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The Library Cares About Me: Creating Distinct Spaces to Support Student Wellness and Mental Health

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ABSTRACT
In January 2021, the Christopher Center Library at Valparaiso University commenced a Mental Wellness Initiative to address the growing rates of neurodiversity and mental health concerns that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative started as a simple plan to increase mental wellness resources and then blossomed into a collaborative, cross-departmental approach to offering wellness spaces and programming within the library. The initial plan for the building was a single mindfulness space where students could relax and take a break from studies, but that quickly evolved into an initiative to include four unique spaces within the library, with one wellness space on each floor. In order to be cognizant of the culture of each floor and not disrupt the students who frequently use it, keeping these environments unique was essential for the process. The ability to create these spaces on each floor was greatly enhanced by collaboration with the university counseling center. Entering the second full semester that the spaces had been available for student use, vital feedback was collected from students. Though initial purchases were selected by the library and counseling center, moving forward, the initiative will be student-led based on feedback and focus groups. Throughout the entirety of the project, multi-faceted resources and spaces have been paramount to continuing the mission. With the rise in the neurodivergent student population, these spaces provide a non-judgmental and cost free space to help alleviate the stress of academic life.

INTRODUCTION
Valparaiso University is a small, private university serving undergraduate and graduate students located in northwest Indiana. The Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources sits in the center of campus and, in addition to the library, houses the Access and Accommodation Resource Center, the campus writing center, the Academic Success Center, the Grinders cafe, and an IT help desk, drawing a diverse population of students through its doors. The library consists of ten staff and administration and only seven faculty librarians. This may feel detrimental to embarking in new initiatives, but our small size allows us to more easily pivot to address student needs.

In January of 2021, the Dean of the Library charged two librarians to expand the resources available to students for mental wellness. After brainstorming, the librarians determined this project could expand beyond just resources, and we evolved it into its own enterprise. We first reached out to the counseling center to find best practices and see how the library could join the movement to support students’ mental wellness. The Counseling Center based their recommendations on the resources available in their own relaxation room as well as ways to expand access to other lesser-known mental health resources available to students. These recommendations came in three areas: The first was the recommendation of light therapy glasses...
that allowed for ease of use and integration into the students’ study process at the library; the second was the expansion of stations hosting the TAO Connect (Therapy Assisted Online) (Benton et al. 2016) platform that allows student access to evidence-based CBT treatments and multiple different mental health screening tools such as the Beck's Depression Scale, and finally, access to self-directed activities such as guided meditation, coloring sheets and fidget toys to allow students to engage in self-regulation as needed. The Counseling Center also highlighted the benefit of semi-private to private spaces to aid in the stabilization of increased anxiety or the prevention of panic attacks or acute distress (Bladek 2021; Brown 2018; Cavanagh et al. 2013). Our first iteration was to create a single space, but we soon evolved our plan to create distinct spaces throughout the entire library. In past informal observations of student use, we noted that many students had a favorite library floor that they used almost exclusively. This is likely due to the unique environment of each of the floors. For example, the first floor is the loudest floor, whereas the third and fourth floors are designated quiet floors and have a calmer atmosphere. Students gather on the first floor for group studying, to pick up a coffee or snack at the cafe, or visit other academic partners housed within the building. Secondly, as a space, the library is not exclusive to academic pursuits. It is not uncommon for students to gather at the library for socializing purposes, taking breaks, and adding spaces for mental wellness, demonstrating our commitment to the student holistically (Hinchcliffe and Wong 2010). The positive impact of taking breaks has been well documented (Bennion et al. 2018; Blasche et al. 2021; Hoover et al. 2022; Sonnentag et al. 2017).

