

INITIAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING TASK FORCE

PHASE ONE: STUDENTS

January 2022



Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Content Warning: This report of WPI’s Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force (the Task Force) presents the initial findings and the perspectives of the campus community gathered through surveys, a student listening session, and virtual and in-person town halls. The subjects of death, suicide, conflict, mental health, and mental illness—and a wide range of emotions, particularly negative emotions like stress, anxiety, loneliness, anger, fear, and frustration, among others—are discussed.

This report also provides national and WPI-based context and a snapshot of the student well-being aspects of the university’s strategic plan and outlines steps already taken and the work ahead to better acknowledge and focus on the mental health and well-being of our graduate and undergraduate students, and to strengthen and maintain a culture of support, inclusion, and acceptance.

Table of Contents

A Youth Mental Health Crisis	... 4
A National Issue	... 4
Our WPI Community	... 4
WPI Student Deaths	... 5
Convening the Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force	... 5
Confirming Needs, Trends, and Opportunities	... 6
Data Gathering	... 6
Emerging Themes and Findings	... 6
Theme: Academics: High Pressure Needs High Touch	... 8
Theme: Lack of Balance/Resilience and Self-Care	... 9
Theme: Inadequate Information/Communication	... 10
Theme: Resource Scarcity	... 11
Theme: Social Isolation, Lack of Connections to Peers/Faculty/Staff	... 12
Completed Actions	... 13
Next Steps	... 14
Appendix	... 15
Item 1: Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force Members	... 15
Item 2: Town Hall and Listening Sessions	... 17
Item 3: Mental Health and Well-Being Survey and Analysis	... 17
Item 4: Longer-Term Recommendations and Suggested Actions	... 18

A Youth Mental Health Crisis

A National Issue

Nationally, feelings of disconnection, fear about the future, hopelessness and increased anxiety are more common than ever, especially among the college-age population.

At colleges nationwide, students are grappling with increased stress and anxiety that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Some students' existing mental-health challenges have worsened during Covid-19, while other students have experienced such concerns for the first time.

In early December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory pointing to a crisis in youth mental health and calling for systemic change.

"It would be a tragedy if we beat back one public health crisis only to allow another to grow in its place... This isn't an issue we can fix overnight or with a single prescription. Ensuring healthy children and families will take an all-of-society effort, including policy, institutional, and individual changes in how we view and prioritize mental health."

Read the full advisory:

[Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory](#)

Our WPI Community

A rigorous, STEM-focused institution with an immersive and fast-paced approach to education, WPI began to see that graduate and undergraduate student mental health needs were increasing in intensity and severity based on the university's own data and its attention to and participation in national assessments, including those from the [Healthy Minds Network](#) and the [American College Health Association \(ACHA\) National College Health Assessment \(NCHA\)](#).

Those needs, intensified by student stressors being exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, led to the vision and plan for a Center for Well-Being at WPI, an initiative of the 2021–2026 WPI Strategic Plan that was reinforced as critical by the Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force, whose members were included in the interview process for the center's director. The new Center is expected to take form in the coming weeks on campus. As part of a holistic approach to student mental health, spanning academic and non-academic aspects of the student experience, the Center for Well-Being at WPI will apply evidence-based practices to promote well-being for students and the broader WPI campus community, recognizing the importance of faculty and staff in creating, maintaining, and modeling a healthier environment for all.

Fundamentally, we need to disrupt three steadfast college realities: academic pressure isn't helping anyone (especially in this time of COVID and isolation stress); asking for help is not a weakness; and being constantly busy is not a badge of honor.

WPI Student Deaths

Since July 2021, six WPI students have died: three deaths are known to have been suicides; one is still under investigation; and another resulted from a medical issue. The university is not able to provide details on the other student's death.

One death is too many. That three are known suicides is unprecedented in the university's history. Between 2006 and June of 2021, WPI saw a total of two deaths by suicide. Prior to 2006, when many of WPI's most effective suicide prevention efforts began, the university's suicide completion rates were on the national average (6.5–7.5 per 100,000 students, which translates to one every three years). Up until this year, that rate dropped to well below the national average.

News media have also explored on the issue, highlighting WPI as one of many universities responding to heightened levels of student distress:

"In the 2020–2021 academic year, 41 percent of students nationally reported symptoms of depression and 34 percent reported anxiety, according to data from the [2021 Healthy Minds Study](#)..."

[‘The Urgency is Greater Than It Has Ever Been’: Four Suicides Rock WPI Campus as Colleges Grapple with Student Mental Health Concerns](#)—*The Boston Globe*, December 18, 2021

"Over the past decade, the rate of depression, anxiety, and serious thoughts of suicide has doubled among college students..."

[Another Surge in the Virus has Colleges Fearing a Mental Health Crisis](#) —*The New York Times*, December 22, 2021

Convening the Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force

In late September 2021, to focus the university's response and better understand the intersection of mental health/well-being and the rigors of higher education as they impact our own community, President Leshin convened a Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force. The Task Force was charged with generating recommendations for specific near-term interventions and longer-term steps to advance the goal of creating a campus centered on supporting mental health and well-being while fostering the development and success of students, faculty, and staff.

Composed of more than 35 students, faculty, and staff, the Task Force is led by **co-chairs Jean King**, Peterson Family Dean of Arts & Sciences, and **Matt Barry**, assistant director of the Student Development & Counseling Center (SDCC). The Task Force, which meets weekly, reports to President Leshin and an Advisory Panel. (See Appendix Item 1 for a list of members.) It has four subcommittees, which meet at least weekly, or more as necessary:

- Academics
- Community Input and Cultural Change
- Leveraging Technology
- Wellness Programming/ Center for Well-Being

Confirming Needs, Trends, and Opportunities

The Task Force first focused on information gathering to identify urgent needs, to understand trends in stressors and factors impacting mental health, and to seek opportunities for the university to mitigate those stressors where appropriate and feasible. This report is focused primarily on students; the term “student” used throughout is inclusive of undergraduate and graduate students; any instances referring to only one of these two populations will be clearly noted.

Findings centered on faculty and staff are currently being analyzed and will be the focus of subsequent reports.

Emerging Themes and Findings

Task Force members and colleagues spent 160+ hours poring over data from the survey, town hall listening sessions, and other feedback to identify high-level findings. This work, combined with the outcomes of an early December 2021 retreat, informed five emerging themes from the findings.

