Harvey Mudd College WHAM! Study: Qualitative Analysis and Findings

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(Prepared for Distribution)

<u>Introduction</u>

The following report was developed based on a review and analysis of open-ended comments from students' weekly reporting as part of the <u>WHAM study</u>. Nearly twelve hundred student entries were reviewed and coded as part of the thirteen-week study. The report provides a summary analysis across major areas of well-being as related to students' reported workload and their work/life balance. Recommendations for communication of findings and considerations for next steps are offered at the conclusion of the report.

<u>Methodology</u>

Students' open-ended comments in the WHAM weekly survey were reviewed and coded by thematic categories. Three broad categories of student negative well-being – negative mental well-being, physical well-being, and social well-being – were identified prior to coding student entries. During the coding process additional categories emerged for sorting student comments. These post-hoc categories were included to capture emerging themes across entries. These categories were: feelings of the workload being acceptable, indications of tradeoffs made to accommodate the workload, mentions of having fun or positive emotions toward school or life, indications of longing (wishing they could be doing something else), and references to coping mechanisms. An initial coding process was conducted in order to sort student comments and identify key words and sub-themes in each area. A second coding process served to refine categories and to check for consistency across coding decisions. Ultimately, the number of codes under each category were tallied and aggregated across study weeks. Entries only received one tally per category, even if multiple instances of a particular category were observed in a single entry. For example if a student indicated feelings of stress multiple times in the same entry, that entry still received only one tally under "mental well-being." If the same entry also indicated negative physical health (e.g., feeling tired), the entry also received a tally under "physical well-being." The number of entries per week is shown in Graph 1 (see Appendix).

Findings

<u>Mental Well-Being</u>
As shown in Graph 1 (see Appendix), students most often reported issues related to negative mental well-being across the 13 weeks of the study. On average, over a third of the entries (35.6%) in any given week indicated negative mental well-being. If the weeks following fall break (week 6) and Thanksgiving break (week 11) are omitted, the percent rises to nearly 40%. Comments coded in this category could be viewed on a continuum from references to feeling the workload was too high to indications of severe mental health issues.

Student comments at the "feeling the workload" end of the continuum used words such as "stressed," "killer," "overwhelming"/"overwhelmed," "frustrated," and

having "no time." References to these kinds of workload pressures often cited the burdens of a particular class that pushed schedules beyond what students found manageable. Math classes, particularly Math60, were regularly singled out in students' entries as creating high levels of stress. "Writ1" was also identified, though to a slightly lesser degree than math. A number of comments also suggested that students felt the workload might be okay for classes individually but the cumulative effects were overwhelming. Students also indicated frustration with spending a lot of time outside of class figuring out material, which cut into the amount of time they had to actually complete assignments.

Student comments coded in this category also related to expressions of frustration due to workload interfering with out of class activities or responsibilities. These ranged from situational frustrations such as not being able to attend the Career Fair (there were many comments in week 5) or a particular event to feeling that the inability to pursue interests or deal with life outside of school work was pervasive.

Comments flagged as "serious" referenced seeking or receiving psychological treatment, the desire for or fear of self-injurious behavior, or fear for the mental health of peers.

Student comments coded for negative mental well-being were also punctuated by feelings of guilt for making choices that delayed or put off coursework. Guilt also resulted from feelings of not trying hard enough to succeed or keep up or from underperforming.

Over the course of the study, there were students who expressed feelings that the workload was normal or acceptable, but in general these references occurred far less often than comments pertaining to being stressed, overwhelmed, or anxious about schoolwork. Occasionally, students who reported acceptable levels of work or notable levels of stasis in their lives appeared almost shocked at feeling okay. These comments were coded differently, as noted in the methodology section

Physical Well-Being
Comments related to students' (negative) physical well-being were found in 17.2% of entries during the study. The highest number of entries coded for physical well-being were recorded in week 3 (31.1%) and the lowest in weeks 10 and 11, 7.7% and 5.7%, respectively. Notably, these weeks were the lead up to and included Thanksgiving break. The third lowest week for entries related to physical well-being was week 6 (fall break). If the three lowest weeks are omitted, the percent of entries related to negative expressions of physical well-being rises to 20.2%.

