



Lead with Purpose:

The Strategic Plan for WPI 2021–2026

Strategic Plan Close-out Report



Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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In 2021, WPI launched *Lead with Purpose*, our ambitious five-year strategic plan focused on three core areas of emphasis: **student well-being, access and affordability; purpose-driven education and research; and an inclusive community**. The plan was developed through extensive planning by more than 100 faculty and staff and the engagement and feedback of more than 640 students, alumni, and community stakeholders.

As the plan concludes in 2026, WPI has made significant progress across all three strategic themes, strengthening the student experience, expanding research impact, advancing innovation in STEM education, and fostering a more engaged and inclusive campus community.

Five Years of Transformational Progress

Key accomplishments include:

- **Achieving Carnegie R1 status**, placing WPI among the nation's leading research universities, supported by a 41% increase in research expenditures, a 59% increase in new research awards, and higher proposal success rates.
- **Establishing the Center for Well-Being**, advancing a campuswide approach to student wellness and contributing to increases in belonging, flourishing, and overall student well-being. The new **Campus Wellness Coalition** of students, faculty, and staff ensures all can contribute to continued development and implementation of wellness best practices.
- **Expanding access and affordability**, including a 56% increase in undergraduate financial aid, enhanced support for students with demonstrated need, and significant growth in transfer student enrollment and retention.
- **Advancing academic innovation**, integrating AI, ethics, and emerging technologies across disciplines while reinforcing WPI's leadership in human-centered, project-based STEM education.
- **Launching new degree programs and workforce partnerships** that respond to evolving industry needs and prepare graduates for high-demand careers.
- **Strengthening shared governance and employee engagement** through the creation of the Staff Council and the further integration of community values into institutional practices.
- **Investing in campus culture, sustainability, and belonging** through new collaborative spaces, campus planning initiatives, and programs that support students, faculty, and staff.

Together, these achievements reflect WPI's commitment to educating purpose-driven leaders, advancing impactful research, and building a community where all members can thrive.

Strategic Plan Outcomes at a Glance

Student Well-Being

WPI has transformed its approach to student well-being by establishing the Center for Well-Being as the hub for a coordinated, campuswide strategy supporting student health, resilience, and success. Through the creation of the ongoing Campus Wellness Coalition, WPI brought together faculty, staff, and students around a shared commitment to fostering a culture of well-being and implementing evidence-based practices across the institution.

Participation in Center for Well-Being programming has increased by 48%, and students report improvements in belonging and flourishing and declines in loneliness. Additional counseling staff, expanded programming, a 24/7 on-call counseling line, and stronger referral networks improved access to care. In addition, the physical education requirement was transitioned to become a wellness and physical education requirement with the addition of numerous courses supporting well-being. Counseling demand stabilized, suggesting that WPI's proactive and preventive approach to well-being is strengthening student resilience before crises emerge.

WPI also adopted the Okanagan Charter, embedding health and well-being into all aspects of campus culture, and introduced the First-Year Welcome Experience, a reimagined pre-orientation program infused with wellness and belonging. WPI expanded transition support and provided comprehensive mental health training for students, faculty, and staff.

Enhancing the Student Experience and Outcomes

WPI invested strategically in services and programs that help students thrive academically, socially, and personally. Student-facing offices, including Academic Advising, Accessibility Services, the Heebner Career Development Center, and the Registrar, were centralized in Unity Hall to improve coordination among support services.

The university expanded staffing across advising, counseling, accessibility, international student support, executive functioning coaching, and case management services. These investments strengthen individual support and create a more cohesive experience; students have reported improvements in counseling services, health services, and well-being support.

Retention and graduation outcomes remained exceptionally strong. Undergraduate first-year retention was 91.5% for the entering 2021 cohort and 94.5% for the 2024 entering cohort. The overall four-year graduation rate fell slightly from 82.7% to 81.8%, possibly due to the impact of COVID on students' first years, while the six-year rate improved from 87.2% to 90.0%.