- 1. Academics – High Pressure Needs High Touch**
WPI’s busy, fast-paced, productive campus culture leads to significant academic pressure, overworking, and burnout.
- 2. Need for Balance, Resilience, and Self-care**
There are widely varying degrees of resiliency in our campus population: many individuals lack the knowledge, skills, and resources to respond to adversity.
- 3. Challenging to Find Information/Communication Perceived as Inadequate**
Members of the community report difficulty finding the information they need and are unaware of existing resources, fostering a lack of trust in the university.
- 4. Resource Scarcity**
More resources are needed: growth in faculty/staff has not kept pace with growth in the student body, causing tension between attending to student needs and to self.
- 5. Social Isolation/Lack of Connection with Peers/Faculty/Colleagues**
Students report a lack of a sense of belonging; feelings of loneliness/isolation; an inability to connect to peers and the larger community; and not feeling valued.

Recommendations and findings from each subcommittee were grouped according to these themes and findings, a summary of which is shared here. See Appendix Item 4 for a full listing of detailed actions offered for consideration.

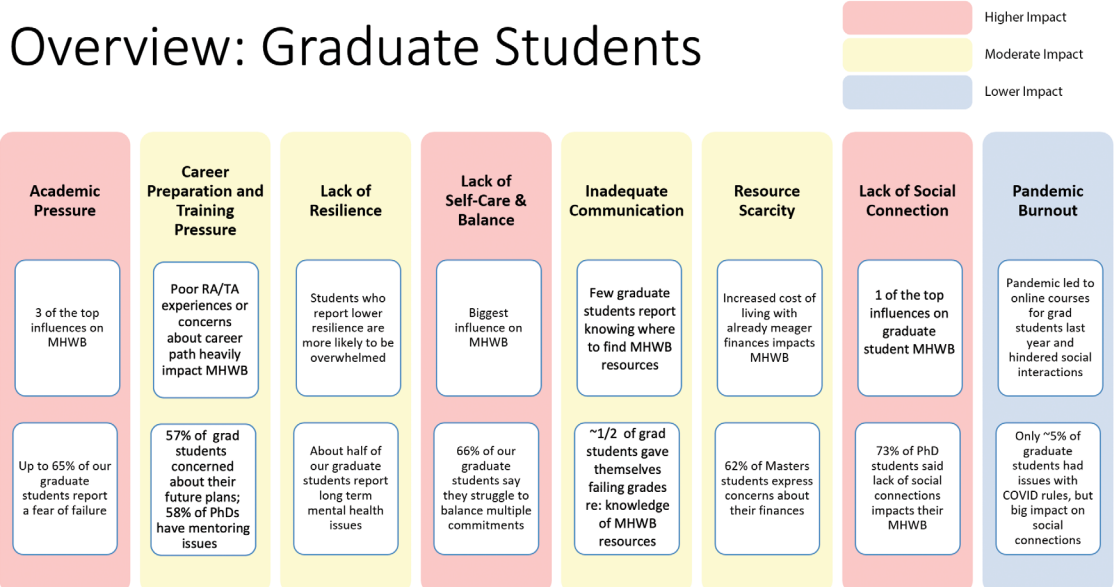
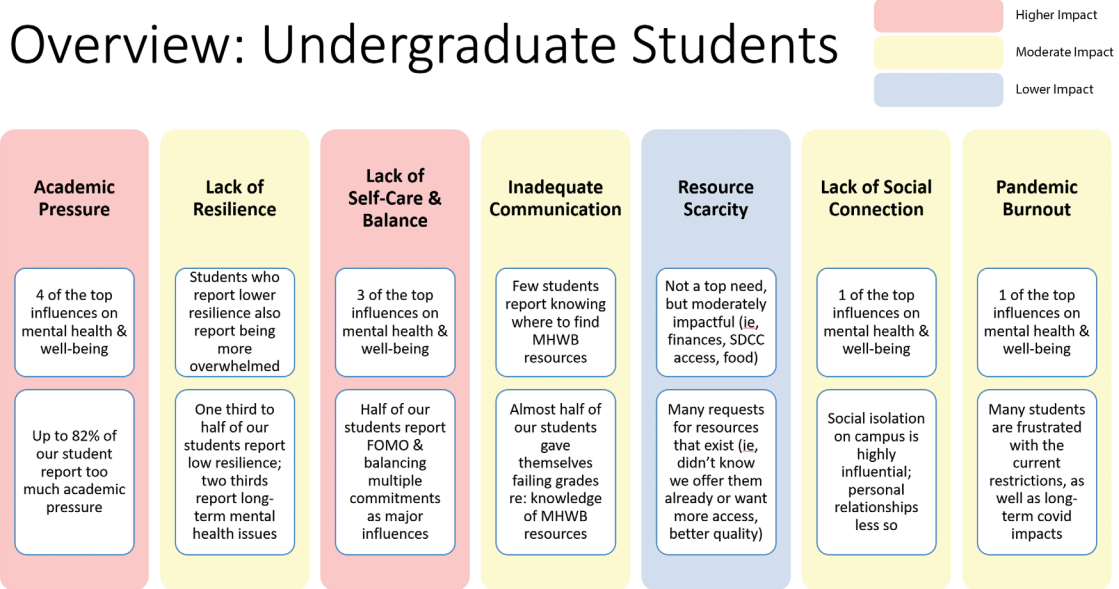
While many of these recommendations and actions will require new or realigned current resources and activities, several recommendations are already being implemented. See Completed Actions, Page 13.

Data Gathering*

- More than 350 students gathered for a listening session (Nov. 4) to voice their concerns and perspectives of factors negatively impacting mental health and well-being.
- About 85 students and 250 parents attended town hall-style meetings, with Task Force members present to capture information and qualitative data; see Appendix Item 2.
- 704 students—10.2% of undergraduates and 9.3% of graduate students—completed a survey opened Nov. 17 and distributed via several channels, including emails from the Dean of Students. Highlights of input are broken down in the charts on page 7. Initial results of the survey are in the Appendix, Item 3
- A great deal of additional qualitative data was gleaned from emails from the community to deans, faculty, staff, and members of the Task Force, and via discussions on social media, Discord, and other platforms.

***Note: There is a concerning gap in engagement and input from BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and other underrepresented groups in the WPI community.** The Task Force will continue outreach efforts to gain input from populations who have been historically minoritized in our community and have felt their input is not heard or heeded. Findings and resulting recommendations provided here may not address the full spectrum of stressors and needs of our campus community.

The charts below provide a snapshot of the themes that emerged from the Task Force’s review of data.



THEME: Academics: High Pressure Needs High Touch

Findings			
Students feel significant academic pressure.	Students struggle to manage their workload and balance multiple commitments.	Students' mental health and well-being suffers when professors are not responsive to their concerns, seem to not care about student well-being, and are not held accountable to change.	WPI is a culture of systemic overwork: individuals feel pressure to do more and more.

Finding

Students experience significant academic pressure for a range of reasons, including struggling to manage their workload and balancing multiple commitments. Newly enrolled students, in particular, report experiencing significant academic pressure in our introductory courses and struggle to manage workload and pace and find appropriate assistance.

