



# Effectively Instituting a Longitudinal Wellness Curriculum



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## Background

Medical schools across the US are recognizing the unique stressors of medical training and many have adopted wellness programs to combat the trend of increasing rates of student depression and burnout. The ideal strategies, however, for addressing deficits in the curriculum and improving student wellness have not been well established. At the University of Connecticut Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine, students have access to a variety of wellness offerings. It has yet to be determined how effective these services are at meeting students' needs.

This project sought to:

1. Identify the wellness resources currently available at UConn
2. Assess students' perception of current wellness resources
3. Identify areas for improvement and develop new initiatives to address identified deficits
4. Publicize and promote existing and new wellness events and resources

## Student Wellness Committee

The University of Connecticut Student Wellness Committee was created in 2015 following the appointment of a Director of Student Wellness by the medical school leadership. The Director position was created to collaborate with the Associate Deans to incorporate wellness throughout the curriculum and plan events to promote wellness, balance, and professional development. Medical students with an interest in wellness were recruited to assist the Director and other faculty members in achieving these goals. Since then the committee has grown to include 15 medical/dental students and three core faculty physicians. In 2016, the committee created a formalized leadership structure and appointed student leaders for several subcommittees: curriculum development, mentoring, peer support, physical health, integrative medicine, and communications. In an effort to guide initial committee actions, a survey was designed and distributed to all medical students (107 respondents) that sought to assess students' perception of the wellness resources already in place including "Med Families", mental health services, and integrative medicine events and gather ideas for ways to improve those resources.

Results from this initial survey indicated:

- 30% of students rated their mental health as "poor" or "very poor" in the previous two weeks
- 32% of students sought mental health services from UConn during their time as a student
  - Of these, 78% listed their experience with these services as "very poor" to "average"
- 49% of students felt that Med Families met their expectations "not at all" or "less than I hoped" citing issues such as poor student attendance, scheduling difficulties, and large family size as common frustrations

Based on these results, the committee decided to focus its reform efforts on:

1. Improving accessibility and diversity of options available to students seeking mental health services
2. Making minor changes to the Med Family program to improve students' experiences
3. Collaborating with the Integrative Medicine Interest Group to support their efforts

Ultimately, our goal was (and continues to be) to develop a comprehensive, coordinated, and longitudinal student wellness plan that would meet the diverse needs of all students.

## Resources

The Wellness Committee looked to several pre-existing models at other medical schools throughout the United States for inspiration including:

- Vanderbilt Wellness Program
- AMA Medical Education Innovation Challenge
- AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium

## Final Conclusions

Although individual programs and events are important components of a student wellness plan, the ultimate goal of the Wellness Committee is to foster a culture of wellness among students, faculty, and staff so that wellness becomes a central, rather than supplemental, part of the curriculum. During the first two years of medical school this may take the form of a longitudinal curriculum that provides students with concrete self-care skills including resiliency training, periodic mental health checks, opportunities for regular physical activity, and creation of a network of supportive relationships with other students, faculty and staff. During third and fourth year, the emphasis could switch to carve out protected time for wellness in the midst of the stressors of clerkship rotations and residency applications. The wellness skills that the students gain through this curriculum would then readily translate to residency training to reduce burnout symptoms as they move forward in their careers.

## Student Wellness Programming

### Wellness Curriculum

- ❖ **Existing Resources:**
  - Overview of counseling services during new student orientation (MS1)
  - Half-day session on student wellness in clinical medicine course (MS2)
  - Integrative Medicine Interest Group offerings: yoga, guided meditation, pet therapy, "Wellness Night"
- ❖ **New Initiatives:**
  - LAUNCH (MS1): 4-hour session including presentations on wellness promotion, resiliency training, nutrition, physical activity, self-care and self-compassion during new student orientation
  - LEAP (MS1): Evening program of workshops including acupuncture, self-hypnosis, and yoga followed by a healthy vegetarian meal
  - Home Week "Morning of Wellness" (MS3): 3-hour session that included a keynote address and student-selected workshops including acupuncture, CBT, self-hypnosis, MBSR, lifestyle medicine, art therapy, and yoga followed by roundtable discussions facilitated by MS4s on a variety of topics (e.g. "How to handle the difficult preceptor")
  - Intern Bootcamp (MS4): TBD
  - Collaborated with MBSR instructor to discuss possibility of longitudinal MBSR training
- ❖ **Recommendations:**
  - Divide LAUNCH curriculum into several 1-hour presentations during orientation and LEAP periods
  - Allow MS3s a limited number of personal days to be used without penalty during third year clerkships
  - Create wellness incentive programs (e.g. badges for participating in wellness activities redeemable for prizes or rewards)

