

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

PHASE ONE: STUDENTS

ADDENDUM:
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO
NEEDS OF SPECIAL STUDENT POPULATIONS

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March 2022



Worcester Polytechnic Institute

*Addendum to Initial Findings and Recommendations of the Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force:
Phase One: Students*

Underrepresented Students in the WPI Population

As noted in the [*Initial Findings and Recommendations of the Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force: Phase One: Students*](#) report, there has been—and continues to be—a concerning gap in engagement and input from Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC); African American, Latino/a American, Asian American, Native American (ALANA); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, Agender and Pansexual (LGBTQIAP+); international, neurodiverse, and other underrepresented groups in the WPI community who feel their voices are not heard or heeded. The MHWB Task Force continues to work with partners across campus to gain input from populations who have been historically minoritized in the community.

While this report includes additional feedback from these communities (below), the overall findings and recommendations presented in the Phase One and Phase Two reports may still not adequately address the full spectrum of stressors and needs of our campus community. The university must continue to fully engage all populations on campus.

Findings

Underrepresented members of the WPI community report a greater sense of disconnection and particular stresses on their mental health and well-being. These students reported the following specific stressors:

- Food insecurity
- Concerns with bandwidth and a need for improved communication
- A lack of clarity regarding the Leave of Absence policy
- A lack of benchmarks for the expected time commitment of each course and support to ensure it is achievable and reasonable; lack of accuracy in the course catalog
- Lack of representation on the faculty of underrepresented populations
- Lack of safe spaces for cultural groups to build community
- Lack of institutional knowledge to be passed through cultural groups; opt-in to communications facing a cultural group.
- Inaction regarding incidences of disrespect towards underrepresented populations
- Lack of DEI training for all faculty
- A lack of connections between faculty and students
- A need for breaks built into terms to allow a rest from work.

Thus, along with the *Initial Findings and Recommendations of the Mental Health and Well-being Task Force: Phase One: Students* (January 2022) additional recommendations should be considered for the following specific student groups:

BIPOC/ALANA Student Recommendations

- Work with the Office of Multicultural Affairs to hold a focus group for Asian/Pan-Asian students during D-Term to gather feedback about their mental health needs.
- Identify additional physical spaces for Black and Brown students to gather safely and build community (i.e., Black House or Black Student Union).
- Offer workshops centered on Black mental health led by Black mental health professionals.
- Provide additional opportunities for BIPOC/ALANA students to engage with each other and BIPOC/ALANA faculty/staff during the Insight Program and/or New Student Orientation.
- Conduct an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) audit of offices/departments to assess the staffing/hiring practices related to BIPOC/ALANA professionals.
- Ensure the Career Development Center identifies opportunities and creates programming to highlight BIPOC/ALANA organizations and businesses (i.e., Career Fair, career workshops, major-specific workshops, etc.).
- Establish dedicated Affinity Councils/Committees/Commissions to advise the Office of the President and Office of the Provost and provide a source of advocacy for students and employees (i.e., Commission on the Black Experience).

LGBTQIAP+ Student Recommendations

- Fast-track identifying space for the creation of a physical Queer Resource Center for LGBTQIAP+ students to gather safely and build community.
- Establish new group-counseling group for trans students.
- Provide more education, clarity, and communication around WPI's Name Change Policy/Process/Practice and what specific processes take place behind the scenes.

International Student Recommendations

- Work with the Office of International Student Life to hold a focus group for international students during D-Term to gather feedback about their mental health needs.
- Enhance existing proactive educational programming for international students to assist with their adjustment to life and education in the United States (i.e. Health Care, Healthy Relationships, Title IX, etc.).

Neurodiverse Students/Students with Disabilities Recommendations

- Work with the Office of Accessibility Services to hold a focus groups for neurodiverse students and students with disabilities during D-Term to gather feedback about their mental health needs.
- When planning and coordinating events, take into consideration the physical space, required accommodations, and/or accessibility needs for all participants.
- Provide an accessibility statement and point of contact for accommodation requests for all campus programs/events.
- Make the WPI shuttle service wheelchair accessible.

