Dear Colleague:

Are you interested in well-being as a topic that has relevance to academic and student life at Mason? If so, then we hope you will explore with us the possibility of your “gen-ed” Mason Core course becoming part of an optional, new pathway for students to fulfill their core requirements. We are working in collaboration with Janette Muir, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, on an exciting new program.

Starting with the 2016-17 academic year, we are creating thematic pathways for the Mason Core that will be called the “Core Engagement Series.” Specifically, Mason students can choose to fulfill 18 credits of their 39 credits of Core requirements with courses that have been designated as part of this theme. One of the first pathway will be on the theme of sustainability (using “Greenleaf” designated courses). Our plan is to make well-being another such option that will be available to all Mason students.

As you may know, one of the strategic goals in Mason’s 10-year Strategic Plan is for Mason to become a model well-being university. A number of initiatives are underway to support this goal for students and employees. Our plans for a Core Engagement Series on Well-Being will allow more students opportunities to deepen their learning about well-being inside and outside the classroom. Both designated core courses plus some co-curricular activities are likely to be part of this Core Engagement Series.

Our plan is to implement this pathway through the General Education curriculum without having to create any new courses. Many existing courses already seem like they are a natural fit – or, with adaptations – will be viable offerings under the well-being curricular theme. Thus, this fall semester, we will be conducting a Faculty Learning Community for full-time Mason faculty who teach a Core course and who have an interest in how it could be part of this innovative approach to General Education requirements. You are invited to apply to be part of that Faculty Learning Community.

At Mason, what do we mean by “Well-Being”? 

For the last two years, the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being has coordinated a faculty and staff learning community focused on the Well-Being University (see wbu.gmu.edu for more information). Admittedly, the expression “well-being” is used in a wide variety of ways across many settings in our world. At Mason, we define well-being as building a life of vitality, purpose, resilience, and engagement. This includes thriving across a range of domains (physical, purpose, social, community, psychological and financial) and being satisfied with one’s life while experiencing curiosity, hope, meaning and joy.

What are the goals and objectives of the Core Engagement Series on Well-Being?

In the Faculty Learning Community this fall, we will work on refining a list of program objectives. At this point in our planning, the Core Engagement Series on Well-Being would have the following program outcomes. Do you see how your own Core course could potentially address one or more of these outcomes?

1) The student will be able to describe and apply methods to enhance interpersonal communications and empathy. This will help the student to create sustainable, quality relationships and social support networks.
2) The student will demonstrate skills for communication (written, oral, visual) about the findings of the science of well-being. In addition, the student will demonstrate the ability to practice methods to enhance well-being, self-awareness, and awareness of others, so as to make oneself a more effective communicator.

3) The student will be able to articulate societal factors impacting community and global well-being, and to engage in practices which build greater sensitivity to the needs of others and the inter-dependent nature of life on the earth. Students will demonstrate knowledge about the measures and comparisons of well-being domains across countries and how those measures correlate with various factors.

4) The student will be able to describe the science of stress and its effects – both constructive and destructive – as well as the methodologies used to respond to stress, promote resilience, and enhance well-being. Furthermore, the student will develop greater self-awareness and capacities for self-care and the care of others from the application of some of these methods.

If you can envision your course fitting well into one or more of these outcomes, then you would be an ideal fit for our faculty community.

*Since a Core course already has an approved syllabus, what can be accomplished by working with faculty colleagues in a Learning Community this fall?*

We will not be trying to change syllabi. They are already approved for the Core courses. However, most courses have room for instructor adaptations that retain the integrity of the learning objectives and the essential assignments. For example, the topic and rubric for an essay might be adaptable so as to address one or more of the four outcomes listed above for the Core Engagement Series on Well-Being. Certain reading assignments might be added to or adjusted – sometimes just with the frame of reference students are asked to adopt as they study and interpret the material. In this regard, we can brainstorm and learn from each other in the Faculty Learning Community.

*What are you agreeing to – time and deliverables – if you participate?*

Each participant will be asked to commit to:
- Participate in the meetings with the learning community members. We are planning to have seven meetings over the course of the semester. They will be held on Tuesdays from 11:30 to 1:00. Scheduled dates are September 8 & 22, October 6 & 20, November 3 & 17, and December 1.
- Read some brief articles or book excerpts that will be provided. They will concern well-being in general, in addition to ideas related to bringing aspects of well-being to a university academic program.
- Create an annotated version of the syllabus for your Core course which highlights the specifics ways in which you will bring well-being into the content material of your course. For example, this could include the rubric for a new writing assignment on a topic that deals with well-being or articles that you will start including in reading assignments.
- Create an overview of your course (approximately 250 to 350 words) that frames the course in a specialized way – an overview that could be used by academic advisors who are helping students select courses for the Core Engagement Series on Well-Being.
- Share with colleagues in the Faculty Learning Community any relevant resources you come across during the semester.
What, other than a wonderful network of colleagues and a supportive space in which to explore possibilities and make connections to well-being literature, is in it for you?

Each faculty participant will have access to a $500 stipend that can be used for faculty development activities such as conference participation and purchasing books or other educational resources. These funds will be made available upon successful completion of the Learning Community.

How do you apply to participate?

This faculty learning community is for full-time instructional faculty members – tenure track as well as term faculty. If interested, please submit a brief statement of interest (no more than 250 words) that addresses what seems most promising or intriguing to you about the Core Engagement Series on Well-Being. Be sure to mention in your statement what Core Course you teach and the frequency with which it is a part of your teaching load.

Send your statement of interest to Mark Thurston at the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being: mthursto@gmu.edu Please submit by noon on September 2nd. Space is limited and the maximum number of participants is 14 faculty members. Selected participants will be notified by noon on September 4th. Remember that the first meeting is Tuesday, September 8th.

If you have questions, please contact Mark Thurston via email or by phone at extension 3-1352.

This program is co-sponsored by the Center for Teaching & Faculty Excellence and the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being.

Sincerely,

Kimberly K. Eby  
Associate Provost for Faculty Development  
Mark Thurston  
Director of Educational Programs  
Center for the Advancement of Well-Being