Recommendations

- Rethink what it means to be successful at WPI and help articulate this notion to the entire campus community. Redefine what it means to be a successful scholar and develop universal language around the growth opportunities from failure and challenges.
- Proactively teach academic success skills and self-care in offerings for newly enrolled students.
- Assess and adjust introductory and foundational STEM courses, particularly support systems in those courses.
- Develop approaches to identify students who are struggling in courses (e.g., they are working too many hours, not submitting assignments, not coming to class).
- Modify policies and practices to recognize and relieve academic pressure.

Finding

Students' mental health and well-being suffers when some professors are not responsive to their concerns, are perceived to not care about student well-being, and are not held accountable to change.

Recommendations

- Create mechanisms to monitor and enhance attention to course workload, flexibility, and faculty accountability regarding workload and flexibility.
- Scale faculty professional development for inclusive teaching and student well-being.
- Adjust faculty reward systems and recruitment to expect and value attention to student mental health and well-being and inclusivity.
- Strengthen course feedback mechanisms and faculty accountability.
- Ensure that we have enough faculty and academic support personnel to meet our commitment to student-faculty interaction and community, support for student mental health and well-being, and distinctive project-based education.

Finding

WPI is a culture of systemic overwork; individuals feel pressure to do more and more.

Recommendations

- Proactively identify and eliminate unnecessary or low-importance work.
- Take time to pause campus operations periodically to slow down and reflect.

THEME: Lack Of Balance/Resilience And Self-Care

Findings					
Individuals feel they lack the time or ability to manage work/life balance.	Self-care resources are scattered, intermittent, or unknown.	The campus community lacks an understanding about mental health and how to support each other.	There is a lack of awareness of MHWB resources and services on campus.	There is an increase (and/or a risk for an increase) in substance use and abuse among students.	Student leaders feel overwhelmed by their responsibility to peers and the university.

Finding

Individuals feel they lack the time or ability to manage work/life balance.

Recommendations

- Prioritize sufficient periods for rest and reflection.
- Provide access and subscriptions to online mental health and well-being resources (in addition to the existing Employee Assistance Program for faculty and staff).
- Survey technology-based efforts related to mental health and well-being that have been implemented at other institutions of higher learning.
- Design initiatives to promote beneficial uses of technology and tools, as well as to raise awareness of harmful uses of technologies and tools (e.g., social media).

Finding

Self-care resources are scattered, intermittent, or unknown and should instead be centralized/standardized.

Recommendations

- Establish the Center for Well-Being as a central source for a wide range of community resources to address the challenges members of the community face in knowing about/accessing the many resources, activities, and programs available to support wellness, mental health, physical and emotional needs.
- Establish a Wellness Support Desk and Wellness Advisors to guide users to resources.

Finding

Members of the campus community lack an understanding about mental health and how to help each other to expand and bolster our support net.

Recommendations

- Provide mental health support training services for students, faculty, and staff.

Finding

Students, faculty, and staff are not aware of available campus resources and student services and how to be part of the support community.

Recommendations

- Reimagine how we engage and train students, faculty, staff, and parents/families on the available campus resources, the capacity/limitations of service, where to find campus/community resources (online and in-person), and how to refer/utilize service.

Finding

There is an increase (and/or a significant risk for an increase) in substance use and abuse among students.

Recommendations

- Create an authentic marketing campaign to share campus resources with students. Offer preventive support and education to deter students from engaging in destructive behavior.

Finding

Student leaders feel overwhelmed by their responsibility to peers and to the university and need more support.

Recommendations

- Complete an assessment of the student leader role (specifically the Resident Advisors and Community Advisors) and evaluate their duties, responsibilities, benefits/remuneration, and employee expectations.

THEME: Inadequate Information/Communication

Findings			
Knowledge gaps, misperceptions, and myths negatively impact students and their WPI experience.	There is a gap in effective connection of MHWB needs and existing/emerging resources.	MHWB apps, technologies, and services are not leveraged effectively.	There are communication gaps regarding events and social opportunities and COVID restrictions that impact them.

Finding

Knowledge gaps, misperceptions, and myths negatively impact students and their WPI experience.

Recommendations

- Initiate a comprehensive communications plan to ensure campus/community resources are both visible and accessible online through multiple mediums (WPI website, The Hub, Discord, TechSync, WPI Apps, social media, etc.) and train students, faculty, staff, and parent/families to access this information online.

Finding

There is a gap in effective connection of MHWB needs and existing and emerging resources; MHWB apps, technology and services are not leveraged effectively.

Recommendations

- Comprehensively survey technology used at WPI related to MHWB, and how it is being used. (These technologies include, but are not limited to, the WPI mobile app, The Hub, the WPI website, and social media.)
- Develop a central MHWB resource repository. (A preliminary webpage, www.wpi.edu/BeWellTogether, was launched in October.)

Finding

There are communication gaps regarding events and social opportunities and the COVID restrictions that impact them.

Recommendations

- Improve awareness of campus events and related guidelines
- Use channels of communication that students prefer (e.g., Discord).

THEME: Resource Scarcity

Findings		
Students feel there is little academic support and mentorship and do not know how to access any that does exist.	Students feel there are few academic experiences at the intersection of MHWB and DEI and don't know how to find/access them.	Offices/campus resources are, or are perceived to be, accessible due to lack of personnel and lack of capacity.

Finding

Many students do not have knowledge of or access to academic support and mentorship or to academic experiences at the intersection of MHWB and DEI.

Recommendations

- Improve academic advising at the department level.
- Ensure that key offices and entities are well-positioned to provide academic support for diverse students, including the Office of Accessibility Services, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Academic Advising and Academic Resources Center, Career Development Center, and International House.
- Streamline access and processes related to MHWB.

Finding

Offices/campus resources are, or are perceived to be, inaccessible due to lack of personnel and lack of capacity.

Recommendations

- Adequately staff and resource offices/departments to increase their capacity to serve students.
- Re-evaluate current programs and services and determine what is effective, what should end, and what is worth continuing (START something new, STOP what is not working, CONTINUE what is working).

THEME: Social Isolation, Lack Of Connection To Peers/Faculty/Staff

Findings		
Individuals lack of a sense of <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Belonging• Acceptance• Inclusion• Being valued	Students feel lonely/isolated; unable to connect to peers and the larger community.	Students need structured programming to build connections with others.

Finding

Individuals feel loneliness/isolation; a lack of a sense of belonging, acceptance, and inclusion; an inability to connect to peers and the larger community; a sense of not feeling valued. There is a need for structured programming to build interconnection and relationships between students, between students and faculty/staff, and among faculty and staff.