We aimed to instill a culture that was supportive as well as proactive. The idea of creating distinctive spaces on each floor of the library had two primary goals: (1) to make the spaces easily accessible and distinct to the ethos of each floor and (2) to demonstrate how the library can offer more than academic assistance. We want the library to be a place where they can find research help, to be sure, but knowing that this is not the primary reason why students may use the building, we want them to be comfortable in their choice. We started thinking of how the library could provide that level of comfort— in essence, how to become the campus’s living room.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental effect on students’ mental wellness. In many cases, students were abruptly relocated back to their homes away from campus. Affected by these transitions, over 30% of students reported a negative impact on their mental health (Conrad 2021; Witteveen 2023; Zhu 2021). Statistically, nearly a quarter (23%) of young adults have experienced symptoms of anxiety and or depression in 2022 (National Center for Health Statistics 2022). As campuses cautiously reopened, it quickly became evident that mental health and wellness would need to be addressed by the university. According to an April 2021 survey from the American Council on Education, the “mental health of students” was the most frequently cited pressing issue by college and university presidents (Taylor et al. 2021). Additionally, according to Salimi et al. (2023), “Many college students need help with their mental health challenges but are often reluctant to get it or unsure how to commence the process” (2023:47). As the prevalence of mental health difficulties on campus and the expectations for more resources increases, many colleges and universities have moved towards a more holistic view of wellness.

Student expectations for more resources expand beyond the responsibilities of university counseling centers and health centers and demand a collaborative approach across campus. Though counseling services are broadly offered on campuses and produce positive results, individual counseling to large numbers of students may not be feasible, thus requiring additional interventions (Brown 2018). This need makes academic libraries a prime place to house mental wellness spaces and resources. Academic libraries are often centrally located, visited by a diverse population, and, in most cases, have longer open hours than other academic buildings (Benedetti et al. 2020; Bladek 2021; Brewster and Cox 2022). In addition to the unique position on campus, libraries are not affiliated with any particular group and thus are seen as “an inclusive and impartial space” (Brewster and Cox 2022:34). The mere fact that the patronage of the library is diverse broadens accessibility to mental wellness resources to a population that may not normally seek out such resources as well as offers a de-stigmatized, neutral location. Students who may feel uncomfortable visiting
a campus counseling center for fear of an attached stigma can easily access the library without any perceived scrutiny. As summarized by Ramsay and Aagard (2018), “Academic librarians are natural connectors, guiding their users to not only resources, but also connecting them to people, services, and spaces that can provide assistance” (p. 334); the library is an ideal space to meet these needs. The addition of spaces to promote relaxation or mental wellness is not a new concept. For several years, libraries have added temporary spaces within the building to offer refuge during midterms and finals. During these high-stress times, libraries often host a variety of programs and activities to promote “de-stressing.” Events such as yoga and therapy dog visits, as well as passive activities such as coloring, puzzles, and leisure reading are frequently used as resources to help students cope with their stress (Casucci and Baluchi 2019; Cox 2022).

Montgomery and Miller (2011) successfully predicted that the intrinsic role of the library is as a place rather than the traditional storehouse of resources or the only place to get research help. Students no longer need to visit the library building for resources due to the library’s virtual services, but we would like them to want to visit. Ray Oldenburg (1999) coined the term “third place” in his seminal work *The Great Good Place*, meaning the place outside of work or home where people chose to go. This third place is a place of comfort, where one might build a unique community and hopefully find a space to relax. It is informal, and there is no set time to be there and no schedule to be kept (Oldenburg 1999).

To expand on the initiatives of wellness in the libraries, many institutions have added dedicated spaces or resources to their library to promote holistic wellness. For example, starting in 2014, the University of Warwick library offered a variety of wellness services to their students. Their initiative featured crafts, physical activities such as yoga and stationary bikes, music lessons, and visits from therapy dogs (Brewerton and Woolley 2016). The Louisiana State University Library opened their “Relaxation Room” in 2016. The room was envisioned to host “puzzles, games, coloring sheets and origami materials” and act as a place where students can “relax, connect with other students, and retreat from the stress of academia” (Morgan 2020:104). The West Campus Library at Tulsa Community College dedicated a space with soft lighting to promote peaceful moods, and the library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign created their “meditation rooms,” which encourage students to embark on meaningful activities such as yoga, self-regulation, prayer, or mindfulness between classes (Pionke 2020; Watcher 2018). Additional resources and stress-relieving activities popular in academic libraries include but are not limited to Lego® Stations, Zen gardens, Play-Doh® availability, napping spaces and gratitude jars (Rourke 2020:13; Wise 2018).