Additional Student Recommendations

Education/Communication/Information Sharing

- Explore new and creative ways to align Admissions messaging and marketing with the lived experiences of underrepresented students on campus to more accurately set student and family expectations.
- Provide clearer communication to students and families related to financial aid and academic progress which might impact scholarship levels and financial aid packages.
- Provide additional education and clearer communication about WPI's Emergency Assistance Fund.
- Provide additional communication regarding, and access to, on-campus job opportunities in offices/departments beyond federal work study positions.
- Provide paid on-campus experiential learning experiences in offices/departments for students to learn professional skills within their field.
- Provide more education, clarity, and communication around WPI's Bias Response Program and what specific processes take place behind the scenes.
- Review policies and practices for addressing incidences of disrespect towards underrepresented populations; provide support for those reporting incidents; more clearly and broadly communicate processes and avenues for redress and resolution.
- Provide a progress report on the Sustainable Inclusive Excellence program on where offices/departments stand on their implementation plans.
- Require training and development for all members of the WPI community to understand the experiences of the LGBTQIAP+ community, BIPOC/ALANA community, international community, and neurodiverse community.
- Expand personnel and resources in the Morgan Center Teaching & Learning Center to assist in elevating the cultural competency of the faculty.
- Provide additional education and communication for on-campus housing options during WPI's break periods.
- Provide a progress report on the status of the WPI Food Pantry.
- Provide additional information and education on the student health plan detailing what the plan covers and does not cover.

Resources/Student Life/Programming

- Develop and host specific culturally responsive wellness programming, including retreats, focused on underrepresented students each term.
- Earmark additional funding resources to support diverse student populations during times of need for supplies, technology, etc.
- Establish an on-campus resource to assist with the off-campus housing search process.
- Consider adding living-learning communities/themed/affinity housing for specific populations within WPI's residential communities.
- Reassess the current dining hours for all campus dining locations to provide flexibility and greater access.
- Identify ways to make meal plans more affordable for students in need; communicate access more broadly.
- Provide more cost-friendly food options in various campus dining locations.
- Provide language/education on how WPI defines wellness and other mental health terminology which might be interpreted differently among diverse populations, nationalities, cultures, and identities.

Spaces

- Re-assess and update the physical infrastructure, features, and conditions of the International House (28 Trowbridge Road), OASIS House (20 Schussler Road), and Collegiate Religious Center (19 Schussler Road).
- Add shuttle stops to the off-campus offices/departments frequented by students (i.e., SDCC, International House, OASIS House, CRC, etc.).
- Establish an ongoing work group/task force to consistently assess physical space needs on campus including, but not limited to, access doors, accessibility buttons, ramps, emergency buttons, accessible restrooms, etc.
- Continue and enhance ongoing efforts, with OMA, Facilities, and Talent & Inclusion, to incorporate signage and/or renovate facilities to ensure each building on campus has a safe and accessible all-gender restroom/toilet. More broadly communicate locations of all-gender restrooms, including on campus maps

Technology/Systems

- Provide timely communication for when new online systems are implemented and how it might impact students who have different demographic information (i.e., name changes) across all of WPI's systems.
- Beta test new online software before implementation to assess how it impacts student demographic information (i.e., name changes) pulled from other systems and entities.

Completed Actions—Update to Phase One report

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. 15: Launched Be Well Together biweekly email series to provide the community with updates on Task Force activities and wellness tips.

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- 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–February 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.)
- Jan. 19: Completed [Initial Findings and Recommendations of the Mental Health & Well-Being Task Force, Phase One: Students](#) and shared with the campus community.
- Actively recruiting additional staff in Academic Advising, Student Activities, and to support the CARE Team.
- Feb. 18: Through a faculty vote, approved a policy allowing students to choose a Pass/NR grade instead of A/B/C grade for C- and D-Term 2022, Spring Semester 2022, and Summer 2022 courses to help alleviate grade-related pressures.
- Feb. 24: Shared an independent review of WPI protocols and practices, conducted by Riverside Trauma Center.
- Feb. 24: Led by students for students, WPI hosted WeConnect, a voluntary day of activities to foster connection between students, faculty, and staff.
- Feb. 28: Welcomed to campus the inaugural [Director of the Center for Well-Being](#), Dr. Paula Fitzpatrick.

Next Steps

Following the work of the Task Force and subcommittees to develop recommendations and suggest actions, the university has assembled a **Mental Health Implementation Team**, led by Senior Vice President for Student Affairs **Philip Clay** and Director of Emergency Management **Ron Bashista**, to ensure progress on recommendations from internal and external sources around mental health and well-being on our campus. Notably, these are the same leaders who worked hand-in-hand with partners across campus to manage the university's COVID response over the past two years.

Sub-teams are being created and aligned with actions to be taken, including Student Life, Academics, Center for Well-Being, Communications, and the First Year Experience. Regular updates are being shared through the [Be Well Together](#) website and other platforms.



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