Recommendations

- Support improved student/faculty/staff relationships.
- Normalize and expand mental health and DEI in curriculum and research.
- Expand student support services to ensure student-facing offices have the capacity to offer new/more programs and services to connect students to each other and the larger WPI community.
- Offer more social gathering events (small- and large-scale) so all students, faculty, and staff can meet people and build new connections. Ensure there are low-risk engagement opportunities for students who are reluctant or unable to engage in larger crowds.
- Develop mentoring programs pairing undergraduate and graduate students with older peers to support them during their educational journey.

Finding

Students, faculty, and staff want to help.

Recommendations

- Create, coordinate and support opportunities for collaboration on MHWB research and topics via IQPs, MQPs, GQPs, MS and PhD theses.
- Coordinate existing on-campus mental health and well-being research efforts.

Completed Actions

Fall 2021

- Mid-September: intensified an ongoing outreach/support of students via internal and online communications channels, social media, personal interactions, and a new Be Well Together Resources webpage: www.wpi.edu/bewelltogether.
- Sept. 16: Faculty governance hosted a special faculty meeting focused on factors impacting wellness.
- Oct. 25: an initial report of short-term recommendation and actions was presented to President Leshin and the Advisory Committee.
- Nov. 2: Hosted Be Well Together Day, a day intended to be free of classes and meetings to allow the community to come together for reflection and wellness activities.
- Nov. 4 and 5: Drop-in grief counseling in the wake of recent losses.
- Nov. 4: Student-led vigil and listening session, noted above.
- Oct: The Morgan Center for Teaching and Learning hosted workshops to help faculty and staff incorporate wellness strategies into their course curricula.
- Oct: The Student Development and Counseling Center (SDCC) hosted 12 Recognizing and Responding to Student Distress (RRSD) training sessions and several [Student Support Network](#) sessions for faculty, staff, and students to learn about signs of stress and how to guide students to help.
- Nov. 9–19: Hosted a series of 16 town hall-style listening sessions for students, faculty, staff, parents, and families.
- November 17, Launched a comprehensive, campus-wide survey to gather feedback from all students, faculty, and staff; additional outreach began to alumni and parents.
- Dec. 6: The Task Force convened for a five-hour retreat to review data and begin developing longer-term recommendations.
- Dec. 17: The Task Force chairs and subcommittee co-chairs presented initial findings, preliminary survey data, town hall feedback, and draft recommendations to President Leshin and the Advisory Committee.
- SDCC recruited three additional full-time counselors, alongside additional per diem counselors. Current wait times for an initial intake appointment are 1 to 3 days.

January 2022

- Start of Spring semester/C-Term, the Morgan Teaching and Learning Center developed a tool, [Supporting Students Through Challenging Times](#), to help faculty and staff talk with students and direct them to resources
- Jan. 12: SDCC launched an after-hours telehealth service to augment its Counselor-on-Call system, providing students with access to mental health counselors when the SDCC is not open in the evenings and on weekends. See www.wpi.edu/BeWellTogether.
- Jan. 12: SDCC launched an online scheduling function, providing students with the option of scheduling appointments at any time. See www.wpi.edu/BeWellTogether. (Within hours, 27 new appointment requests were received, quadruple the usual rate.)
- Plans are on track to launch the new Center for Well-Being at WPI early in 2022; a director is being actively recruited and the university expects to announce a hire shortly.
- Actively recruiting additional staff in Academic Advising, Student Activities, and to support the CARE Team

Next Steps

The Task Force is currently analyzing data collected regarding faculty and staff concerns, needs, and opportunities related to mental health and well-being. A retreat is scheduled for early February, at which the Task Force and subcommittees will review this data, summarize findings, develop recommendations and suggested action items, and report to the President's Advisory Committee and the WPI community.

The Task Force continues to work to engage BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and other underrepresented and historically marginalized students, faculty, and staff in our community to include all voices in the university's efforts to support wellness.

The university, following the work of the Task Force and subcommittees to develop recommendations and suggest actions, is currently assembling a robust cross-campus team to be charged with operationalizing and implementing action items. This group will coordinate and manage WPI's sustained response to the mental health and well-being challenges facing our community.

Appendix

Item 1: Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force

President's Advisory Panel

- Philip Clay, Senior Vice President for Student Affairs
- Joyce Kline, Chair of the WPI Board of Trustees Committee on Student Affairs
- Laurie Leshin, President
- Charlie Morse, Associate Dean and Director of the Student Development & Counseling Center
- Mark Richman, Secretary of the Faculty
- Wole Soboyejo, Provost

Task Force Co-Chairs

- Matt Barry, Assistant Director, Student Development & Counseling Center
- Jean King, Peterson Family Dean of Arts & Sciences

Task Force Members

Students

Zoe Januszewski '22

Sean McGovern, graduate student

Isabelle Mellor '22

Brandon Persons '22

ML Tlachac, graduate student

Robbie Starr, graduate student

Danielle Upton '22

Casey Willis 22

Faculty

Emmanuel Agu, Computer Science

Scott Barton, Humanities & Arts, Chair, Committee on Advising and Student Life

Chrys Demetry, Morgan Center for Teaching & Learning

Katherine Foo, Integrative & Global Studies

Arne Gericke, Undergraduate Studies

Adrienne Hall-Phillips, Business

Stephen Kmiotek, Chemical Engineering

Doug Petkie, Physics

George Pins, Biomedical Engineering

Zoe Reidinger, Biomedical Engineering

Carolina Ruiz, Arts & Sciences

Stacy Shaw, Social Science & Policy Studies

Jeanine Skorinko, Social Science & Policy Studies

Staff

Veronica Brandstrader, Information Technology

Alison Duffy, Marketing Communications

Rory Flinn, Graduate Studies

Cherise Galasso, Physical Education & Athletics

Erika Hanlan, Career Development Center

Arnold Lane Jr., Multicultural Affairs

Steve Marsh, Campus Police

Lisa Pearlman, Health Services

Emily Perlow, Student Affairs

Paul Reilly, Academic Advising

Brianne Ross, Advancement

Matt Thaler, Office of the General Counsel

The Task Force has four subcommittees, as follows. Subcommittee co-leads are marked with *.