Trends in retention are frequently studied and explore how higher education institutions can improve student success and retention, especially within the first year. Studies have shown that libraries and library programming can offer a positive effect on student retention (Bell 2008; DeVille and Sughrue 2023; Jones and Mastrorilli 2022; O’Kelly 2017; Oliveira 2018; Soria et al. 2013). Additionally, as stated by Nance (2022), “A growing number of studies have identified an undeniable link between student mental health distress or ill-being and lower academic achievement and student retention (p. 166).” Studies have also shown a link between improving student well-being, their sense of belonging on campus, and retention, especially in the first year (Kahu et al. 2022; Olfert et al. 2022; Saunders-Scott et al. 2017). Wellness initiatives include both programming and spaces, and libraries frequently try to design their spaces around student needs. When libraries take student needs into account, these “unique spaces contribute significantly to student retention, success, and completion and allow an advocacy for potentially underserved and underrepresented students” (Godfrey et al. 2017:376). Designing wellness spaces in an academic library could help foster this sense of belonging and help to improve student well-being. The evidence shows that libraries combining mental wellness initiatives could have a positive effect on student retention and are well worth the investment.

**CASE STUDY**

**Process of Creating the Spaces**

Student stress does not follow a calendar. The Library provides students with stress relief programs during our DeStress week before finals each semester. These
events historically have been well-attended and well-received, therefore extending some de-stress events beyond a week, and creating unique spaces showed our increased dedication to support student mental health. We wanted to provide some level of stress relief throughout the year. We researched and collaborated with the University Counseling Center, the student group Active Minds, the Campus Suicide Prevention Advocacy Group and the Social Work Department and grew in our understanding of how to support students holistically. We began our research into wellness spaces at other academic libraries.

Our argument for such spaces in our library was that the Christopher Center is one of the major hubs on campus where almost all students find themselves at some point during the semester—it seemed like the most logical location. The University Counseling Center, while in demand, is located in a more discrete and isolated location. With the late hours the library is open, combined with how many students in the building may be experiencing some sort of stress and anxiety around college life, these spaces have the opportunity to reach students effectively and efficiently and at a more opportune time than any other campus location. Creating a space for reflection and re-centering is important for our students and encourages them to take a break in a way that does not require much more than walking a few feet. It also provides them with the opportunity to try out and utilize resources they may not have sought on their own. By removing obstacles such as finances or time, we are more likely to expose students to evidence-based activities that can continue to help them even as they graduate and leave campus. After we put together the specifics of what we thought would work best for our students and our space, our proposal had to go through several levels of approval.

To change the purpose of any space in the library requires the approval of the university’s space planning committee. In order to make our best case to the committee, we put together an extensive packet that included detailed explanations of rationale, funding, timeline, impact statements and purposes, and collaborations, all backed up with references. We described each space and the possible reconfigurations and changes we wanted to make, including a quick visual mockup of what each space would look like.

While we thought our intentions were clear and unassailable, there were two areas of pushback. The university space planning committee had concerns (such as having computers on quiet floors and the stations blocking window access) about some of the proposed changes, but we addressed those concerns with additional changes and statements from the Assistant Director of Prevention and Wellness Education and the Director of Counseling Services/Professor of Psychology and formal approval was granted. The second instance of pushback was from within the library, which included anticipated student complaints, extra workload, and overall trepidation of changing spaces. After these concerns came to the surface, we addressed them directly. Using what we had put together in the space planning packet to demonstrate the benefits and ensure the workload would fall to the initiating librarians, we were able to alleviate the concerns. Since the wellness initiative has been put into place, these initial concerns have not come to fruition.

Initially, purchases were funded by a grant, from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which was awarded to the University Counseling Center and shared with the library. We also received an additional internal grant from the Valparaiso University Guild, an organization affiliated with the university that gives funds to support the students’ physical and spiritual welfare. Through careful budgeting and the reuse of previously acquired materials, we have managed to remain within budget thus far. For example, rather than purchasing new soft seating, we repurposed some from elsewhere in the building, and we used computers from university surplus. The Dean of the Library is also committed to this wellness initiative and has set aside funding for its maintenance.