Transfer student first-year retention increased from 93.7% in 2021 to 94.7% in 2025, thanks in part to university-wide efforts to better support transfer students from orientation through graduation.

Expanding Access and Affordability

WPI took significant steps to minimize barriers to accessing its transformative educational experience. Undergraduate financial aid increased by 56%, from \$104 million in FY21 to \$162 million in FY26. These investments helped stabilize net tuition costs for students with demonstrated financial need.

Additional partnerships with area community colleges, enhanced recruitment efforts, and dedicated support programs nearly tripled transfer enrollment over the course of the strategic plan.

The university also expanded emergency and basic-needs support through initiatives such as the Emergency Assistance Fund, Gompei's Closet for clothing needs, and an on-campus food pantry.

Purpose-Driven Education

WPI strengthened its position as a national leader in innovative STEM education by identifying and embracing emerging technologies and preparing students for rapidly evolving careers. The university incorporated online and tech-enabled learning options into its already distinctive project-based education, especially during the summer, growing the number of online undergraduate E-Term courses by 43% and online undergraduate E-Term registrations by 42%.

A major focus was the careful integration of artificial intelligence literacy, ethics, and application throughout the curriculum. Through the Morgan Teaching and Learning Center, WPI established a comprehensive AI teaching ecosystem that supports faculty via specialized instructional support, workshops, communities of practice, and resource development. More than 100 faculty and staff completed WPI's Critical AI Literacy program in 2024 and 2025, with 95% reporting confidence in applying what they learned.

The university also invested heavily in educational innovation through grants, such as the \$150,000 annual grant via the Morgan Teaching and Learning Center, supporting redesigned projects involving 23 faculty members across 53 courses in 11 departments, reaching more than 3,500 students.

WPI continued to advance its distinctive project-based curriculum while strengthening the integration of human-centered, ethical, and global perspectives throughout the student experience.

Assessment data demonstrate that students successfully apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges. Reviews of Interactive Qualifying Projects, Major Qualifying Projects, and Humanities and Arts projects found strong evidence that students routinely engage in human-centered problem-solving, consider ethical implications, evaluate social and global impacts, and collaborate across disciplines.

Recognizing the evolving needs of employers and industries, WPI launched the Career Pathways Task Force to strengthen connections among academic programs, experiential learning, internships, career preparation, and employer partnerships. This additional support positions students to enter an increasingly complex workforce with both technical expertise and the foundational capabilities required for long-term success.

Expanding Research Impact

In 2025 WPI earned Carnegie R1 status, one of the most prestigious designations in American higher education and a recognition of the university's growing research and doctoral education enterprise.

Research growth represents a significant accomplishment of the strategic plan. Between FY21 and FY26:

- Research expenditures increased 41%, from \$37 million to \$52 million
- New research awards increased 59%, from \$42.3 million to \$67.5 million
- Average award size increased 16%
- Proposal success rates rose from 23% to 31%
- More than \$1.2 million was invested in interdisciplinary seed funding to encourage collaborative discovery

The university also deepened partnerships with corporations, healthcare innovators, and industry leaders. Collaborations through PracticePoint and the Biomanufacturing Education and Training Center and partnerships with various organizations expanded opportunities for research, workforce development, and technology innovation.

Additional investments included the expansion or creation of research centers, with awards totaling \$11.8 million to support the Autonomous Vehicle Mobility Institute; \$5.2 million to launch a biomanufacturing hub; \$5 million for a Central Massachusetts Climatetech Hub Incubator; \$2 million for medical robotics innovation and training at PracticePoint; and \$1 million to support workforce training for the growing hydrogen economy, positioning WPI as a key contributor to regional and national economic development.

Expanding Education and Strategic Partnerships

To meet workforce demands and support lifelong learning, WPI launched nine new graduate programs and five new undergraduate programs, expanding educational offerings in high-growth fields. These programs were designed to align with emerging industry needs while providing flexible pathways for professional advancement.