Subcommittee for Community Input and Cultural Change

Arne Gericke	Emily Perlow
Adrienne Hall-Phillips*	Zoe Reidinger*
Erika Hanlan	ML Tlachac, graduate student
Arnold Lane, Jr.*	Danielle Upton '22
Stephen Marsh	

Sub-committee for Leveraging Technology

Emmanuel Agu	Carolina Ruiz*
Scott Barton	Matthew Thaler*
Veronica Brandstrader*	Casey Willis '22
Brandon Persons '22	

Sub-committee for Academics

Chrys Demetry*	George Pins
Katherine Foo*	Paul Reilly
Zoe Januszewski '22	Stacy Shaw
Sean McGovern	Jeanine Skorinko
Douglas Petkie	

Sub-committee for Wellness Programming/Center for Well-being

Alison Duffy	Isabelle Mellor '22
Rory Flinn	Lisa Pearlman
Cherise Galasso*	Brianne Ross
Stephen Kmiotek*	Robert Starr*, graduate student

Subcommittees are assisted by Marketing Communications partners Damien Arlabosse, Jillian Ferguson, Diana Fiorentino, Sheila Georger, Jess Grimes, Stacey Happy, Diane O'Keefe, Julia Quinn-Szcesuil, and Allison Racicot

Appendix Item 2: Task Force Town Halls and Listening Sessions

A series of 16 sessions were held for specific groups, to allow for freer exchange of feedback, and at different times to accommodate participants' schedules. The number of participants, dates, and times are listed below. More than 630 attended; registration was not recorded and it is not known how many attendees participated in more than one session.

Students (84+)

- 10+ Tuesday, November 9, 5:00 PM (All Students) – In-person
- 10+ Friday, November 12, 6:00 PM (All Students) – In-person
- 4 Tuesday, November 16, 10:00 AM (IQP + MQP Students) – Zoom
- 25+ Tuesday, November 16, 4:00 PM (All Students) – In-person
- 20+ Friday, November 19, 12:00 PM (Graduate Students) – Zoom
- 15+ Friday, November 19, 7:00 PM (All Students) – Zoom

Faculty (90+)

- 40+ Thursday, November 11, 2:00 PM– In-person and Zoom
- 30+ Friday, November 12, 5:00 PM– Zoom
- 20+ Thursday, November 18, 10:00 AM– In-person and Zoom

Staff (205+)

- 80+ Wednesday, November 10, 4:00 PM– In-person and Zoom
- 75+ Friday, November 12, 3:00 PM– In-person and Zoom
- 50+ Friday, November 19, 3:00 PM– Zoom

Parents and Families (250+)

- 160+ Thursday, November 11, 7:00 PM– Zoom
- 90+ Wednesday, November 17, 8:00 PM– Zoom

Appendix Item 3: Mental Health and Well-Being Survey and Analysis:

Student Phase

[Mental Health and Well-Being Survey and analysis](#)

Appendix Item 4: Longer-Term Recommendations and Suggested Actions

THEME: ACADEMIC PRESSURE

WPI's busy, fast-paced, productive campus culture leads to significant academic pressure, overworking, and burnout.

Finding

Students experience significant academic pressure for a range of reasons, including struggling to manage their workload and balancing multiple commitments. Newly enrolled students, in particular, report experiencing significant academic pressure in our introductory courses, and struggle to manage workload and pace and find appropriate assistance.

Recommendation: Rethink what it means to be successful at WPI and help articulate this notion to the entire campus community. Redefine what it means to be a successful scholar and develop universal language around the growth opportunities from failure and challenges.

- **Action:** Consider “flipping failure” storytelling or a similar model within our community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

Recommendation: Proactively teach academic success skills and self-care in offerings for newly enrolled students.

- **Action:** Pilot free summer experiences to expand pre-orientation programs and services for incoming first-year students; these include academic bridge programs to bolster foundations (e.g., pre-calculus, pre-programming) and to equip students with success skills (e.g., reading strategies, STEM learning strategies, time management, campus resources, wellness, etc.).
- **Action:** Formalize and enhance use of summer terms to provide “extended runways” to assist first-year and sophomore students in completing foundational courses and addressing learning gaps.
- **Action:** Recast the PE requirement for undergraduates as a wellness requirement with a wider range of learning experiences, and provide similar offerings for graduate students.
- **Action:** Charge CASL and Marketing/Communications to develop and implement communications plan for students, faculty, and staff with the rationale for 7-week terms and student effort-hour expectations, data, and conditions for balance, success, and well-being.

Recommendation: Assess and adjust introductory and foundational STEM courses, particularly support systems in those courses.

- **Action:** Convene departments and instructors that teach large introductory courses (CH, CS, MA, PH), identify assumed prior knowledge, develop resources and supports for students who do not have that prior knowledge.
- **Action:** Reassess roles and best practices for use of MASH tutors, TAs, and PLAs to better meet the range of students' needs (e.g., filling gaps in prior knowledge, review in addition to questions and homework).
- **Action:** Develop a system to match first-year students who are taking similar courses to proactively encourage them to form study groups. This could be done in Insight groups and/or with a technology solution.

Recommendation: Develop approaches to identify students who are struggling in courses (e.g., they are working too many hours, not submitting assignments, not coming to class).

- **Action:** Assess and possibly adopt new technology to identify students in need (for example, Salesforce student advising module).
- **Action:** Work with faculty to use mid-stream course feedback and Canvas features for this purpose.
- **Action:** Develop a systematic approach for faculty, TAs, and PLAs to proactively reach out to students in courses (especially large first-year courses) rather than passively waiting for students to attend office hours.

Recommendation: Modify policies and practices to recognize and relieve academic pressure.

- **Action:** Improve financial aid education and align WPI-controlled policies for retention of merit-based financial aid (previously passing 11 of 12 courses) with standards for satisfactory academic progress (passing 4 of 6 in

semester and 8 of 12 in year).

- **Action:** Assess and respond to additional barriers for students from minoritized populations (e.g., financial concerns, access to food).
- **Action:** Continue community discussions (i.e., started in CAP and student government in Fall 2021) about a Pass/NR option for all courses upon student request.

Finding: Students' mental health and well-being suffers when some professors are not responsive to their concerns, are perceived to not care about student well-being, and are not held accountable to change.

Recommendation: Create mechanisms to monitor and enhance attention to course workload, flexibility, and faculty accountability regarding workload and flexibility.

- **Action:** Charge departments to foster ongoing student-faculty-staff dialogue to build mutual empathy about workload and flexibility challenges and co-create strategies for improvement.
- **Action:** Provide resources to make it easier for faculty to routinely arrange for proctored makeup exams, not just for students with documented accommodations.
- **Action:** Charge CAP to work with Undergraduate Studies to modify student course report summaries for department heads to flag instructors/courses where too many students report too many effort-hours.
- **Action:** Request all faculty modify their assignment/project submission practices, testing/examination, and grading policies. Incentivize faculty who are more flexible with their teaching and grading.

Recommendation: Scale faculty professional development for inclusive teaching and student well-being.