Expressions of concern for physical well-being were overwhelmingly related to sleep deprivation (e.g., feeling tired, exhausted/exhaustion, not sleeping enough) and illness (e.g., feeling sick, reporting having been sick, lack of energy). Feelings of anxiety or stress, coded under "mental well-being," were often paired with codes for "physical

well-being." An example of this pairing might be something like, "While I managed to get work done this week and despite getting sleep and food, I feel tired and unaccomplished. I feel as though I'm treading water and just about to sink."

To a lesser degree, comments on physical well-being also referred to a desire for better diet and exercise. Occasionally, students noted reflections on their lack of self-care.

It is worth highlighting that students often equate illness with being consequential; if a student becomes sick they see illness as directly impacting their ability to keep up with schoolwork. Some entries suggest a fear of becoming sick and a need to press through illness to get back to work as quickly as possible.

Social Well-Being
Social well-being is often viewed in terms of students having a sense of belonging, feeling accepted, and being a part of a community. Following the coding protocol, it was striking how largely absent comments related to social well-being were from students' entries. At most, comments related to negative social well-being were just over 10% of the total entries in a given week (e.g., Week 4). Overall, entries related to social well-being comprised just over 4% of all entries across the study.[1] Perhaps, because Mudd attracts students in a limited number of fields, its students have a sense of belonging and shared passion from the moment of matriculation. Indeed, Mudd students are their own affinity group. This is a great strength of the College. Comments pertaining to social well-being primarily focused on having a lack of time to socialize and be with friends due to the high workload or due to commitments outside of class.

The other common trend among student entries related to negative social well-being was a feeling of a lack of support from professors or from the institution as a whole.

Though some student entries over the course of the study did note feelings of being unsupported, this sentiment was also countered by a number of comments that explicitly acknowledged the support of specific faculty members or tutors. Although not graphed, these comments were coded as indications of students noting positive feelings and emotions related to workload, their life, or their college experience overall. The frequency of these codes spiked dramatically during the weeks around semester breaks (i.e., fall break and Thanksgiving break), rising to nearly 25% of all entries during these two weeks. On average, the number of entries coded for positive comments were 9.8% of all entries across the study. Perhaps the only discernable trend among these comments was the implicit surprise or novelty evident in comments when students reported being on track, having fun, or pursuing outside interests.

Consequences and Coping Mechanisms

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[1] This percent goes up modestly to 5.7% when weeks around breaks are omitted from calculations (i.e. Weeks 6, 7, and 11).

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In addition to entries related to mental, physical, and social well-being, two other significant coding categories emerged from the analysis. The first pertained to entries in which students referenced consequences or trade-offs related to workload issues. The implicit message was that students saw grappling with their workload as a kind of zero sum game in which making a choice to do one thing meant spending less time on something else. In a number of cases the trade-off was a hobby, an activity, or actions associated with future hopes for post-graduate education or employment.

Students also commented with some consistency on ways in which they were coping with their stress, workloads, and ability to manage competing responsibilities inside and outside the classroom. The two most frequent coping mechanisms reported by students were tight control over scheduling and dropping a class or seeking an extension. A number of students expressed a desire to upload their schedule as part of the study to provide evidence of how busy they were and how accountable they were for their time. Accordingly, students also reported tweaking their time management systems with new planners or new approaches to managing their schedules. For example, one student reported utilizing a "time tracking app" to help check the accuracy of perceived time spent on activities. In a number of instances students reported dropping a class (or an assignment) to deal with pressures.

Coping mechanisms often involved the very trade-offs reported above; students would opt to do something to make themselves feel better, knowing they would pay or already had paid a price for falling behind.

Caveats and Limitations

The findings reported above are not intended to reflect a scientific study that would enable generalization to all Mudd students. The coding scheme employed would certainly benefit from refinement and inter-rater reliability across multiple coders. Rather, the results summarized are intended to capture the broad, thematic areas of focus across the sample of students who elected to provide their self-reported experiences and feelings. The coding of student entries intentionally took a conservative approach to the application of codes. For example, codes for mental health were not given to comments related to feeling "busy" or even "very busy," but they were assigned when students reported being "overwhelmed" and "stressed." Notably, attrition in students' entries dropped steadily over the course of the study with the exception of weeks 6 and 7 (fall break) and weeks 11-12 (at the end of the semester). This is not an uncommon phenomenon in longitudinal survey research. The matter of attrition raises questions about who, over time, opted out of the study. In this case, it is possible that students who were the busiest and most stressed opted out of the study. Nearly every week at least one student commented that they, ironically, did not have time to comment. It is also plausible that those students who were the most adept at managing the workload or saw

the workload as reasonable either did not provide comments or stopped commenting during the study.