Description of the Spaces

Using retention trends with wellness spaces as a selling point, we raised the stakes by requesting to create distinct wellness spaces on all four floors of our library, something not found in the literature. This was a selling point for internal and external buy-in. Not only would this allow students to not have to travel from the floor they may be on to take a wellness break, but it would give several different

1 Funds were received under grant number 1H79SM048093 from SAMHSA. The views, opinions and content of this publication are those of the authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of CMHS, SAMHSA, or HHS, and should not be construed as such.
options for wellness breaks, from a potentially loud play space to a virtually silent individual station for meditation; nothing had to change in the environment to accommodate the spaces. Having these wellness spaces fully integrated onto every floor also helps to eliminate the stigma associated with mental health – these spaces are not hidden away but normalized.

As previously mentioned, the first floor is the library's loudest floor due to its collaborative nature. It holds the media and leisure reading collections as well as other building partners. In order to fit in with this noisy and collaborative environment, the play space was placed here. This wellness space includes a Lego® table and a large selection of tabletop games, which were selected by student suggestions (see Figure 1). The materials selected support the social environment where students can interact with each other freely. Since this area borders the Access and Accommodations office, staff were consulted to make sure this play space would not impede their duties. Students have been observed playing the tabletop games, including checking them out and moving them to other floors. The Lego® table also gets quite a bit of use.

The second floor is the library's most visible floor, where the circulation desk, library classrooms, and most librarian offices are located. It is also the primary entrance into the library, and it is connected to the Arts & Sciences building, which is heavily trafficked. It is not a quiet floor, yet it is also not as noisy as the first floor, and, most importantly, it had a decent amount of space that could be used for wellness. The library's microform room was an enclosed
space close to the circulation desk. The need for microform has dwindled, and the room still contains cabinets of microform, but it was otherwise an open space. We seized the opportunity to turn this underutilized space into a more comforting environment tailored for relaxation. After re-homing the microform reading machine and computer, we reconfigured the space with the purpose of making it into the “library’s living room.” We reused tables, soft seating, and lamps from around the library and added Moon Pods®, fluorescent light covers, blankets, sound machines, a Zen garden, a light therapy lamp, soft lighting with floor lamps, coloring, and mindfulness sheets (see figure 2). Students frequently use the room for studying as well as relaxing; what we have observed them using the most is the soft lighting.

The third and fourth floors have the same configuration, as they are the library’s quiet floors, and the wellness space matches this volume. These spaces are the smallest ones developed and fit within a small area of the floor’s alcove (see Figure 3).

Each station consists of a smaller table, chair, and a desktop computer locked onto TAO Connect (Therapy Assistance Online, offering meditation and mindfulness exercises), to which the university has a subscription. Because we wanted to keep the ethos of the quiet floor (which is completely student self-policed), the computer has a set of headphones permanently attached. The space also has aesthetic wellness components, such as a salt lamp, artificial succulents, and artwork. Unlike the first

Figure 3: The identical third and fourth floor station includes mindfulness activities in a quiet space.

Figure 4: Lego® table engagement over the period of a few months.
and second floors, there was not an immediate initial plan for the third and fourth floors. However, having spaces for individual students is important for the initiative, and creating small stations on the quiet floors was ideal for this.

Every floor has two things in common: a binder featuring guided mindfulness worksheets, meditations, and music (links to on-theme Spotify playlists) and a "Box of Breaktime Fun." The box contains items for a quick distraction (fidget poppers and other toys, stress balls, aroma putty, motivational cards) and for practicality (earplugs). For a breakdown of the spaces, including reasoning, costs and usage, see Appendix A.

**Student Response**

In attempts to determine what resources are needed and desired by students, we collected and analyzed feedback and usage data.

The first iteration of data was collected through ethnographic observation. We created a schedule of walk-bys to gauge how many students were using the spaces at various times. There were noticeable limitations to this method, considering we were only able to record observations Monday through Friday during general working hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. We conducted scheduled walk-bys for two months, walking past four times a day (10:15 a.m., 1 p.m., 3 p.m., 4:30 p.m.). Due to limited staffing, we were unable to observe all four floors, so we opted to observe the first and second floors as those spaces are more group oriented. We wanted to respect the privacy of those using the individual stations.

In our observational walk-bys, the first floor was the most difficult to observe student use. In 148 total walk-bys, we only observed students actively at the space 2% of the time. However, we did document changes to the Lego Table (evidence that pieces had been moved or added) with photographs and determined that the space was being engaged at a much higher rate than observed (see Figure 4).

