO HAVE AND GIVE ME NEW IDEAS WHEN PLANNING MEALS. ”

Both quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated participants' behavior change and increased knowledge in subject areas, indicating that an online educational program like Wellness Wednesdays has the potential to effect change in knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

IMPACT ON THE DEPARTMENT

Rutgers Department of Family and Community Health Sciences is county-based; currently, 12 FCHS faculty and staff educators serve 16 of New Jersey's 21 counties. New Jersey is among the most diverse states in the country in terms of race, ethnicity, and income level (State of New Jersey, 2022). Furthermore, New Jersey is the most densely populated state, ranking 11th largest in population but 47th in geographic size, making it a difficult task to create programming that appeals to, and is easily available for, all residents. Due to the disparate needs of each county, each FCHS educator has differing programmatic foci. This has resulted in a department that is quite responsive to their communities' needs, but also de-centralized in creating educational programming. Wellness Wednesdays created an opportunity for FCHS to unite as a department to address the overarching problem of reaching its audiences during a time of physical separation. Wellness Wednesdays has also afforded FCHS the opportunity to create, deliver, and evaluate a collaborative, department-wide program for the first time with all its current faculty and staff educators. This has further resulted in FCHS being able to demonstrate collective impact by reporting the data from Wellness Wednesdays to stakeholders at the university, local, county, state, and national levels.

In late 2020, after several months of running Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS webinars, FCHS surveyed its own faculty and staff to obtain their feedback on the program.

Their responses overwhelmingly indicated their satisfaction with the program; in particular, FCHS faculty and staff said that it was a well-run program, expanded their reach as a FCHS educator, and their sessions were easy to present

(see Figure 2). These survey results suggest that virtual programming will continue to be a mode of educating even after COVID-19 social distancing requirements are no longer in place.

Figure 2 - FCHS presenter survey

How do you feel the Wellness Wednesday with FCHS program was run this summer?

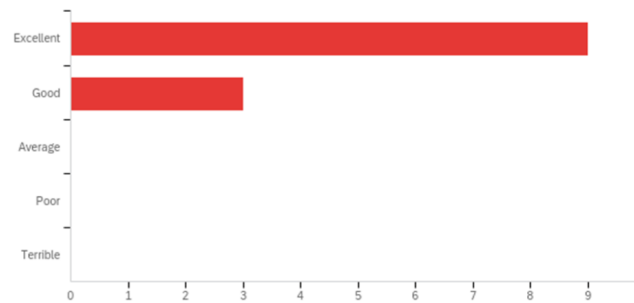
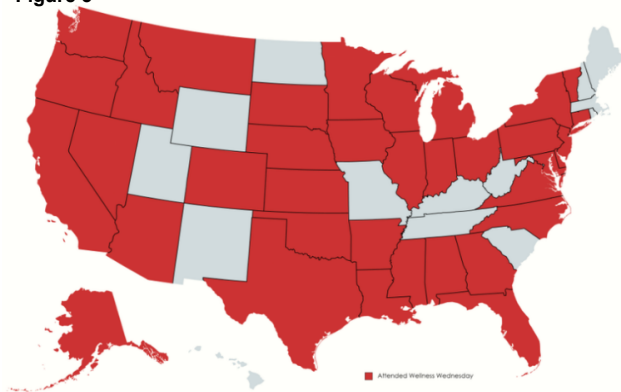