- **Action:** Provide programs and resources for faculty to make changes in syllabi to foster inclusion and well-being. Request all faculty conduct a syllabus inventory to determine which factors may be unintentionally causing stress. Encourage faculty to indicate this agreement is/can be accommodating and is not strict. Encourage faculty to have their syllabus vetted by the Center for Teaching and Learning for further recommendations. Provide all faculty with universal language detailing campus access/learning accommodations resources, campus mental health resources, and other resources.
- **Action:** Build capacity at the department level for course redesign (e.g., authentic assessment, growth mindset and ungrading, use of OER, culturally responsive curricula). Train and equip faculty with knowledge and best practices to provide academic and social flexibility for all graduate and undergraduate students taking their course even if they do not have a documented diagnosis. Offer training opportunities to center universal design practices when teaching and facilitating.
- **Action:** Develop and normalize research mentorship training for all who work with graduate and undergraduate students on research.
- **Action:** Encourage or require participation in basic mental health training (e.g., Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress with elements of DEI).

Recommendation: Adjust faculty reward systems and recruitment to expect and value attention to student mental health and well-being and inclusivity.

- **Action:** Establish expectation of professional growth in teaching for MHWB and DEI for annual merit review, tenure, and promotion, and recognize the labor of excellent academic advising and mentoring in faculty workloads.
- **Action:** In faculty searches, normalize intentional assessment of candidates' commitment to DEI and MHWB.
- **Action:** Codify importance of quality over quantity in scholarship.

Recommendation: Strengthen course feedback mechanisms and faculty accountability.

- **Action:** Ask CAP and CGSR to redesign student course report system to prioritize mid-term course feedback, attend to student well-being, assure that student comments may be seen by DH, and lessen use of summative

questions prone to bias.

- **Action:** Create mechanism for students to provide feedback on faculty who do not comply with community expectations for care and respect or who mistreat students. Process should assure follow-up and accountability. This could be centralized reporting, department-based ombuds, or other method.

Recommendation: Ensure that we have enough faculty and academic support personnel to meet our commitment to student-faculty interaction and community, support for student mental health and well-being, and distinctive project-based education.

- **Action:** Charge a group to assess trends in instructional capacity (faculty, TAs, PLAs, tutors, student success managers, etc.) against student growth.
- **Action:** Create a plan for instructional capacity targets by discipline and provide resources for implementation. Assess student: faculty ratio against disciplinary standards.
- **Action:** Expand academic advising support for both undergraduate and graduate students. Add advising personnel (FT staff and peer tutors) to support BIPOC and first gen students. Add advising personnel (FT staff and peer tutors) to support graduate students.
- **Action:** Train and retrain faculty to effectively advise and counsel graduate and undergraduate students through their academic journey.
- **Action:** Review all undergraduate, masters, and doctoral academic programs and establish new Academic Planning Worksheets for each major with suggested courses for each term/semester.

Finding: WPI is a culture of systemic overwork; individuals feel pressure to do more and more.

Recommendation: Proactively identify and eliminate unnecessary or low-importance work.

- **Action:** Create a required process for entities at all levels across campus (i.e., departments, organizations, offices, centers, research groups, committees, courses) to:
 1. Identify and make explicit the entity's essential mission.
 2. Take an inventory of tasks, processes and habits performed by the entity and their relevance for the essential mission.
 3. Eliminate (or at least reduce) unnecessary and low-relevance tasks, processes, and habits.
- **Action:** Rethink what it means to be successful at WPI and help articulate this notion to the entire campus community.

Recommendation: Take time to pause campus operations periodically to slow down and reflect.

- **Action:** University leadership should pause campus operations for a period of time to slow down. Take the time to reimagine WPI's identity and what the Institute should/can be. Give employees an opportunity to disconnect and take a break.
- **Action:** Request faculty incorporate breaks/catch-up time in their syllabus (not including the scheduled Reading Days or Wellness Days).
- **Action:** Request faculty encourage students to prioritize their self-care in lieu of working all hours of the night to pass their course. Faculty can support students by encouraging them to speak up when they need time and help.
- **Action:** Incorporate career conversations in teaching (when able), daily interactions, student advising, and student coaching/counseling. Coach students to center their ability to learn, fail, and learn again to be the best professionals they can be. Help students rethink their grades and instead focus on their ability to learn and consume new knowledge.
- **Action:** Equip all faculty/staff with the language to name/acknowledge current events, issues, concerns, etc. impacting members of the WPI community. Encourage faculty/staff to engage in small group dialogue to check in with students and other employees and ask how individuals can be supported at that time. Refer students and employees to the appropriate campus resources.

THEME: LACK OF BALANCE/RESILIENCE AND SELF-CARE

There are widely varying degrees of resiliency in our campus population: many individuals lack the knowledge, skills, and resources to respond to adversity.

Finding: Individuals feel they lack the time or ability to manage work/life balance.

Recommendation: Prioritize sufficient periods for rest and reflection.

- **Action:** Charge an appropriate group of students, faculty, and staff to establish standards for length of term breaks, rest days during terms, and formal expectations for rest days for all community members.
- **Action:** Charge CGSR with creating formal time-off policies for TAs, RAs, Fellows, and Post-Docs.

Recommendation: Provide access and subscriptions to online MHWB resources (in addition to the existing Employee Assistance Program for faculty and staff).

- **Action:** Assess the effectiveness of existing online MHBW apps and services, including Calm, Headspace, Talkspace, Sanvello, and EvenMind.
- **Action:** Provide free or discounted memberships (possibly through health insurance provider) to effective online apps and resources to students and employees as appropriate.

Recommendation: Survey technology-based efforts related to MHWB that have been implemented at other institutions of higher learning.

Recommendation: Design initiatives to promote beneficial uses of technology and tools, as well as to raise awareness of harmful uses of technologies and tools (e.g., social media).

Finding: Self-care resources are scattered, intermittent, or unknown and should instead be centralized/standardized.

Recommendation: Establish the Center for Well-Being as a central source for a wide range of community resources to address the challenges members of the community face in knowing about/accessing the many resources, activities, and programs available to support wellness, mental health, physical and emotional needs.

- **Action:** Establish an advisory panel of graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, and staff—particularly those of underrepresented groups within the community—to work with the Director of the Center for Well-Being to audit the direction and programming impact of the Center.
- **Action:** Gauge community interest in, and launch as appropriate, programs for:
 - Yoga/Meditation
 - Work/Life Balance
 - Substance Abuse Education
 - Healthy Relationship with Food
 - Physical Activity
 - General Life Skills for students; explore potential for offering course credit; integrate into degree requirements to help encourage students to take courses in topics including:
 - Time management
 - Resilience
 - Healthy eating, cooking skills
 - Money management,
 - Sexual health; healthy body image

-
- **Action:** Explore potential for offering course credit for General Life Skills programming listed above; integrate into degree requirements to help encourage students to take courses.
 - Engage new students in programming via graduate and undergraduate New Student Orientation platforms.

