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**Play in Adulthood**

# Playing for Keeps: how academic libraries are prioritizing student mental health and well-being through play

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade there has been an increasing awareness of the need for holistic means of support for college and university students. With the rate of mental health concerns continuing to rise, institutions of higher education are working more collaboratively to create increased access to mental health support on campuses. Although academic libraries have customarily been responsible for bolstering their parent institution's commitment to academic success as well as student and faculty research initiatives – it has become increasingly clear that prioritizing their community's mental health plays a critical role in achieving these goals. As a result, many academic libraries have begun utilizing methods of play to support the mental health and wellbeing of their patronage. Most commonly art supplies, videogame consoles/games, and kinetic resources such as Legos and Play-Doh are offered year-round for check out at many institutions, while events including colouring and crafting opportunities are offered monthly with an increased presence near midterms and finals.

## Introduction

Historically, support for student mental health and academics have been treated separately in US Higher Education, with the responsibility of student mental health and well-being falling to health and wellness, residential life, and student life departments while academic support has fallen under the purview of the teaching faculty, libraries, and academic support departments. While this has been the standard of higher education for decades recent studies indicate that this divided approach to student support has proven detrimental to the mental health, well-being, and academic success of students. With both the rates and severity of mental health concerns among college and university students continuing to rise, an increased focus on supporting the mental health and well-being of students has taken its rightful place as a foundational element of higher education's framework. Young adulthood, ages 18-25, is a critical period for personal development in which individuals establish and strengthen relationship, coping, financial, and professional skills that will help to facilitate lifelong wellness. Simultaneously, this age bracket is also known as a high-risk period for the onset of a variety of mental health disorders including, but not limited to, anxiety, mood, substance abuse, and psychotic disorders (McGorry

et al, 2011). The transitional nature of this demographic, however, makes college aged students the ideal candidates for interventional and preventative mental health efforts. As a result, a growing number of institutions are working to address the complex needs of their students by launching campus wide wellness initiatives that help to provide equitable access to much needed support.

As the landscape of higher education continues to pivot in favour of a more holistic approach to student support and education, academic libraries are taking an active role by working to broaden the scope of their materials, spaces, and resources to support not only the academic success of their patronage, but also that of their mental and emotional health. The centralized location and extended operating hours of campus libraries partnered with their function as both a natural student gathering space and source of reliable information makes these institutions crucial components in promoting and fostering student well-being and mental health on campuses. In addition to introducing a variety of services and spaces including yoga classes, seed libraries, meditation rooms, and food pantries to help answer the evolving needs of their patrons, academic libraires are working to support student well-being and mental health by means of play. Studies have shown that playful activities such as colouring, playing with Legos, Play-Doh, and video games can help to relieve feelings of depression, anxiety, isolation, and stress among adults (Flett et al., 2017, Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Over the past decade a growing number of academic libraries have begun utilizing play initiatives as a means of support for their students' mental and academic heath. By providing access to toys and creating a safe space and an occasion to play, libraries are providing students with the opportunity to hone important life skills such as balance and mindfulness while also relieving feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression through play.

This article works to both contextualize the mental health crisis effecting campuses globally and investigate the different ways by which academic libraires are utilizing methods of play to support the mental health, well-being, and academic success of their student populations. While many academic libraries are already providing access to "stress busting" materials and events during high-stress seasons such as mid-terms and final exams, the purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance of these resources while also providing a rationale for the creation or expansion of play initiatives within academic libraries.

## Mental Health on Campus

The freedom experienced by college and university students is often accompanied by feelings of stress and anxiety, as many young adults are faced with being separated from familiar support systems such as family and friends, acclimating to new surroundings, academic and social requirements, and navigating financial stressors such as student loans and rent (Cleary et al., 2011). Although the argument could be made that these same stressors have been experienced by the majority of college bound students over the years, it should be noted that the rising cost of living and higher education partnered with the increased rigor and competitive nature of college and university admission and coursework has worked to significantly amplify these stressors.

