



Take a Paws & Breathe: Library Programming that Supports Student Wellness

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Background

Students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) face a fast-pace and challenging schedule with a curriculum comprised of four 7-week terms, resulting in taking final exams four times a year. Library staff expressed concern over student wellbeing through out various stressful time periods throughout the year and were interested in finding ways to help provide ways to help students relieve stress.

Additionally, Library staff had observed students using quiet, low traffic areas in the stacks for prayer, in particular Muslim students observing the daily call to prayers from midday through late night hours. Students indicated a lack of a space outside of their residence hall room in which to engage in their daily faith tradition. Staff recognized a need to provide students with a safe, quiet space where they knew they would be welcome to engage in their chosen prayer, meditation or reflective practice.

What We Did

De-Stress Days Finals Support

- Developed to help highlight the need for mental health awareness and relaxation before finals
- Pilot program in Fall 2016; ongoing program including through the pandemic
- Quarterly program that runs 3-4 days BEFORE the start of the finals exam period
- Budget allocation of ~\$300/year for supplies
- Academic support: partner with Office of Disability Services (now Office of Accessibility)
- Student group collaboration: Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Alpha Phi Omega, Cantonese Cultural Club, Active Minds, Promotion of Animals Welfare Society
- Programming typically consists of a variety of both supervised and unsupervised activities:
- Scheduled events: Therapy dogs/animals, crafts (cookie decorating, shirt tie-dye, string art, mandolin rocks, calligraphy, neck wraps, stress balls, friendship bracelets), yoga & meditation group
- Unscheduled passive activities include: coloring sheets, scratch art, etc.



Reflection Space & Weekly Mindfulness Sessions

- Created to better fulfill the need for a space for students to pray, prior to the dedicated space students were utilizing the compact storage area for a quiet private area.
- Development started over AY 2017-18
- Partnered with the Office of Accessibility to expand the Reflection Space to also accommodate a Sensory Zone to support neurodivergent students
- Supplies such as rocking chairs, wall art and fidget spinners were donated; a small budget of \$100 provided rugs, a suggestion box and pillows
- Mindful sessions were created in 2017 in collaboration with the Student Development and Counseling Center
- Over 85 members, 15 minute sessions twice a week inclusive for the whole WPI community



COVID-19 Pandemic Adaptations

De-stress Days

- Activity sets such as sunflower growing kits and origami were provided in goodie bags; no face to face interactions
- QR Codes provided needed instructions
- Therapy Dogs were cancelled

Reflection Space

- Some furniture removed but space remained available during library open hours

Mindful Sessions

- Moved to a virtual platform through Zoom
- Sessions offered as extra credit for certain courses/campus programs

Library Staff Wellbeing

- Library staff mindful days were provided with an hour off for reflection, a movie night and card making for the elderly in Worcester



Assessment

- Attendance numbers are gathered for weekly Mindful Sessions and for quarterly De-Stress Days events, such as therapy dog visits.
- Participation in crafting events is estimated by the use of supplies and hand out items.
- Annual Library Student Survey includes questions on the De-Stress Day activities including
- A suggestion box is located in the Reflection space. Example suggestions include requests for specific types of furniture, such as bean bag chairs, as well as fidget devices.

Key Takeaways

- De-stress activities and acknowledgement is just as important for staff as it is for students
- Programming and creation of the new space help to create a sense of community and belonging, connecting students to the Library as a space
- Programming created new opportunities for collaboration and creating new partnerships with other campus offices and student organizations
- Events and programming engaged and attracted students who normally do not use the Library

Next Steps

- Increase the accessibility of de-stress and wellness focused programming by using the lessons learned from the pandemic to create more hybrid programs that can accommodate both in-person and virtual audiences
- Collaborate with Facilities and Dean of Students Office to expand the Reflection Space concept to an outdoor garden space on campus
- Develop more intentional assessment tools that are built into the programming
- Seek opportunities to expand partnerships across campus focusing on student and staff wellness