Nevertheless, nearly 1200 student entries were recorded for this study, a robust sample if using the number of entries as the unit of analysis, rather than individual students. Additionally, the first five weeks of the study had entries from over 100 students, on average. Again, though not a random sample, the weekly sample sizes at the student level, particularly at the beginning of the study, were significant. The volume of entries over multiple weeks did provide for discernable patterns to emerge across thematic areas, as reported in the findings. Rather than serving as a basis for definitive conclusions about student well-being at Mudd, this study might serve as a baseline for building upon these thematic areas and gathering more data over time.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the analysis provided, with consideration of recommendations also provided in the 2017 external review of the core curriculum. Recommendations cover two areas: communication of results and considerations for addressing well-being at the institutional level.

Communication of Results

A good deal of time and resources have been put into the WHAM study. Transparency of results to show that those resources and time, including that of the students who participated in the study, were valued is a critical element of developing an effective communication strategy. The needs and interests of different stakeholders, including students, should be considered within the communication strategy. What is missing from the above analysis is a pairing of qualitative findings with quantitative evidence. To the degree possible, data should be paired to present a fuller picture of workload trends and consequences for students. It is important for faculty, students, and staff to not interpret the findings in aggregate as alarmist. Like any study, outliers should be considered but not dwelled upon. Certain comments contain serious and concerning material, but they do not represent the majority of comments. The more prevalent trend across entries is a persistent sense of overwhelm, stress, fatigue, desire to cope, and a lack of flourishing.

One way to understand how truly representative these trends are is to begin conversations around the thematic components of well-being detailed in the analysis. Targeted conversations can be devoted to exploring mental, physical, and social well-being for example. These conversations can be tailored for faculty, student, and staff groups. Perhaps the most important part of a communication strategy is how communication fits into a larger plan for action. What would you like stakeholders to do with the information or following the conversation? What can you say is forthcoming in terms of next steps for the discussion or for campus planning?

Considerations for Next Steps

The findings from this study, particularly in light of findings from the review of the core curriculum, would suggest a holistic approach to addressing student well-being at Mudd is optimal. There is, at present, a culture of overwork among Mudd students. HMC students possess a sense of identity closely tied to struggle and aspects of that struggle (e.g., fatigue, stress, keeping up, making difficult choices, and living with consequences). Evidence of this shared identity is found in the commonality of language and references throughout nearly 1200 entries. Language and themes were remarkably consistent within and across weeks.

The following considerations are raised only as possibilities for thinking about the scope of what it might mean to alter the culture at Mudd from one of extreme workload pressures to a culture that supports students to flourish amid those pressures. Thus, the primary recommendation is not to make Mudd less rigorous. It is to pair that rigor with an equally robust environment of support, encouragement, and balance. Students' entries reflected a desire to be well and to do well, but those goals were often in conflict. Dealing with that conflict was almost always focused upon the individual coping skills of the student. Thus, the following considerations take aim at creating an environment, necessarily involving all stakeholders (i.e., staff, faculty, administrators, and students), in which students' well-being is visible, reinforced, and pervasive at Mudd.

1) *Define "Well-Being" at Mudd–* Language is a powerful source of reinforcement for cultural norms. Finding language that resonates across stakeholder groups will make the commitment to well-being uniquely part of the Mudd experience. Are students inspired to thrive? To flourish? To be resilient? To persist? What characteristics and capacities have helped Mudd faculty to be successful in their own lives and careers? Finding language that matters to the Mudd community is important for inviting all levels of participation. For example, Stanford University, as part of a group of elite universities that have formed the Resilience Project, created a campaign called "The Duck Stops Here" (a riff on the idea that ducks appear to glide effortlessly along the water when, in fact, they are swimming furiously underneath). The effort is uniquely Stanford's and actively encourages students to examine failure and resilience as essential parts of learning and growth. Georgetown University has similarly borrowed directly from its Jesuit mission to promote the idea of *cura personalis* or "self-care" widely on campus. All Georgetown students take at least one course associated with the university's signature Engelhard Project, in which traditional academic course content is infused with modules and topics related to well-being.