The second floor was the most likely to find student use during walk-bys. Of the 148 observed times, students were occupying the space 57% of the time. As previously mentioned, limitations to this method did not take into
account evening or weekend use and only accounted for a small portion of the day. Additionally, due to limited staffing, there were occasions when the scheduled time was missed or delayed.

After collecting observational data about how the spaces were used, we generated a passive survey (Appendix B) that was located in all four of the wellness locations. The IRB approved survey inquired about general demographic information, whether students had used more than one space in the library, which space they used the most/least, how much time was spent in the space, what was the draw of the space, what would bring them in more often, their thoughts about mental health spaces in the library, and what other resources they would like to see in the spaces. The survey was available for six weeks at each space, and once the students filled them out, they brought them to the circulation desk, where they received a small sensory toy for participating.

The survey conducted used demographic information to determine the population using the spaces. Thirty-nine responses were received (see Table 1). The results showed that freshman and sophomore students were represented the most as using the space 35.9% and 28.2% respectively. Upperclassmen (juniors, seniors, and graduate students) made up the remaining 35.9% of survey respondents. We are hopeful that the higher rate of use by freshmen and sophomore students may be useful for student retention since freshman are the most vulnerable for attrition during breaks and semesters.

We were also curious if all four spaces would be justified in their creation or if students would be drawn to the largest and most elaborate space. The survey responses indicated that all four spaces were utilized by students (see Figure 5). Though the second floor space was the most used, the results indicated that there were students who preferred and used others, or responded that they used multiple spaces equally. This correlates with our initial intention that having unique spaces corresponding to the ethos of each floor would promote student use. In fact, 56% of survey takers indicated that they used exclusively one space in the library.

We also received qualitative feedback from students on how they responded to the library offering the dedicated mental wellness spaces (see Table 2). It was clear that students appreciated having these spaces in the library, compared to other places on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Years of Students</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Student feedback regarding dedicated mental wellness spaces in the library.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you feel about the dedicated mental wellness spaces being available in the library?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“College can be very stressful and having a place to relax in the middle of all this chaos is like a privilege.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think it’s great because it is easier to access and it normalizes taking care of your mental health.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I like it better in the library because I am always here and [it’s] less obvious if you need help with mental health.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“These spaces allow me to do things on my own time, my own way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It feels a lot more accessible and less intimidating to go in the library than the counseling center.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s great to have them in the first place, but it would be better to have them everywhere.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I love it here because most students come here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think it is a great place because students don’t feel intimidated to come here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I love that it starts to de-stigmatize anxieties and stress.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 6. Student moods after using spaces.

Figure 7. Reasons for visiting the space.
At the end of spring semester 2023, a second IRB approved survey (Appendix C) was made available to students who utilize the spaces. The intention of this survey was to determine if the spaces affected the moods of the students who used them, in addition to more detailed data on how long students spent in the spaces and why they visited the area on that particular day. The survey was set up as a pictorial Likert scale ranging from a red unhappy face (1) to a bright green smiling face (5) for the first two questions. The first Likert smiling scale inquired how the student was feeling prior to visiting the wellness space, while the second scale inquired how the student felt after spending time in the area. The third question inquired how much time the student spent there during the specific visit and the fourth and final question offered multiple choice answers on what brought them to the space for the visit in question.

Once again, the survey was placed in each space, and the students would take the completed survey to the circulation desk for a prize. The second survey was administered for two weeks at the end of the spring semester for two main reasons. The first reason was to space the two surveys a semester apart and ideally eliminate survey fatigue. Secondly, based on past experience, near the final exam period, a more concentrated number of students visit the space, therefore expanding the population of those who could complete the survey. By the end of the spring semester, 17 responses were collected. Despite a small sample size, we received responses directly from our target audience. The results found that 94% of participants cited that their moods improved while using the wellness spaces in the library (see Figure 6). Only one respondent indicated that their mood neither improved nor deteriorated, but overall rated their mood at a four out of five.

The second inquiry was how much time students spent in the spaces in order to improve their mood. The large majority (65%) of survey participants responded that they visited the area between 0-15 minutes and their moods improved. 24% of students preferred to spend more time in the space, citing that they spent more than one hour in the space.