Recommendation: Establish a Wellness Support Desk and Wellness Advisors to guide users to resources.

- **Action:** Establish and staff, within the Center for Well-Being, a Wellness Support Desk (both in-person and virtual) to serve as a focal point of resources for students, faculty, and staff seeking help on a variety of wellness questions, including ways they may help their friends, students, and colleagues.
 - The Support Desk could potentially be staffed by students trained and supervised by professional staff of the Center for Well-Being.
 - In order to serve all types of students at WPI, staff overseeing this desk should have intersectional background/training in life skills and strategies for a variety of specific needs, including but not limited to needs of LGBTQIA+ students, neurodiverse students, students with disabilities, first-generation students, students of color, and others.
 - The support desk could provide in-person one-on-one consultations for students, faculty and staff seeking advice on wellness questions.
 - The support desk could also provide a chat/e-access function for those who might be remote (such as those away on IQP or graduate students in online programs).
 - The services could be identified as a resource during the Insight and Graduate Student Orientation programs.
 - The Support Desk could maintain and share a database of searchable FAQs to support those interested in self service.

Finding: Members of the campus community lack an understanding about mental health and how to help each other to expand and bolster our support net.

Recommendation: Provide mental health support training services for students, faculty, and staff.

- **Action:** Incorporate mental health training into the existing series of required programming modules (for students and employees) related to health and safety, conflict of interest, sexual harassment, privacy issues, and others.
- **Action:** Expand training such as RRSO and SSN to reach more members of the community.
- **Action:** Add trainings to new student, staff, and faculty orientations, department and division retreats, student organization programs/events.
- **Action:** Assess the effectiveness and adoption feasibility of MHWB training tools such as Kognito.

Finding: Students, faculty, and staff are not aware of available campus resources and student services and how to be part of the support community.

Recommendation: Reimagine how we engage and train students, faculty, staff, parents/families, etc. on the available campus resources, the capacity/limitations of service, where to find campus/community resources (online and in-person), and how to refer/utilize service.

- **Action:** Implement an after-hours telehealth service to offer student support as an adjunct to the SDCC. Develop a plan for emergency personnel to reach the student in crisis when required.
- **Action:** Implement an online scheduling system for students to schedule/cancel individual and group counseling appointments.
- **Action:** Curate and offer a series of online and in-person mental health and crisis management training sessions for students, faculty, staff, parents/families, etc.

- **Action:** Expand mental health and wellness training sessions for all student leaders.
- **Action:** Offer train-the-trainer sessions to expand the facilitation ability of the Student Support Network (SSN) beyond the SDCC staff.
- **Action:** Offer additional mental health and wellness sessions throughout New Student Orientation for students (graduate and undergraduate) as well as parents/families.

Finding: There is an increase (and/or a significant risk for an increase) in substance use and abuse among students.

Recommendation: Create an authentic marketing campaign to share campus resources with students. Offer preventive support and education to deter students from engaging in destructive behavior.

- **Action:** Expand substance abuse education and health promotion (in-person and online) throughout the spring semester.

Finding: Student leaders feel overwhelmed by their responsibility to peers and to the university and need more support.

Recommendation: Complete an assessment of the student leader role (specifically the Resident Advisors and Community Advisors) and evaluate their duties, responsibilities, benefits/remuneration, and employee expectations.

- **Action:** Communicate what is and is not expected of student leaders to all students, faculty, staff, parents/families, etc. Clarify what the university, students, parents/families ask of student leaders and assess whether expectations are realistic and whether they align with the needs of the student leaders.

THEME: INADEQUATE INFORMATION/COMMUNICATION

Members of the community have difficulty finding the information they need and are unaware of resources, fostering a lack of trust in the university.

Finding: Knowledge gaps, misperceptions, and myths negatively impact students and their WPI experience.

Recommendation: Initiate a comprehensive communications plan to ensure campus/community resources are both visible and accessible online through multiple mediums (WPI website, The Hub, Discord, TechSync, WPI Apps, social media, etc.) and train students, faculty, staff, parents/families, etc. to access this information online.

- **Action:** Host recurring town halls during the spring semester to provide up-to-date information about the mental health and well-being recommendations and other campus occurrences.
- **Action:** Create a new, innovative, and authentic communications campaign to share campus resources with graduate and undergraduate students. Additionally, create innovative strategies to engage parents and families about campus resources.
- **Action:** Establish specific personnel charged with effective communication methods to engage parents and families. Offer recurring training opportunities to equip families with knowledge about available campus resources to support their student.
- **Action:** Establish and promote a Wellness Support Desk as a one-stop shop for all campus wellness resources and information. (See above.)

Finding: There is a gap in effective connection of MHWB needs and existing and emerging resources; MHWB apps, technology and services are not leveraged effectively.

Recommendation: Comprehensively survey technology used at WPI related to MHWB, and how it is being used. (These technologies include, but are not limited to, the WPI mobile app, The Hub, the WPI website, and social media.).

- **Action:** Gather and analyze usage data on the use of these existing technologies by different user groups (students, faculty, and staff).
- **Action:** Identify strengths and weaknesses of these technologies.

.....

Recommendation: Develop a central MHWB resource repository.*

- **Action:** Create a curated, central, online resource (e.g., webpage) that lists and links to MHWB resources on campus. This resource should be:
 - Comprehensive, providing links and information for all relevant resources.
 - Easy to find
 - Easy for all to access and use
 - Engaging
 - Data-driven to direct updates and enhancements

*A preliminary resource, www.wpi.edu/bewelltogether, was launched in October by Marketing Communications.

Finding: There are communication gaps regarding COVID restrictions, events happening on campus, TechSync usage, etc.

Recommendation: Improve awareness of campus events and related guidelines.

- **Action:** Train and retrain current and new students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and parents/families, etc. to access program and event guidelines; effectively utilize TechSync (mobile and online); sync programs, events, seminars, and other learning opportunities to their preferred calendar; expand options across campus to promote campus programs and events.
- **Action:** Expand education (in-person and online) about the University Calendar and TechSync features and other resources.
- **Action:** Train and retrain new and current student leaders about the available platforms and how to use them effectively.
- **Action:** Train students to utilize Microsoft Outlook to ensure they are receiving the information they need to be successful. Show students how to build in time throughout their day to read, sort, and archive emails.
- **Action:** Add advertising screens in high-traffic areas across campus.
- **Action:** Create a tag system to characterize events by type: intended audience, size, social, academic, sports, appropriateness for different personality types, etc.
- **Action:** Create a central repository of events with effective access that is searchable and tailored by tags.
- **Action:** Make WPI Today available to graduate students.

Recommendation: Use channels of communication that students prefer.