WPI also received national recognition for its long-standing commitment to integrating research and education, earning the Council on Undergraduate Research Award for Undergraduate Research Accomplishments. This distinction reflects WPI's model of engaging undergraduate and graduate students alongside faculty in research that addresses pressing societal challenges in areas such as health, sustainability, advanced manufacturing, robotics, and socially responsible technology.

Our Inclusive Community

Strengthening Community Values and Culture

One of the most important accomplishments of the strategic plan was the articulation and integration of a shared set of community values that now help guide institutional decision-making, employee expectations, leadership practices, and performance management.

These values provide a common framework for how WPI works together as a community and have become embedded in employee evaluation and professional development, reinforcing a culture of accountability, collaboration, and respect.

Building a Thriving and Sustainable Campus

WPI continued to invest in the physical environment as a critical component of community experience and institutional success.

Through the development of the Campus Framework Plan, the university established a long-term vision for campus growth that supports teaching, research, student life, accessibility, sustainability, and community engagement. The plan included extensive stakeholder input and provides a roadmap for future investment while maintaining WPI's commitment to responsible stewardship.

Since 2021, WPI has added significantly to its 95-acre campus, which now includes 105 buildings with over 2.7 million net assignable square feet of space. More than \$200 million has been devoted to upgrades, additions, renovations, and capital maintenance projects, including:

- Construction of the Unity Hall academic and student services building
- Expansion of the Sagamore research building at 20 Sagamore Road
- Purchase of the Gateway II research building at 50 Prescott St.
- Extensive interior and exterior renovations of on-campus buildings, including Kaven Hall, Stratton Hall, Olin Hall, and Daniels Hall
- Purchase of the Hampton Inn and Courtyard Marriott adjacent to WPI's Gateway Park
- Enhanced building access controls and upgraded lighting systems with sustainability features throughout campus

Enhancements to campus gathering spaces and student-focused facilities contributed to increased student satisfaction and strengthened opportunities for connection and community-building. Since 2023, satisfaction with study spaces increased from 69% to 77%, and satisfaction with social spaces rose from 67% to 78%.

The university also advanced sustainability goals through a co-generation partnership with Harrison Street that modernizes the energy infrastructure while reducing WPI's carbon footprint and supporting long-term environmental sustainability.

Expanding Employee Engagement and Shared Governance

WPI strengthened employee engagement by creating pathways to amplify faculty and staff voices and increase participation in institutional decision-making.

The establishment of the Staff Council in 2022 marked a significant milestone, providing nonunion staff with a formal mechanism to engage with leadership, raise concerns, contribute ideas, and influence institutional policy. The Staff Council has helped prioritize improvements in workplace practices, benefits, and the employee experience.

In 2023 WPI conducted its first comprehensive staff climate survey in a decade, engaging more than 500 staff members, and launched several key initiatives. Other efforts include conducting a staff compensation and classification project that created salary grades and improved equity and transparency; periodically surveying employees; and training hiring managers to mitigate unconscious bias and reinforce WPI's values throughout the hiring process.

The university also invested in employee growth through leadership development programs, expanded professional learning opportunities, and created a Performance Management Task Force, focusing on growth, development, and well-being. Employee participation in the performance management process has increased to 95%. New employee recognition programs further reinforced appreciation for individuals whose contributions advance WPI's mission and strengthen its culture.

Together, these efforts have helped build a more engaged, collaborative, and inclusive community, positioning WPI to continue attracting and supporting outstanding faculty, staff, and students.

Closing Statement

Across all three pillars of the strategic plan, WPI achieved substantial progress and delivered measurable results. The university strengthened student success and well-being, expanded access and affordability, elevated its research enterprise to R1 status, modernized academic programs for the future of STEM, and fostered a more engaged and inclusive campus community. These accomplishments provide a strong foundation for WPI's next strategic chapter and reaffirm its commitment to education, research, and societal impact.