The third data point we surveyed was why students enjoy visiting the space. Students were invited to select as many of the provided responses as they liked as well as write in “other” reasons not listed. 76% of the students cited that they used the space to take advantage of the atmosphere (soft lighting, soft seating and decor). A close second, 65% of respondents stated that they visited the space to change their mood (see Figure 7).

One outcome of the spaces and the student responses was unexpected. Despite taking on more work and responsibility, the librarians responsible felt a boost in our own morale. At a time when we were taking on a higher workload, and likely to be susceptible to vocational awe we instead felt re-energized (Agostino and Cassidy 2019; Ettarh 2018).

We recognize the limitations of our small sample size and would like to continue to gather additional data for future research. However, we do feel the data we have has high salience due to surveying the highly specific and targeted population of students opting into the spaces. This decision led to data collection that was more akin to a focus group than a survey of the general population of patrons, many who may not be aware of, or currently in need of, the wellness spaces. Data collection began immediately, as we needed real-time student feedback to continue to develop the initiative.

Figure 8: Interactive displays: Post-it® Art Gallery (left) and Post-it® Positivity (right).
Discussion

One priority when creating these spaces was ensuring that students’ opinions, needs and desires would remain the benchmark for future developments. While we build on previous knowledge and expertise, we also honor students’ own knowledge about what they require. Therefore, internal changes that the students were making in the spaces were also noted, adjusted, and, in some cases, funded to make sure the spaces had a high impact for students. When the spaces were first opened for student use, we observed that some of the decor was moved to different places. Initially, we returned items to their previous locations, but within a week, students relocated items to desired locations. For example, when we noticed a salt lamp was continuously being moved to a different floor, we purchased another to have one in both locations.

A second goal was to ensure that the spaces remained original and updated. We have accomplished this in the following ways: adding new resources, cycling resources, and adding semester-long displays. The library frequently adds new sensory toys to the various locations and replaces items that are missing. Even a simple addition of adding copies of a new coloring sheet has a high return on investment. As for cycling, once a semester, new mindfulness worksheets are added to the binders, and worksheets that are unused are saved to be reintroduced in future semesters. Lastly, in the second-floor wellness space, a semester-long “display” is created via student participation. The first semester display boasted a “Post-it® Art Gallery,” whereas the second semester hosted “Post-it® Positivity” (see Figure 8).

Both displays were highly interactive and well-received. Display topics will be changed each semester with the intention of keeping students engaged.

Due to the nature of resources being freely available and not restricted, the initiative accounted for an expected amount of loss of materials. Some materials were intended to be taken and used (i.e., coloring sheets, mindfulness worksheets, earplugs, self-care cards); however, certain materials were intended to stay and be available for use by multiple students (aroma putty, sensory toys). To track and budget for the loss of materials and consumables, a bi-weekly inventory of the spaces is completed. This inventory period also ensures that spaces remain relevant and offer adequate resources. Beneficial to the library, conducting an inventory also acts as an indicator of what resources are often used and in which spaces. This data can help with future planning, expansions, and adjustments.

Some maintenance of the spaces falls directly into the responsibility of the two librarians leading the initiative. This includes the hygiene of the area and washing the soft-lines such as covers for the Moon Pods®, blankets, and pillows. The soft-line materials are washed weekly, and one of the best investments was purchasing backup blankets and covers so that laundry could be completed over a weekend without leaving the spaces void of resources.

FUTURE PLANS

The next step for the library’s initiative is converting two study rooms on the third and fourth floors into semi-private wellness spaces. Based on student feedback, students called for additional spaces that were more private. Plans for these new spaces include soft seating, sound-reducing egg chairs, sensory resources and TAO Connect stations. These spaces could be useful for students with telehealth appointments, as there is a door and the ability to take a private call. These space proposals have passed the campus space planning committee and are awaiting funding and free time to transform them. Once the new spaces are established, the counseling center will help market these spaces as telehealth-friendly. Future plans also include gathering more student data, including hosting a focus group and assessing more student use of the spaces.

The library’s wellness spaces have been held up as a model for the rest of the university for those who want similar spaces in their departments/buildings, as the Dean of the Library has been told on multiple occasions during administrative meetings. Currently, there are similar spaces in the Brauer Museum of Art, the Office of Multicultural Programs, and the Counseling Center, with the prospect of new spaces in the College of Engineering, the College of Nursing and Health Professions, and the building that houses the Social Work, Education, and Psychology departments. We hope that more collaboration can occur, even when the spaces are not inside the library.