Figure 3



EXPANDING OUTREACH

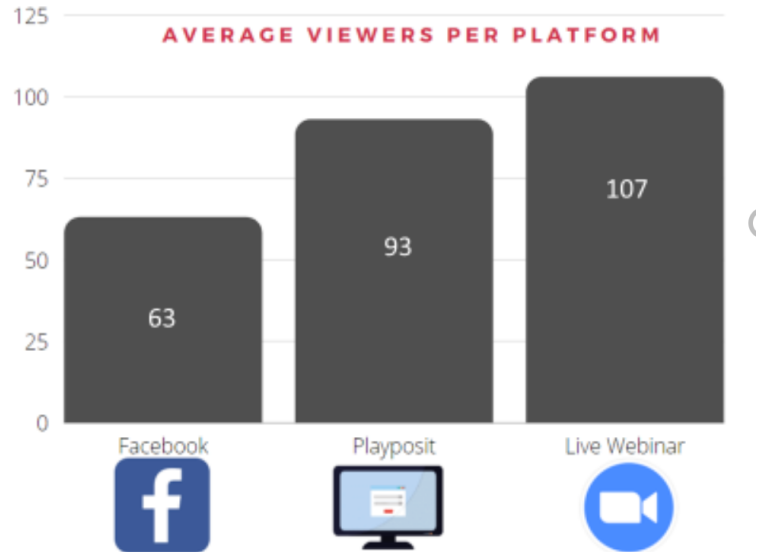
Wellness Wednesdays' reach quickly expanded as attendance increased each week and attracted new attendees from throughout New Jersey and beyond. The program reached all 21 New Jersey counties and in 2021 attendance was documented from 41 states (Figure 3), two US territories (Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands), Poland, Thailand, Dominican Republic, Philippines, India, and Norway.

Additionally, data on program attendance indicated 40% of participants were new to FCHS in 2020 (950 new of 2390 survey respondents), and in 2021, 41% of program participants were new to FCHS (1936 new of 4556 respondents). On average, there were 37 new participants per webinar in 2020 and 34 in 2021. The webinar series attracted new learners and expanded the reach of the department compared to in-person learning from 2019 as well. In fact, in 2021, Wellness Wednesdays reached 51% of the audience that the entire FCHS department reached in-person in 2019. Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS enabled the department's expansion to new audiences, increased the number of viewers for educational outreach and offered the department the opportunity to impact learners as the urgent need for evidence-based health information arose.

All Wellness Wednesdays webinars are recorded, then archived on a webpage, where they are organized by topic. This allows audiences to watch recordings of past webinars and access educational materials that are housed on the webpage even if they are unable to attend the live webinar. When participants view an archived webinar, they are prompted to answer poll questions about demographics at the beginning and questions about content, instruction and intended behavior change at the end.

2021 Program Overview

- Facebook
 - 25 presentations streamed on Facebook Live
 - 1,683 reaches
- Playposit
 - 47 presentations posted
 - 4,363 total views for 2021 recordings
- Website Viewership
 - 12,561 total visits to all WW subpages
 - 7,089 total visits to main WW site



These polls allow data collection from audiences who did not attend the live webinar. The total webpage views since May of 2020 is 19,529 and includes visitors from across New Jersey and beyond. Approximately 4363 individuals viewed recorded webinars from January to December 2021, almost doubling the program’s live webinar audience (Figure 4). This demonstrates that the archived webinars were instrumental in allowing FCHS to significantly expand its reach beyond the live webinar audience.

MARKETING THE PROGRAM

The survey asked Wellness Wednesdays registrants how they heard about the program. FCHS faculty and staff were surprised to learn that most participants – on average 65% - indicated that email was the method by which they learned about, and were prompted to register for, one or more webinars. Social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) accounted for only 2% - 6% of responses, indicating that social media was not an effective marketing tool for Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS. These results are consistent with research showing that email marketing is considered one of the most effective marketing activities (Hudak et al., 2017). As a result, FCHS has concentrated its efforts on expanding its outreach and marketing via email by soliciting list serves from faculty and staff, ensuring that the Wellness Wednesday email list serv stays accurate and up-to-date, and encouraging FCHS and other Rutgers personnel to share marketing emails with anyone who may be interested in attending.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Much like the transitions that traditional university instruction required during COVID 19 (Habib et al., 2020), Cooperative Extension also met the needs of learners through trial-and-error and use of several technology

platforms. The concept of a weekly live webinar seemed simple enough to execute; however, FCHS personnel quickly learned that they would have to learn new software programs and employ diverse technology applications to ensure effective program content, delivery, marketing, and data collection. Various platforms and strategies were tested to create the best operational practice for the Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS webinar series.