2) *Make the Commitment to Well-Being Known –* Faculty can also play a critical role in reinforcing the commitment to well-being for students. Faculty at the University of Texas at San Antonio, for example, are an important part of an effort to support first-year students (F2G&G initiative) at the university. As part of the initiative, first-generation faculty members wear buttons to indicate they were first-generation college students, as well as serving as coaches for these students.

3) *Strategies to Address Well-Being Should Be Pervasive* – An environment for well-being is created by addressing this commitment within and across multiple areas of students' academic and social lives. The space for well-being can be made within the curriculum, for example, by including opportunities for reflection and strategies for coping within specified courses or as part of the core. Without reinforcement and opportunities for application outside of the curriculum, students may be tempted to compartmentalize these experiences as "something to get through." Thinking about how commitments to well-being are reinforced between the curriculum and the co-curriculum will help students see the institutional commitment to this outcome.

4) *Students as Well-Being Change Agents* – Mudd already has robust and visible peer tutoring programs. Mentors are a significant resource for Mudd students, though their focus is primarily on academics. How might students be empowered to promote well-being for themselves and their peers? Students might, for example, consider starting a Mudd chapter of Active Minds, a national organization dedicated to empowering students to lead conversations around mental health on college campuses. Students might also be paired with faculty and/or staff to help lead conversations both within and outside of class.

5) *Think Outside the Box* – Students at Mudd and on campuses around the country are facing pressures that are unique to this time and generation of students. The strategies employed to mitigate those pressures and promote student flourishing can similarly draw from twenty-first century advances. Because resources, both monetary and human, are common obstacles for strategic planning of this type, the following examples are offered as considerations for providing additional help for students (particularly those too stressed to reach out in the first place) without relying heavily on people power or financial resources. First, colleges and universities have found success in implementing "chatbots" to interact with students on a range of topics (e.g., admissions processes, financial aid). Reimagined as a tool to provide basic access to resources, a well-being chatbot could create a crucial layer of initial support for time-starved Mudd students who need help finding mental health resources or people to connect with about issues. Second, Dominican University of California has recently partnered with Beyond 12, an Oakland based non-profit focused on underserved student success. Beyond 12 offers a "My Coach" app that provides college and life skills tips and tools for college students. Beyond 12 offers the possibility to customize some of this content for each institution's needs. Dominican is using the app as part of our integrative coaching program at no cost for the initial year of the partnership. We believe this resource will provide a helpful and familiar extra layer of support for our tech-savvy incoming students, in particular. An app does not replace human contact, but we also want students to have quick access to an additional channel of support for positive messages and important campus reminders.