BEST PRACTICES

The most useful tool in creating wellness spaces in a library is student input. Student input should be sought early on in the planning process to ensure that the spaces represent their needs. This can be achieved through
working with student groups, gathering input from student employees and offering small incentives for participation in surveys. Student input can come in a variety of forms, which may include students changing the spaces to meet their preferences. Allowing these changes gives the students ownership over their level of comfort. Students also tend to appreciate finding the creative and unexpected in their library. Items like Moon Pods® or toys such as a Lego® table may seem out of place in an academic library, but this appeals to their desire to unwind.

A second consideration is space in the library. While real estate in the library may be limited, this does not have to be an obstacle. Inventory spaces that are not frequently used and consider repurposing the space for student use. This may lead to an opportunity to prioritize lower priority projects that impact space. For example, we were able to create 15 feet² of space by weeding cassette tapes from the collection, a project that had been avoided. Looking at the library holistically through a student-centered lens, it is possible to see wellness space in unexpected places. This space does not have to be large, even using a space the size of a table and chair is sufficient. Any space is preferable to none.

It is very important to the library and this initiative that all of these spaces were not restricted; we wanted to remove any barriers that might continue stigmatizing mental health. This is being taken into account with our new semi-private spaces in former study rooms. This commitment extends beyond students to anyone who can use the space. All of our wellness spaces are open to all patrons of our library: students, faculty, staff, and community members. We have observed that most of our users are students, which is unsurprising as they are our main constituents. Faculty and staff are aware of the spaces, but we have seen little to no use from these populations. Due to our status as a private academic library, we have not seen many community members use the spaces, but they would certainly be welcome.

Funding can range from minimal to expansive and can feasibly fit any library’s budget. If the budget is minimal, high-impact, cost-effective resources could include wellness/mindfulness worksheets, coloring sheets with art supplies, a resource guide, and repurposed soft seating and lighting. Seeking external funding can help make the case for these spaces with library administration, as well as being able to afford additional resources outside the scope of library funding. Opportunities for outside funding could include state funding, internal university grants and awards, or discretionary funds from other departmental partners. Wellness spaces can easily use supplies and resources already owned by the library. From what we have observed, we would have made a difference in the second floor space with only the addition of soft lighting, which was a total cost of $70. The goal of this initiative is not to simply provide fancy wellness resources but rather to give a dedicated environment for student wellness. This demonstrates that the library cares for the students not just academically but holistically.

Be prepared to make a case with evidence not only for library administration, but other university entities as well. There can be many bureaucratic steps, such as approval from campus administration and university space planning committees. In making our case, we found that a simple visual mockup of our plan for the space and citing recent literature supporting similar initiatives helped the committee(s) understand what we wanted to do. This collected evidence can also be helpful when making the case internally in the library.

Avoiding silos is important for a wellness initiative. Naturally, working with mental health providers on campus can provide evidence-based practices and offer extensive knowledge that might not be in a librarian’s skill set. Do not limit this only to the counseling center—act broadly to include collaborators, including departments such as social work or psychology, access and accommodations, student groups and other mental-health-focused groups. For example, we worked with Valpo’s Campus Suicide Prevention Advocacy Group with funding and resources.

Not everything will go as expected. Early on in our initiative, we purchased light therapy glasses on recommendation from the counseling center. Due to the price point, the library needed to place them on reserve, and students had to check them out. This necessary barrier led to low circulation. To combat this, we purchased two less expensive light therapy lamps that were both barrier-free (located in the second and fourth floor spaces) and easier to use. Once again, evolution is key; be prepared to sunset materials and ideas that do not work with your population.
CONCLUSION

Overall, we learned that students appreciated any efforts on the library’s part to promote mental wellness, and realistically, any level of dedicated space is worth the investment. These spaces can easily be added to any library if the determination is present; the scope or cost of the space does not have to be grand. Something as small as providing a blanket can have a meaningful impact on students. Despite the initial resistance, the spaces have been well-utilized and worth the challenge. Students appreciated all the distinct wellness spaces within the library, and as shown in our data, many of the students were loyal to their preferred spaces. Students also appreciated that these spaces were within the library, citing them for ease of access and de-stigmatization of mental health care. Our goal was this normalization. As one student said, “I think it’s great because it is easier to access, and it normalizes taking care of your mental health.”

