

Macy Bowman, Monica Gingerich, Steve Borrelli, Megan Gilpin, and Robin Tate

# Shelves of Support

## Penn State Libraries' Wellness Initiatives for Students

Over the last decade, there has been growing concern for the well-being of university students, especially in relation to the lasting negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. A decline in this population's overall mental health due to increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and stress has been observed<sup>1</sup> and students who don't feel a sense of belonging at their university are especially at risk.<sup>2</sup> Substance abuse issues across university campuses have also steadily increased.<sup>3</sup>

Penn State University's largest campus, University Park, is located in central Pennsylvania and enrolls approximately 50,000 students. Additionally, there are nineteen commonwealth campuses across the state, with student enrollments ranging from fewer than five hundred to more than six thousand students. Penn State also serves online students through world campus, where students can earn degrees fully online. Penn State Libraries support wellness initiatives across all twenty-one campuses throughout the commonwealth.

Pre-pandemic, 33 percent of students at Penn State's University Park campus reported that stress impacted their academics in the past year, while 19 percent reported that depression also affected them. Additionally, 76 percent of students had consumed alcohol in the past three months. Overall, 56 percent of students felt that Penn State prioritizes student well-being and health, recognizing the university's efforts in supporting them.<sup>4</sup> Following the pandemic, in 2024, 35 percent of students at Penn State's University Park campus reported that stress impacted their academics in the past year. Depression remained the same at 19 percent of students reporting that it affected their academics in the past year. Additionally, alcohol use in the past three months decreased post-pandemic to 73 percent of students. Alarmingly, only 42 percent of students felt that Penn State prioritizes student well-being and health, a 14 percent decrease from pre-pandemic data.<sup>5</sup>

This provides evidence that student well-being and health need more support for Penn State students. In 2020, academic libraries supporting well-being for students was identified by ACRL as one of the top trends of academic libraries.<sup>6</sup> While Penn State offers several wellness initiatives, the library has a unique role in supporting students' well-being. It is a place where students often spend long hours studying, chatting with friends, or simply relaxing. The library is both a connector and hub for campus resources and support. In this article, we'll explore our efforts to address these challenges and support student wellness.

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## Collections

One of the ways we support student wellness is through our collections. For example, Penn State Libraries locations across the commonwealth provide and promote leisure reading collections to reduce stress and enhance student wellness. In addition to the physical leisure reading collections, they also cater to ebook readers and audiobook listeners, providing an extensive and student-informed leisure collection via Libby. This increases access across all locations while also addressing user needs and preferences, such as font size, background color, and so forth. Penn State Libraries host a variety of programming and outreach and engagement events to promote leisure reading.

Some locations compete in a “Reading Rumble,” where students, faculty, and staff can sign up to log their reads (i.e., books, newspapers, podcasts, audiobooks, comics, etc.), and the campus with the most reads wins a prize. This challenge has also created several spin-off events—such as reading kick-off parties with food and swag and silent reading events where students meet up to read together—and has brought attention to the many leisure resources offered by the Penn State Libraries. Additional leisure reading programming includes “Mystery Date with a Book”/“Blind Date with a Book,” where students check out a book without knowing the title and with only a few clues about it, Banned Books Week displays, and book clubs.



Mystery Date with a Book table.

These efforts promote leisure reading while also supporting student well-being, creating community both within the library and throughout the campus. The success of integrating leisure reading into library programming is evident in the frequency at which leisure reading titles circulate throughout the campuses.