### Physical Wellness

- ❖ **Existing Resources:**
  - Student gym: located in administrative building separate from academic building, open on weekdays from 3-11pm, staffed by students
  - Subsidized gym memberships at local gyms
  - Integrative Medicine Interest Group offerings: free weekly yoga classes, annual 3-day retreat to Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, "Cooking Healthy on a Student Budget" (co-sponsored by AMSA)
  - Dance Club offerings: free monthly dance classes
  - Student government sponsored annual events: ski trip, white water rafting trip
  - Student-organized intramural sports clubs: basketball, soccer, tennis, hockey
- ❖ **New Initiatives:**
  - Formed subcommittee on intramural sports to focus on formalizing and increasing offerings
  - Surveyed medical and dental students to assess student interest in specific sports
- ❖ **Recommendations:**
  - Continue to support offerings by student organizations by providing financial support
  - Improve quality and accessibility of on-campus fitness center (plans are in place to relocate the fitness center to the academic wing of the medical school in Fall 2017)
  - Expand hours of on-campus fitness center by making it key and card accessible
  - Offer exercise classes on-campus (e.g. spinning, strength training, Zumba);
  - Provide fitness assessments or personal trainers
  - Offer standing desks or stationary bikes to reduce time spent sitting during the academic years

### Online Resources

- ❖ **Existing Resources:**
  - Database of wellness resources including links to documents, audio files, and videos addressing all aspects of student wellness including mental health, stress management, nutrition, sleep, exercise, and creative expression
  - Integrative Medicine Interest Group: monthly integrative medicine electronic newsletter and calendar of upcoming events
- ❖ **New Initiatives:**
  - In the process of creating a wellness website housed directly on medical school page that includes links to resources listed above as well as an interactive events calendar
- ❖ **Recommendations:**
  - Improve communication with student body regarding wellness offerings through e-mails, announcements, and calendars



### Professional Support

- ❖ **Existing Resources:**
  - Peer Tutors who provide academic support as needed
  - Financial wellness lectures and workshops put on by Student Services
  - Free access to SALT (web-based financial literacy courses)
  - Career Development and Mentoring Program using resources from Careers in Medicine (CiM) curriculum and website
  - MS3s select academic advisors for guidance with clerkship scheduling and residency applications
- ❖ **New Initiatives:** None
- ❖ **Recommendations:**
  - Improve communication from administration regarding expectations and deadlines for clerkship scheduling, USMLE Step exams, and residency applications
  - Greater emphasis on specialty specific career advising

### Social Support

- ❖ **Existing Resources:**
  - Peer Support: Student-operated organization offering confidential support services to classmates
  - Med Families: Student-operated, longitudinal, formalized peer-to-peer mentorship program among medical students across all four years (participation mandatory only for MS1s)
  - Student lounge: common area in academic wing with couches, fridges, TV, ping pong tables, etc. with 24-hour student access
- ❖ **New Initiatives:**
  - Brought Peer Support under Student Wellness Committee leadership
  - Provided training to Peer Support members in confidentiality and therapeutic interviewing skills
  - Assigned members of Peer Support to specific Med Families to provide targeted outreach
  - Surveyed MS1 and MS2 students and placed them with students with similar interests
  - Limited Med Family size by recruiting more upper classman to serve as mentors
- ❖ **Recommendations:**
  - Continue to recruit faculty who are willing to serve as Faculty Support members to augment Peer Support
  - Set aside time during academic hours for Med Families to meet

### Emotional Wellness

- ❖ **Existing Resources:**
  - Free confidential mental health and substance abuse services available to all students through Outpatient Psychiatry and CHIPS (Confidential Help for Impaired Professional Students)
  - "Mind-Body-Spirit" and "Healer's Art" electives for MS1s and MS2s
- ❖ **Initiatives:**
  - Improved counseling services provided by Peer Support by training members in confidentiality and therapeutic interviewing skills
- ❖ **Recommendations:**
  - Foster a culture of openness and acceptance by encouraging all students to utilize counseling services
  - Increase the number of mental health providers available to improve the diversity of providers and provide more timely care
  - Offer periodic mental health screenings
  - Institute suicide prevention and crisis counseling
  - Provide support for spouses/partners/families (e.g. couples counseling)

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the members of Student Wellness Committee who have put in countless hours working to improve the health and wellness of UConn's medical and dental students: Benjamin Aronow, Laura Baumann, Mark Buchanan MD, Alyssa Ettinger, Christina Farrell, Jared Gelbs, Jelena MacLeod, Jonathan Neal, Daniel Rappoport, Brian Solinsky, and Katherine Tian.

