

THE *Current*

April 19, 2012

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UC Santa Barbara Named One of 25 Healthiest Colleges in U.S.

Lauded for its health and wellness services, fitness programs, and healthful dining-hall fare, UC Santa Barbara has been named one of the 25 healthiest colleges in the U.S., according to Web-based health resource Greatist. The campus landed at No. 15 among an assemblage of schools that also includes Stanford, Yale, and the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Santa Barbara earned special praise for its student health services, which were described as "second to none," and for the varied offerings of the UCSB Recreation Center. It also got kudos for making nutritional information about dining-hall meals readily available online, via the smartphone-friendly NetNutrition site, and for its array of wellness-themed programming.

"I'm of course thrilled," said Sabina White, director of the UCSB Health & Wellness program. "It's about time we get recognized for all the work this campus has done to make this a healthy, safe place for students. We have been committed to that for a long time, and we're proud of our efforts and our students."

UCSB's provision to students of dental, dermatological, and vision care were singled out in the rankings, lauded as a "trifecta that's notably absent at most schools' health centers." Full dental and vision care were new to student health insurance as of fall 2011, rounding out a lineup of services that includes psychiatrists, social workers, dietitians, free alcohol and drug counseling, as well as a full-service

pharmacy, lab, X-ray services, and physical therapy, according to Mary Ferris, MD, director of UCSB Student Health.

"We're really proud of being such a comprehensive health center," Dr. Ferris said. "It's hard to get credit for preventive care -- you don't hear too much about it -- so we are really excited by this ranking. We know we have a great student health service, but we don't get a lot of publicity. So we are very proud to be recognized as a leader in the nation, and we take a lot of credit for that."

UCSB was also an early adopter of electronic medical records, implementing digital capabilities in 2005. Students can also schedule appointments online and ask for health advice and information by e-mail. Along with drop-in urgent care, the initiatives are part of the campus's ongoing efforts to "meet students where they're most comfortable," Ferris said.

Connecting with students where, and how, they're most at ease is also a key component of UCSB's wellness programs, with holistic approach to health that has resulted in research-based initiatives ranging from peer education and field trips to free massage, yoga classes, and distribution of fresh fruit to a dozen departments across campus. Among the more unique offerings of the campus Wellness Collaborative is Dog Therapy Day, in which dogs help to de-stress students prepping for finals during Dead Week.

"We're all about positive psychology, and a real strength-based approach," said Mark Shishim, programs coordinator for Health & Wellness. "We know a whole lot about what's wrong with students, but we're really interested in what's right with students, and how to enhance that. So, to me, this ranking is not surprising because we have a student affairs division that listens to students, that involves students, and that promotes UCSB's culture of caring. We care and we give back to each other. That's who we are."

That culture of caring extends to the campus's Residential Dining program, which serves a combined 2 million meals per year out of four dining commons. Their menus offer a balance of fresh and unprocessed foods, include choices for vegans and vegetarians, and feature locally grown and organic products. The program got a special nod in the rankings for NetNutrition, its web and smartphone app that provides nutrition information on all of the items offered in campus dining halls.

"Diet and nutrition play a critical role in the overall health of our students," said Bonnie Crouse, assistant director of Residential Dining Services. "Because a well-balanced diet enables students to be more productive, it is important to provide resources that allow them to become educated consumers, and NetNutrition does just that. Residential Dining is also committed and passionate about striving to satisfy diverse tastes and appetites by providing a variety of fresh, healthy, high-quality food."

To come up with its list of the nation's 25 healthiest schools, Greatist took nominations from readers via social media, and scoured the web for mention and discussion of college campuses with top-notch food, fitness facilities, health services, health-related programming, "and just plain old, happy students." They also considered relevant rankings from other sources, such as College Prowler and The Princeton Review. UCSB was previously ranked 11th on Princeton Review's 2011 list of schools with the happiest students.

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