Over the past decade, the Association for University and College Counselling Centre Directors (2019) has reported a substantial increase in mental health related issues globally. Their Annual Survey, which polled 477 institutions across the United States, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Australia, identified anxiety (59.2%), depression (46.5%), and stress (42.8%) as the three most frequently reported mental health concerns among students (p.29). Although there has been a substantial increase in mental health related issues among students, young adults are still among the least likely to seek help with only 13% of the population being served by campus counselling services (p.15). Although campus-based counselling centres have proven to be highly effective in assisting students, the students receiving treatment are most often self-referred (Forbes et al., 2019). In a study of US college populations, an estimated 60% to 80% of students with mental disorders or feelings of emotional or psychological distress did not seek or receive treatment (Lipson et al, 2015). These statistics have helped to identify the need for increased access to mental health resources as well as much needed encouragement for students to refer themselves for mental health counselling and support.

As both the number of students reporting mental health distress and the need for on campus support continues to grow, institutions of higher education have launched campus-wide mental health initiatives in an effort to answer the growing need. Many institutions have created campus wellness centres whose primary responsibility is to provide increased access to mental health and well-being initiatives. In 2018 the University of Wisconsin – Superior opened The Pruitt Centre for Mindfulness and Wellbeing which works to partner with multiple campus departments to provide access to weekly yoga and meditations sessions as well as courses and workshops on mindfulness and stress relief while Drexel university has partnered with their recreation centre to provide a mental-health self-check where students can stop for a self-lead mental health check up on their way to or from the gym. In addition to these efforts, many campuses are working to train faculty and staff across departments to identify signs of mental health distress and incorporate wellness initiatives throughout their departments.

**The Impact of Play**

In childhood, playing helps to establish a multitude of crucial developmental skills including, but not limited to, creativity, problem solving, teamwork, communication, and reasoning (Wing, 1995, Howard & McInnes, 2012). However, as individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood the value of play shifts from serving as a developmental powerhouse for individual and interpersonal skills to signifying immaturity or a lack of productivity or discipline. An increasing amount of research regarding the benefits of embracing and pursing playfulness in adulthood document an increase in engagement, creativity, mindfulness, and innovation while also helping to decrease boredom, stress, tension, and nervousness (Guitard et al., 2005, Proyer, 2013, Magnuson & Barnett, 2013). The 2005 article, *Toward a Better Understanding of Playfulness in Adults,* works to dismantle the misconception that play and playfulness in adulthood indicates a lack of focus, engagement, or productivity by identifying the ways in which, "playfulness enables adults to distance themselves from others, from situations, and from conventions to approach situations with an open mind to find original solutions to problems, to

confront difficulties, and to accept failure." (Guitard et al., 2005). This research helps to mitigate negative connotations associated with play in adulthood by highlighting the benefits it has on the mental and emotional health as well as the professional and education success of adults.

Although there is a limited amount of research relating to the effectiveness of play as a means of mental health support among adults, it's positive effect on the mental and emotional health within this demographic cannot be overstated. Research shows that play's ability to significantly decrease stress, boredom, and feelings of depression, aggression, and anxiety, while also simultaneously increasing individual social and coping skills, quality of work, performance, and cognitive ability continues to benefit individuals substantially as they enter adulthood (Bowman, 1987, Glynn & Webster, 1992). Early research postulates that play evolves from an activity into an individual personality trait (playfulness) as adolescents continue to mature into adulthood. In short, play is often seen as a developmental tool often identifiable by physical activity or interaction with toys, games, and other materials, while playfulness refers to an individual's tendency to analyse or present situations in an amusing or entertaining manner for themselves and/or others (Chang, et al., 2013). As young adults leave their adolescence, the ways in which they play often no longer function as a means of escape or leisure associated with games and toys, but rather as a tool which can be utilized to navigate school, work, and everyday life by means of creative thinking, imagination, and problem solving.

