Findings and Recommendations of the Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force Phase 2: Special Student Populations, Faculty, & Staff

March 17, 2022
Addendum to Phase 1: BIPOC, ALANA, and LGBTQIAP+ Students

- **BIPOC Students**: Black, Indigenous, People of Color
- **ALANA Students**: African American, Latino/a American, Asian American and Native American
- **LGBTQIAP+ Students**: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, Agender and Pansexual

Faculty Findings & Recommendations

Staff Findings & Recommendations

Summary/Next Steps
BIPOC, ALANA, and LGBTQIAP+ Students

Two focus groups were held in January to address concerns of:

- Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students
- African American, Latino/a American, Asian American and Native American (ALANA) students
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, Agender and Pansexual (LGBTQIAP+) students
Survey | Overview: Undergraduate Students (Overall)

**Academic Pressure**
- 4 of the top influences on mental health & well-being
- Up to 82% of respondents report too much academic pressure

**Lack of Self-Care & Balance**
- 3 of the top influences on mental health & well-being
- Half of respondents report FOMO & balancing multiple commitments as major influences

**Lack of Resilience**
- Students who report lower resilience also report being more overwhelmed
- One third of respondents report low resilience; two thirds report long-term mental health issues

**Lack of Social Connection**
- 1 of the top influences on mental health & well-being
- Social isolation on campus is highly influential; personal relationships less so

**Inadequate Communication**
- Few students report knowing where to find MHWB resources
- Almost half of respondents gave themselves failing grades re: knowledge of MHWB resources

**Pandemic Burnout**
- 1 of the top influences on mental health & well-being
- Many respondents are frustrated with the current restrictions, as well as long-term Covid impacts

**Resource Scarcity**
- Not a top need, but moderately impactful (ie, finances, SDCC access, food)
- Many requests for resources that exist (ie, didn't know we offer them already or want more access, better quality)
Different Constellations of Experiences for Undergraduate Students from Special Populations

Each marginalized undergraduate student subgroup reported being **overwhelmed more often** this academic year than their more privileged peers, including:

- Women students.
- Non-binary students.
- LGBTQIA+ students.
- BIPOC students.

Are they more overwhelmed in the same ways?

Specific Stressors

Worcester Polytechnic Institute
BIPOC, ALANA, and LGBTQIAP+ Students

Finding
BIPOC and LGBTQIAP+ members of the WPI community report a greater sense of disconnection and particular stresses on their mental health and well-being.

Students reported the following specific stressors:

1. Financial Stress
2. Lack of representation on the faculty of minoritized populations
3. Lack of safe spaces for cultural groups to build community
4. Lack of institutional knowledge to be passed through cultural groups; opt-in to communications facing a cultural group
5. Inaction regarding incidences of disrespect towards minoritized populations
6. Lack of DEI training for all faculty
7. A lack of connections between faculty and students
8. Food insecurity
# Overview: Faculty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Faculty Reporting</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching Expectations</strong></td>
<td>1 (out of 3) indicators are a top influence</td>
<td>54% of faculty reported teaching load as a major influence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 (out of 3) indicators are top influences</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Research Expectations</strong></td>
<td>Both indicators are relatively less influential</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inconsistently included in open responses</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Service Overload</strong></td>
<td>64% of faculty reported at least one aspect of research expectations as a major influence</td>
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<td>34% of faculty reported committee work as a major influence</td>
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<td><strong>Admin Workload</strong></td>
<td>18% of faculty reported admin workload as a burden at WPI</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Campus Morale</strong></td>
<td>2 (out of 6) indicators are top influences</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (out of 3) indicators are top influences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Self-Care &amp; Balance</strong></td>
<td>Lack of time to complete work as a major influence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>68% of faculty report too much work to complete within their work week as a major influence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Concerns</strong></td>
<td>All 3 indicators are relatively less influential</td>
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<td></td>
<td>36% of faculty reported job security as a major influence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Social Connection</strong></td>
<td>2 (out of 5) indicators are top influences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>50% of faculty reported missing out on time with family &amp; friends as a major influence</td>
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**Higher impact**, **Moderate impact**, **Lower impact**
Which factors have the greatest influence on faculty?

- Too much work to complete within my scheduled work week: 68%
- Teaching load: 54%
- Missing out on time with family and friends: 50%
- Publishing/Pressure to "publish or perish": 45%
- Grantwriting/Pressure to obtain grant funding: 45%
- Not being heard or having my voice valued in decision making: 44%
- Dynamics within my program/department: 44%
Faculty: Overwork

Finding

Faculty feel overworked with teaching, research, administrative and other duties. WPI is a culture of systemic overwork; individuals feel pressure to do more and more.

Sample Recommendations

- Evaluate optimal teaching load, including credits delivered. Hire more faculty in overloaded areas and/or those pertaining to strategic initiatives.
- Acknowledge labor by marginalized faculty as part of their workload.
- Build more days into the schedule give faculty the time to allow for more student/faculty interaction outside of the classroom (e.g., advising meetings).
- Implement “No Meeting Fridays”.
- Provide a regular term off for teaching faculty; no one should be teaching 8 courses per year for XX years in a row.
Faculty: Appreciation

Finding

Faculty do not feel appreciated and wish to be recognized for more than “just research.” Campus morale is low.

