Amy Athey, new chief wellness officer, aims to optimize University community's well-being

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Amy Athey, a licensed psychologist who has led wellness initiatives in two previous campus roles, has been named an associate vice provost and the University's first chief wellness officer.

Athey will bring together staff and faculty experts from across campus to define and lead the University's health and wellness vision, which includes establishing opportunities for research, professional training and funding for health and wellness initiatives.

Areas Athey will look to work with include the Campus Health Service, Campus Recreation, Housing and Residential Life, the Dean of Students Office, Life & Work Connections and University of Arizona Health Sciences. The role is intended to be a resource for these units as they work toward the University's health and wellness vision, Athey said.

"It's very much a horizontal strategic leadership type of role that looks at how we can bring everybody to the table and support each other," said Athey, who was previously executive director of student wellness and retention in Student Success and Retention Innovation.

Athey will also lead a new health and wellness board, composed of University health experts, to shape and guide the campus health and wellness plan. The board's membership is still being decided, but will include faculty, staff and students, and will represent the diversity of expertise and life experiences of the campus community, Athey said.

In her new role, Athey serves under the leadership of Kendal Washington White, vice provost of campus life and dean of students.

Liesl Folks, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost, announced Athey's appointment in a letter to campus on May 4, the day the appointment took effect. Folks, in her letter, said the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of ensuring the well-being of the entire University community.

"Now, more than ever, we need innovative and cost-effective ways to improve access to health and wellness support services while also ensuring those services are effective and efficient," Folks wrote.

A history of wellness initiatives

Athey came to the University in 2015 as the director of clinical and sport psychology in Arizona Athletics. During her 5 1/2 years in that role, she built out health and wellness services for student-athletes through partnerships across campus. These efforts included a sports psychiatry residency program to improve student-athletes' access to psychiatry
services.

Athey also led a program, along with Michael Grandner, director of the Sleep and Health Research Program, that helped student-athletes improve academic performance and mental health through sleep.

Athey moved to Student Success and Retention Innovation about a year ago to improve students' access to mental health services as part of the strategic plan's Pillar 1, The Wildcat Journey. This included a program that embedded mental health experts in academic and nonacademic units across campus.

"I really enjoy partnering and finding ways to come together through innovation, whether it's research partnerships or clinical partnerships," Athey said, noting that she's not a researcher by training, but values the way practitioners can inform research to provide evidenced-based programming.

Building the University's wellness vision

The concept of wellness, Athey said, refers to a proactive approach to preventing illnesses rather than treating them as they come. Chief wellness officers have become common in corporations to promote workplace wellness, and in medical schools to focus on students' wellness, Athey said.

Some wellness models focus on different aspects of the human experience — including financial security, academic and career success, mental health and social life — to optimize a person or group's overall health. Figuring out what the University's model will look like is among the first orders of business for Athey and the health and wellness board, she said.

Coming up with ideas to improve health and wellness on campus through research, funding and professional development opportunities won't be difficult thanks to the expertise found across campus, Athey said. But many of those experts often don't have the resources to implement those ideas while they're running their units, she added.

She hopes her office and the new board can provide that support.

"Hopefully I can offer that fabric that extends horizontally to be able to innovate and evolve our services," she added.

Emphasizing that the vision must include the entire campus community, Athey said she plans to work closely with leadership in Life & Work Connections and elsewhere in the Division of Human Resources to find ways to serve employees.

Looking ahead

Athey said her immediate priority is inviting members of the campus community to serve on the health and wellness board. She is also looking at ways to support University leaders as they develop a plan for a return to campus in the fall.

And for all the challenges that COVID-19 has brought, Athey said it has presented an opportunity for the University to shine as a national leader in how it serves the holistic health of its community.
"I'm really excited that our University leadership values not just looking at how we treat somebody who gets sick, but how we come together and leverage opportunities to optimize our well-being as members of our community," she said.

For resources and information about health and wellness specific to employees and COVID-19, visit the University's Health and Wellness Resources [12] website.

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