This new and changed environment, focused on mental health, can be where the students can find comfort and belonging. As another student stated, “I really enjoy having these spaces on campus as I feel like it shows how much Valpo cares about their students.”

REFERENCES


## Appendix A. Breakdown of Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floor / Ethos</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
<th>Materials and Cost</th>
<th>Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First floor</strong>&lt;br&gt; Ethos: Collaborative, High-volume, social</td>
<td>Legos®, toys and board games support the collaborative and social environment where students can interact with each other freely.</td>
<td>Lego® table: $99</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Storage ottomans for Legos®: $20/ottoman</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Board games: $25 (average)</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fidgets: $1/fidget (average)</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness binder: $2/binder</td>
<td>Low use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second floor</strong>&lt;br&gt; Ethos: Collaborative, High-traffic, Mid-volume</td>
<td>The second floor had the largest available space which is also the most secluded. This makes it possible to solely use soft-lighting and offer comfortable and cozy resources.</td>
<td>Moon Pods®: $299/chair</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sound machines: $30</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Soft lighting: $15 (average)</td>
<td>Very high use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Zen garden: $5</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Zen Water Art Board: $28</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repurposed soft seating: $0</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fidgets: $1/fidget (average)</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness binder: $2/binder</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pillows/Blankets: $5/pillow or blanket</td>
<td>High use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Light therapy lamp: $30/lamp</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third / Fourth floor</strong>&lt;br&gt; Ethos: Quiet, Individual study</td>
<td>These spaces are located in quiet spaces in the library, thus they need to be suited for individuals.</td>
<td>TAO Connect: University pays for subscription</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness binder: $2/binder</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fidgets: $1/fidget (average)</td>
<td>Very high use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Items at circulation desk</strong></td>
<td>These are more expensive items that need to be checked out.</td>
<td>Glasses: $200/pair</td>
<td>Low use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Weighted Blanket: $50/blanket</td>
<td>Medium use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B. Feedback on Use of Space

1. What is your role on campus?

Student       Staff       Faculty       Other:

2. If you are a student, what is your current year?

Freshman     Sophomore     Junior     Senior     Graduate     N/A

3. Have you used at least one (1) of the mindfulness space in the library?

Yes          No

4. Have you used more than one (1) of the mindfulness spaces in the library?

Yes          No

5. Which space did you use the MOST?

First Floor: Interactive area [Legos®, Boardgames]
Second Floor: Mindfulness space [Soft seating, soft lighting, sound machine]
Third Floor: TAO Connect Stations
Fourth Floor: TAO Connect Stations

6. How much time did you spend in the space?

7. What features draw you to this space?

8. Which space did you use the LEAST?

First Floor: Interactive area [Legos®, Boardgames]
Second Floor: Mindfulness space [Soft seating, soft lighting, sound machine]
Third Floor: TAO Connect Stations
Fourth Floor: TAO Connect Stations

9. What would bring you to this space more often?

10. How do you feel about the dedicated mental wellness spaces being available in the library as opposed to other spaces on campus like the Counseling Center?

11. What are additional mental wellness resources and tools that you feel would be useful to other VU community members that the library could provide?

Thank you for your participation! Please bring back this survey to the circulation desk, and pick out a small reward as a thank you!
Appendix C. Effect of Space Use

1. Prior to coming to this wellness space today, how were you feeling?

2. After spending time in this wellness space, how are you feeling?

3. How much time did you spend in this wellness space today?

   0-15 minutes   15-30 minutes   30-60 minutes   1 hour or more

4. What brought you into this wellness space today? Select all that apply.

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_To relax</td>
<td>_To take a nap</td>
<td>_To meet with classmates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_To take a break from studying</td>
<td>_To use TAO Connect (3rd/4th floor)</td>
<td>_To change my mood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_Had time between classes</td>
<td>_To use Lego® Table (1st floor)</td>
<td>_To take advantage of the atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_To study</td>
<td>_To use board games</td>
<td>_Other (please describe below)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_To alleviate stress</td>
<td>_To use the materials in the space</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>