Sample Recommendations

- Eliminate the label of “merit-based” pay increases; increases are not about merit but rather how a very limited amount of funds can be distributed.

- Prioritize, recognize, and signal greater value of service and engagement within the WPI community in addition to teaching and research. Ask this in Faculty Annual Report and other evaluations.

- Make mental health and well-being support and community engagement an explicit part of merit, tenure, and promotion to show its value, while also recalibrating expectations overall.

- Support rewards of teaching buyout or other opportunities for faculty who go above and beyond in providing student support service or who have administrative roles.

- Encourage leaders to show appreciation for faculty by calling out/calling in/holding accountable those faculty who are harming students (e.g., those who say they are “too old to learn your pronouns”) and requiring training and performance improvement plans.
Faculty feel unprepared to deal with students’ mental health challenges or provide resources for students and themselves. There is an imbalance in faculty ability/willingness to support students.

- Increase resources for faculty and staff beyond referrals to the EAP
- Support TRT faculty who are taking on disproportionate mentorship responsibilities, for which they are not recognized or compensated
- Address feelings of exclusion or not belonging by faculty, especially in humanities, social sciences, and business and disproportionate feelings of overwhelm by junior, female, BIPOC, and TRT faculty
- Set realistic expectations and boundaries for work and working hours for faculty, department heads, and deans. Communicate work hours and availability explicitly
- Provide training on how to interact with other populations on campus around mental health
Faculty & Staff: Work/Life Balance

Finding

Work/life is out of balance. There is a need for clearer boundaries between work and life, and a more thoughtful distribution of work load and more balanced work habits/expectations. 
*(Note: This finding and recommendations are the same for faculty and staff.)*

Sample Recommendations

- Reconsider “working hours” 8:30 to 4:30 or 9 to 5, instead of 8 to 5 or consider shift to 35-hour work week; allow for flexibility; encourage the use of email signatures such as “I understand my work hours are not necessarily the same as yours...”

- Re-evaluate meeting schedules and establish meeting etiquette to allow breaks/downtime; make meetings 25 or 50 minutes, instead of 30 and 60, to allow for breaks in between

- Streamline work: too many hands are required to touch things when fewer is often enough

- Discourage working through illness/injuries and encourage using sick time when needed

- Lead by example. Support idea that it’s OK to seek balance; model self-care and “powering down” behavior
## Staff: Summary of Findings/Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overworked</th>
<th>Work/Life Balance</th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Compensation</th>
<th>Mental Health Education</th>
<th>Decision Making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burned out</td>
<td>Desperate need for better balance</td>
<td>Don’t feel work is appreciated</td>
<td>Better compensation in recognition of hard work</td>
<td>More mental health training and education for themselves and others</td>
<td>Want to be more involved with campus decisions, especially those that require staff support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covering multiple positions for extended periods of time</td>
<td>More boundaries between work and life</td>
<td>Especially during the pandemic</td>
<td>Improved benefits</td>
<td>Would improve employee retention</td>
<td>Want more opportunities to connect with others</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Better distribution of workload</td>
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**Higher impact**

**Moderate impact**

**Lower impact**
During the current academic year, how often have you felt overwhelmed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never (once or twice this academic year)</th>
<th>Rarely (once or twice per term)</th>
<th>Occasionally (once or twice per term)</th>
<th>Often (once or twice per week)</th>
<th>Very often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

64%, or almost 2 of every 3 staff members reported feeling overwhelmed very often or very often.

147 responses
Overlap: Faculty and Staff

Work-Life Balance
• Both faculty and staff report low self-care & balance / work-life balance and boundaries

More Realistic Expectations
• Faculty report teaching and research expectations affect their mental health, staff also report that expectations to always be available, rapidly pivot toward new initiatives/projects, and work with urgency affects mental health.

Need More Staffing
• Faculty feel effects of low staffing levels, staff note this makes their jobs more difficult and contributes to errors that create problems or delays later

Compensation
• Both faculty and staff ask for higher compensation
Major Themes Across All Campus Groups

Major themes, or areas of difficulty:

1. Overwork
2. Work/Life Balance
3. Lack of Appreciation/Support
4. Mental Health Challenges
Summary

RADICALLY CHANGING OUR COMM-UNITY (COMING TOGETHER IN UNITY) SUPPORT SYSTEMS

HOLISTICALLY RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURE ACROSS ALL GROUPS

REDEFINING SUCCESS - ENHANCING SELF CARE & REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

CO-CREATING A COMMUNITY THAT ENHANCES HUMAN FLOURISHING AND DESTIGMATIZES MENTAL ILLNESS
Next Steps

• Full text report available: https://www.wpi.edu/student-experience/resources/be-well-together/task-force

• Deeper Dives: Recorded webinars available at https://canvas.wpi.edu/courses/1046/modules

• Mental Health Implementation Team (MHIT)
Mental Health Implementation Team (MHIT)
Organizational Structure

Student Life Section
Section Chiefs: Perlow, Lane

Academics Section
Section Chiefs: Heinricher, Kmiotek

Programs, Training & Services Section
Section Chiefs: Barry, Fitzpatrick

First Year Experience Section
Section Chiefs: Reilly, Sharry

Communications Section
Section Chiefs: Duffy, Fiorentino

SVPSA
EMD

MHIT

Parents LNO
Pasha

Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Discussion and Questions