WEBINAR PLATFORM

Initially, a webinar platform was used based on existing account access to deliver webinars and collect data from viewers using the poll feature. However, in 2021, after participant feedback, FCHS switched from this initial platform and began using Zoom instead. Polling was used to gather information during live webinars, in both platforms.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Qualtrics was used to send quarterly surveys to all participants who attended at least one webinar. The data gathered from polls and Qualtrics surveys has informed FCHS about audience interests for future webinar topics. Through participant feedback and increased knowledge about various technical applications, FCHS was able to support learners and continually improve the webinar series.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media and interactive video learning platforms allowed for increased viewership of both live and recorded webinars. Twenty-five Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS webinars were streamed on Facebook Live, attracting 1683 Facebook users and expanding the program's reach even further (see Figure 4).

SOFTWARE

Kaltura and PlayPosit are software programs that allow users to create and edit streamed or uploaded videos, share content, and generate assessments for viewer responses. Kaltura was used in 2020 to edit and post webinars on the webpage. Kaltura provided an opportunity to include closed captioning of the videos to increase accessibility for the hearing impaired. In 2021, PlayPosit was utilized to expand data collection of recorded webinars, as a tool which allowed embedding questions into existing videos (Figure 4). Kaltura and PlayPosit were both used to increase the program's reach and collect data from viewers that would not be available otherwise. PlayPosit was used to administer survey questions to recorded webinars, thereby capturing data from viewers who were not watching the webinar in real time. This data illustrated that FCHS was able to double its reach, and that viewers have been from varying states including Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, and across New Jersey.

Through trial-and-error, FCHS discovered technology that best captured data for program results and met the needs of the department to deliver effective programming. Furthermore, using polls and surveys, FCHS was able to remain responsive to its audiences' needs to continually seek out new and improved mechanisms to administer quality programming.

AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

The survey administered to Wellness Wednesdays' audiences allowed FCHS educators to receive feedback directly from its audiences. In general, during pre-COVID times, FCHS educators had worked with a community point person such as a librarian or senior center coordinator to schedule educational programs. This point person tended to request that a certain topic be presented; however, there was no way to know if this topic was actually of interest to the audience. Wellness Wednesdays surveys have effectively eliminated the intermediary, ensuring that educators hear directly from consumers, an approach that has been shown to be beneficial in guiding programs and dissemination (Serrano et al., 2014). This has resulted in FCHS educators tailoring programs to consumers' needs and incorporating new topics that the department may not have considered teaching without that feedback. Furthermore, many survey respondents requested topics beyond the scope of FCHS educators' expertise; therefore, the department recruited guest speakers from other Rutgers departments, including Social Work, Nutritional Sciences, Food Sciences, the Cancer Institute of New Jersey, and Human Ecology. This has resulted in several successful collaborations between FCHS and other departments that likely would not have occurred without the responses from Wellness Wednesdays' attendees.

DISCUSSION

Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS has established itself as an essential program for the Department of Family and Community Health Sciences despite its rapid and unprecedented implementation. FCHS had no way of knowing how long the department might need a virtual program to reach participants due to the pandemic lock down; however, evidence from data collection supports Wellness Wednesdays' continued delivery even as COVID-19 restrictions ease. Additionally, the program provided an opportunity to reach new audiences and expand outreach to both a national and international audience. The significant participation at each webinar over the past two years demonstrates the staying power the webinar series possesses. Although in-person programming has begun to resume, it appears that the future direction of Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS is to continue, as participation remains steady, and the audience has come to rely on the evidence-based information provided each week. Additionally, the data collected from participants has informed FCHS personnel on consumer interest and will be useful for future program development. Wellness Wednesdays with FCHS filled a gap when in-person learning was not possible and provided lessons learned about collaboration, data collection and use of technology to meet both audience and educator needs. In the future, FCHS plans to continue expanding the department's reach with Wellness Wednesdays using a health equity approach, incorporating topics that address health disparities and bringing this program in line with the Cooperative Extension framework for health equity so that FCHS' audiences have a "fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible" (Burton et al., 2021).



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