- **Action:** Encourage faculty, TAs, and PLAs to create and actively use Discord channels for their courses. Provide training and support for using Discord.

THEME: RESOURCE SCARCITY

More resources are needed: growth in faculty/staff has not kept pace with growth in students, causing tension between attending to student needs and to self.

Finding: Many students do not have knowledge of or access to academic support and mentorship or to academic experiences at the intersection of MHWB and DEI.

Recommendation. Improve academic advising at the department level.

- **Action:** Charge CASL with formally defining roles and responsibilities for high-quality academic advising.
- **Action:** Act on recommendations of Task Force on Academic Advising (2017) to create departmental plans for academic advising and support for advisors.

.....

Recommendation: Ensure that key offices and entities are well-positioned to provide academic support for diverse students, including the Office of Accessibility Services, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Academic Advising and Academic Resources Center, Career Development Center, and International House.

- **Action:** Assess size and scope of offices, put plans in place to right-size and/or diversify as necessary, set goals for adjustment in programs and services, monitor and improve.
- **Action:** Charge the Academic Resources Center and core departments to assess and optimize use of learning assistants including tutors, PLAs, and TAs.

Recommendation: Streamline access and processes related to MHWB.

- **Action:** Develop an app to make appointments with the SDCC.
- **Action:** Develop easy-to-use flow diagrams that describe the process needed to match an MHWB need to the appropriate offices (e.g., academic advising, SDCC) and resources. These flow diagrams need to be customizable to different users (students, faculty, staff, family, peers) who look for resources.

Finding: Offices/campus resources are, or are perceived to be, inaccessible due to lack of personnel and lack of capacity.

Recommendation: Adequately staff and resource offices/departments to increase their capacity to serve students. Re-evaluate current programs and services and determine what is effective, what should end, and what is worth continuing (START something new, STOP what is not working, CONTINUE what is working).

- **Action:** Evaluate the staffing structure of the following student-facing offices and expand staffing accordingly; initiate search processes to have new staff members in place by FY23:
 - Office of Accessibility Services
 - Office of International Students
 - Student Activities Office
 - Student Development and Counseling Center
 - Student Affairs office
 - All academic offices/departments
- **Action:** Hire additional faculty to teach math courses (online and in-person). Hire math specialists to support faculty and Academic Advising to tutor students.
- **Action:** Evaluate the effectiveness of all campus programs, services, research, meetings, etc., to determine what needs to be reconsidered and what is still useful.

THEME: SOCIAL ISOLATION, LACK OF CONNECTION TO PEERS/FACULTY/STAFF

Students report a lack of a sense of belonging; feelings of loneliness/isolation; an inability to connect to peers and the larger community; and not feeling valued.

Finding: Individuals feel loneliness/isolation; a lack of a sense of belonging, acceptance, and inclusion, loneliness/isolation; an inability to connect to peers and the larger community; a sense of not feeling valued. There is a need for structured programming to build interconnection and relationships between students, between students and faculty/staff, and among faculty and staff.

Recommendation: Support Improved Student/Faculty/Staff Relationships.

- **Action:** Build opportunities, through the Center for Well-Being, to facilitate the development of informal interactions to help build community, improve relationships with staff and faculty, inclusive of advising and mentoring relationships.

- **Action:** Establish a university-level recurring Be Well Together Day on some to-be-determined frequency to provide scheduled time for reflection, yoga, meditation, community gatherings, and other activities around self-care, relaxation, and reconnecting. Initial and informal discussions appear to support a large, day-long program once per semester.
- **Action:** Coordinate more frequent, shorter-duration events on a more regular basis along the lines of “Take Back the Night” or “Can We Talk.”
- **Action:** Facilitate departmental student/staff/faculty networking, much like Academic Advising does for First Year students each January.
- **Action:** Provide de-stressor activities prior to mid-terms and finals to promote wellness and self-care.

Recommendation: Normalize and expand mental health and DEI in curriculum and research.

- **Action:** Develop new or redesigned courses at the intersection of mental health and DEI, especially in the first year (e.g., GPS).
- **Action:** Hire faculty with expertise and interest in mental health teaching and research.
- **Action:** Hire faculty of minoritized identities across departments; this can help students of minoritized identities better connect and feel support.
- **Action:** Create an authentic communications campaign around destigmatizing and normalizing mental health issues on campus. Create new marketing strategies to assist with building the knowledge and capacity of students, faculty, staff, parents/families, etc. to refer to the proper campus/community resource.

Recommendation: Expand student support services to ensure student-facing offices have the capacity to offer new/more programs and services to connect students to each other and the larger WPI community. Offer more social gathering events (small- and large-scale) so all students, faculty, and staff can meet people and build new connections. Ensure there are low-risk engagement opportunities for students who are reluctant or unable to engage in larger crowds. Develop mentoring programs pairing undergraduate and graduate students with older peers to support them during their educational journey.

- **Action:** Maintain and expand outdoor seating and gathering spaces for community building, meetings, campus events, classes, and studying. Install permanent tables, benches, and chairs in spaces students and employees gather. Build gazebos and a pavilion on campus. Add outdoor seating to off campus office locations (i.e. SDCC, OMA, CRC, International House, Pre-Collegiate Outreach, etc.).
- **Action:** Assess dining menus across campus to evaluate all food options to support student needs. Offer and promote new and healthy food options for students.
- **Action:** Create a centralized domain in Workday where students can look up their network of support, such as: Academic Advisor, Faculty Advisor, Program Advisor, Resident Assistant, Community Advisor, Student Senator, Admissions Counselor, etc.
- **Action:** Hire staff (full-time and student staff) to expand mental health resources and student support for BIPOC, LGBTQIAP+, international, and other diverse student communities.
- **Action:** Expand Religion and Spiritual Life programs to supplement the mental health and wellness resources available to students. Hire staff to recruit and supervise additional campus Chaplains who can counsel student seeking spiritual and religious guidance. Expand staff to support LGBTQIAP+ students, first gen students, and women students.
- **Action:** Offer more informal social interactions for students, faculty, and staff to engage with each other through campus programs or meals.

Finding: Students, faculty, and staff want to help: We can create, coordinate and support opportunities for collaboration on MHWB research and topics via IQPs, MQPs, GQPs, MS and PhD theses.

Recommendation: Coordinate existing on-campus efforts.

- **Action:** Identify existing efforts around campus to develop or use technology to address MHWB: faculty research and student projects (IQPs, MQPs, GQPs, and graduate theses) related to website and app development, and AI/machine learning predictive models.
- **Action:** Design initiatives to leverage these efforts in a coordinated manner.



Worcester Polytechnic Institute
100 Institute Road | Worcester, MA 01609
wpi.edu