Ultimately, creating an environment at Mudd in which students feel supported to thrive and flourish will not develop as a result of a single action, program, or initiative. The strategy must be holistic, but it also need not be implemented at once. Initial steps
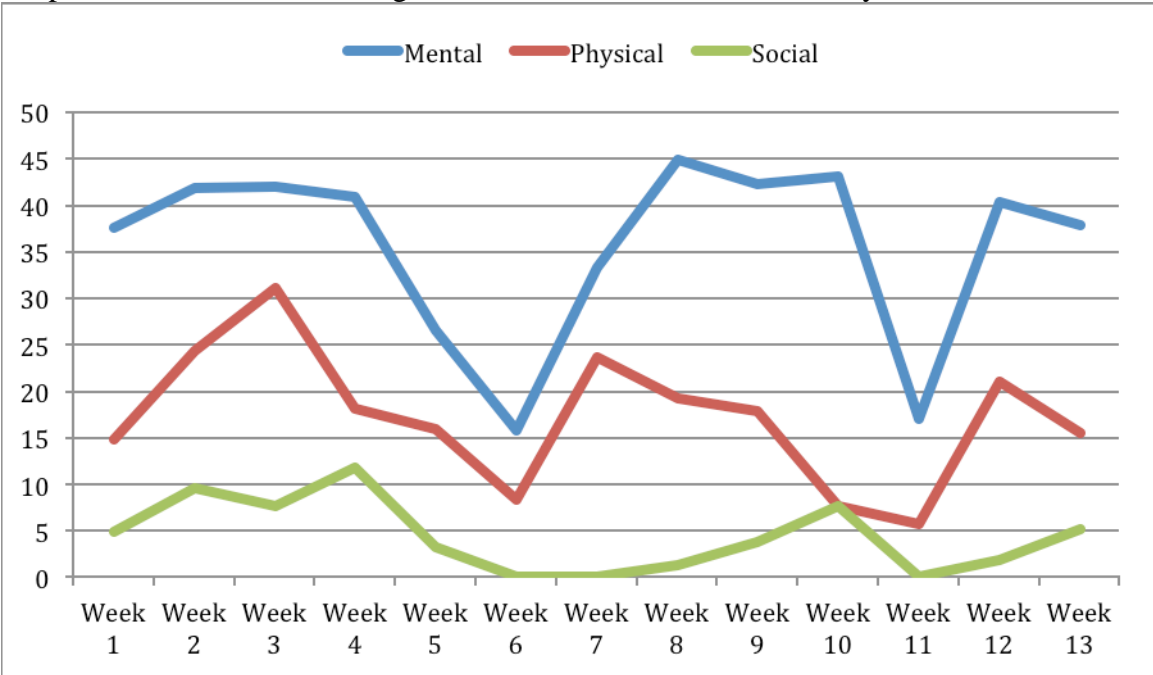
might involve convening a taskforce comprising representatives of faculty, staff, and students to strategize around short-term messaging, events, and also longer-term goals. In time, WHAM studies will hopefully reflect a greater balance between students' hard work and thriving, rather than hard work and surviving.

Appendix

Graph 1. Number of Student Entries Per Week
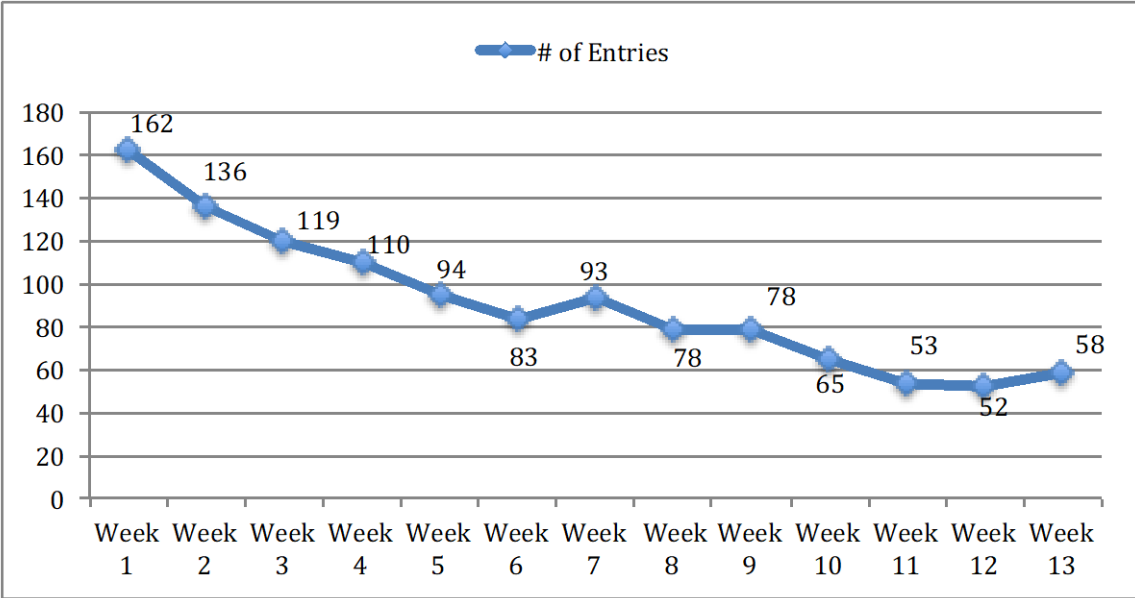
Graph 2. Percent of Well-Being Codes Per Total Number of Weekly Entries

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