In addition to the positive impact play can have on mental health and professional development, a correlation between play and increased academic success, intelligence, and knowledge absorption has also been identified as a key contributor to academic achievement as well as overall wellbeing and coping (Proyer, 2011, Magnuson & Barnett, 2013). In a 2013 study of 898 undergraduate students, Lynne Barnett and Cale Magnuson, found that of the students surveyed, individuals who identified themselves as "playful" often featured lower stress levels and healthier coping skills than that of their more serious counterparts. In fact, a number of studies have worked to identify and document the role of play on the individuals ability to cope with perceived and psychological stress as playfulness and coping share a number of key characteristics, "that involve creative, multi-strategy approaches, persistence, active engagement, and flexibility" (Saunders et al., 1999, p. 222). Often students who engaged in play or identified as playful were significantly less likely to make use of unhealthy means of support such as substance use/abuse, isolation, and denial or avoidance (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013). Similarly, a study conducted by Rene Proyer (2011) evidenced a positive connection between playfulness and higher self-esteem, intellectual ability, and academic success among undergraduate students.

## Library's as Active Contributors to Student Well-Being

Academic libraries most typically align their mission and vision statements with that of the academic and educational aspects outlined in their parent institution's mission statements. Most often these facilities vow to serve their students through their advancement and support of initiatives relating to teaching, learning, research, and providing access to well-rounded collections, programs, and services. In recent years, 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. Students experiencing suicidal ideations, substance abuse, or other behavioural health concerns featured lower GPAs and identified their mental health struggles as having a significant impact on their academic performance (De Luca et al., 2016). In a 2021 analysis, researchers found that of the 1,231 students interviewed, 66% indicated that counselling services improved their academic performance and GPA while 63% of students self-reported that the same services had a positive impact on their retention (Kivlighan et al., 2021). The correlation between mental health distress and lower academic performance and overall retention has resulted in the creation of a multitude of library services and spaces which have been designed to help students prioritize their mental wellness in the hopes that, "fostering playfulness in students may be useful for increasing not only their performance but also their acquisition of knowledge." (Proyer, 2011). It is important to note that these services and spaces are not to be considered as substitutes for counselling or therapy, the accessibility of materials partnered with the destigmatizing nature of these initiatives allow students to practice mindfulness, balance and stress relief while also encouraging self-reflection and expression.

Occasional feelings of anxiety are common among college-aged students, however, for many these sporadic feelings of anxiety can lead to lifetime disorders including phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety, and more (Kessler et al., 2005). In a study of U.S. college students conducted by the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (2019), 65.7% reported feelings of "overwhelming anxiety" with only 24.3% seeking professional treatment (2019). These statistics highlight not only the critical need for resources that help mitigate building feelings of anxiety but also work to clarify the need for accessible spaces, opportunities, and materials needed to learn and practice balance and mindfulness. Over the past five years college and university libraries have been expanding their holdings to include materials such as electronic gaming systems, sports equipment, boardgames, and more in an effort to provide more holistic services, spaces, and resources for their patrons while also encouraging students to play, exercise, and take a break from studying. In addition to these services, hosting stress busting or de-stress stations during seasons of high stress, such as mid-terms and final exams, has become a standard among college and university libraries globally. These initiatives often feature colouring materials, including ornately lettered quotes and elaborate designs such as mandalas, video games, and tactile materials namely Play-Doh, kinetic sand, and Legos. Integrating mental health interventions and initiatives into academic library settings can work to reduce the stigma associated with mental health events and diagnosis by distancing these services from clinical and medical settings which can often be seen as intimidating and isolating. Locating these services within high traffic, social, and safe areas on campus communicates to the community that the need for mental health support is not uncommon and does not need to be seen as something to be kept secret. The increased accessibility and normalization of these resources and experiences could help to facilitate a rise in the number of students self-referring to campus-based counselling services for help. As such, academic libraries are working to provide a variety of wellness resources for their patronage utilizing one of the most common methods of relieving feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression -

play.