## Spaces and Events

The libraries also offer a variety of spaces across locations designed to contribute to and support individual wellness. These spaces include relaxation stations, sensory spaces, and areas designated for board game collections, crafts, and building blocks use. Sensory spaces to support neurodivergent students are a recent development at many library locations. These can include flexible seating (e.g., wobble stools, egg chairs, beanbag seating, and couches), weighted blankets, fidget toys, essential oils, dimmed lighting, and sound machines. Where space is limited or reserved to capacity, sensory



Sensory space in the Penn State Pattee and Paterno Libraries.

kits help fill the gap. These kits can be checked out by students and used wherever they wish in the library. They include earplugs, fidget toys, coloring supplies, and other small comfort items. At one of the smaller library locations, the sensory rooms and kits were reserved more than thirty times in just two weeks. The sensory rooms are highly sought out at all locations, creating a comfortable space for neurodivergent students and the general population alike.

In addition to sensory spaces, some Penn State Libraries locations have developed relaxation stations equipped with wellness reading collections, board game collections, puzzles, and craft supplies. To be inclusive of everyone, students also have the option to take “grab bags” of certain crafts or craft supplies to complete them where they feel the most comfortable. Crafting events include making vision boards, creating your own spa, flower pounding, canvas bag decorating, and much more. Crafting events have had huge success across the campus libraries; often a staff member with a hobby such as knitting, crocheting, painting, or button making will teach students how to do it. These events occur regularly throughout the semester and, depending on the craft, can have up to fifty participants at our smaller campuses. In addition to several crafting events, there are also game nights and trivia events. These game nights are hosted using board game collections available at several locations. Some locations are also offering PC gaming such as Dungeons & Dragons, with workshops on how to play and even clubs being formed.

A wide array of events are held throughout the campus libraries to support student well-being. One popular event at several locations has been therapy dog visits. These have been commonly used around mid-terms to help reduce stress for students at such a busy time in their semester. Individual library locations partner with therapy dog programs in their areas to bring in certified therapy dogs for students to spend time with, pet, and converse with their handlers. Additional events throughout the school year include author talks, poetry nights, speaker series on mental health and wellness, and “bling nights,” where students can decorate their belongings with decals and bling. It is important to note that many of these events are partnerships with other campus organizations, such as campus recreation; counseling, and psychological



Penn State student interacting with a therapy dog.

services (CAPS); student affair; tutoring centers; and the career center. The libraries serve as a connection point for students, and by holding events in partnership with other campus organizations, students are connected to the services and support resources they need.

The largest and most well-attended events that Penn State Libraries hosts are its de-stress events, which occur at the end of each semester or during finals week. De-stress events are geared toward reducing stress for students during finals, supporting their physical and mental well-being, and highlighting the ways in which the library can be supportive of students.

These events most often include snacks and drinks, extended library hours, crafts, coloring books, board games, and jigsaw puzzles. In addition to the most common activities, some locations include therapy dogs, VR meditation, yoga, tutoring sessions, and video games. Several of the crafts offered around winter final exams are holiday-themed, with informal workshops on how to make your own cookie dough, macrame ornaments, and holiday magnets. No matter the activity, de-stress events at all campuses have historically yielded large crowds of students. These offerings enhance relationships with library staff and provide a chance to relax and focus on something fun, while showing how the library can be used not only as a place for academic study, but also for fun and relaxation. Hosting these types of events showcases how dynamic and unique the campus libraries at Penn State are in delivering wellness focused community-building programming.



Students at a DeStress Fest event.

## What's Next?

Moving forward, Penn State Libraries has formed a commonwealth-wide committee, LibWell, to help build the brand for student well-being programming, collections, and spaces. This includes a color scheme and font that is easily recognizable by students across all locations highlighting current programming and forming an identity for all things student well-being. Going beyond visuals, LibWell also aims to facilitate program sharing through virtual events, planning materials, resources, and themes. Pursuing future collaborations with university stakeholders and student groups will allow LibWell to revise and refine programming and resources, keeping them relevant and meaningful as the libraries continue to find new ways to support the well-being of its students. With a commitment to innovation and collaboration, LibWell will strengthen the libraries' role as a key resource for student well-being and will help shape a library experience that prioritizes student well-being and fosters a culture of holistic support. ♪



Sensory room at Penn State DuBois.

## Notes

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