In their *Play Well Report* the Lego company found that of adults globally, 73% researched methods of stress relief on at least a weekly basis and 81% indicated that playing helped them to relax and relieve stress (The Lego Group, 2021). Additionally, students who exhibit higher levels of playfulness often use self-distraction as a method of emotional support or coping and are often more engagement-focused in their coping and stress relief efforts (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013). As such, these materials offer students access to resources and materials that allow them to participate in healthy coping methods while also bolstering their playfulness – a trait that will continue to serve them well into adulthood. Choosing healthy methods of coping is subjective to the individual's access to healthy coping mechanisms. Often, stressful events work to diminish the access one may have to healthy coping mechanisms resulting in increasing levels of stress and anxiety (Chang, et al., 2013). A school project for example, could result in increased hours spent in isolation, studying, or preparing which in turn results in a significant decrease in sleep, leisure, and socialization. Introducing healthy coping mechanisms and stress reliving tools into the academic library settings works to close the gap between students and their access to healthy coping mechanisms.

The correlation between student mental health and academic success has clarified the need for a more holistic approach in supporting the patron's academic needs by simultaneously providing access to research spaces and materials as well as activities, resources, and spaces that help students establish healthy practices, mindfulness, and self-care. In addition to serving as active participants in campus wide wellness initiatives, academic libraries have also begun creating and hosting their own wellness driven activities and services. Over the past ten years libraries have worked to introduce a multitude of services, resources, and events designed to help support the multifaceted academic and individual needs of their patrons. A research study conducted by Barnett (2007) helped to establish the four basic components of playfulness; gregarious, uninhibited, comedic, and dynamic as identified by 649 undergraduate students. As such, academic libraries often provide access to an assortment of materials, games, and resources that will appeal to a variety of play-types which are often evocative of the four aforementioned play components. These resources often include games, therapy dogs, and puzzles (gregarious), colouring pages and crafting stations (uninhibited), and events including scavenger hunts, escape rooms, and library mini golf (comedic/dynamic). While these services, spaces, and materials are varied in nature they share one critical characteristic in that each of these resources and events utilize play as a means of mental health, academic, and developmental support for their patrons.

**Micro-Breaks**

Researchers are increasingly interested in identifying and implementing different strategies that will help to keep individuals feeling refreshed, energized, and engaged while at work or school. Mounting scholarship has indicated that taking short "mental breaks" or "micro-breaks" in which an individual focuses on a task that is unrelated to work or study results in overall increased productivity, content absorption, and engagement (Ariga

& Lleras, 2011). College and university students often participate in study for long periods of time without interruption. Cram sessions and all-nighters are a common plight among college and university students, often earning the reputation as a rite of passage. While memorizing and cramming are two of the most commonly utilized methods of study among this demographic, the knowledge gained using these methods has been scientifically proven to be short-lived (Brent & Felder, 2016). While this method of study continues to be common amongst students, prolonged focus can often result in feelings of burnout, lack of productivity, decreased engagement, stress, and anxiety. While adults often replenish their energy levels by participating in relaxing and engaging activities after work and class, micro-breaks are needed to keep adults refreshed and engaged throughout the day (Zacher et al., 2014). Academic libraries are working to create a conducive study atmosphere which encourages individuals to take regular breaks, socialize with friends and classmates, and focus on an unrelated task by providing access to colouring materials, Legos, video games, and more. Providing these resources allows patrons to socialize, step away from the computer, meditate, and refocus of their studies which has shown to have a positive impact on fatigue, vitality, and engagement (Zacher et al., 2014). Similarly, focus based activities such as colouring, building/sculpting, and playing video games can help patrons by allowing them to be present in the moment rather than worrying about the future. The engagement requirements present within these activities help keep student's minds from racing and thoughts from wandering, thereby providing respite from feelings of stress and anxiety.

Psychological stress is known as, "a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus et al., 1984). By providing access to play based wellness materials and events libraries actively encourage their patronage to participate in self-nurturing behaviours which, "can lower their stress levels. . . calm the Central Nervous System and aid developing stronger coping strategies" (Shields et al., 2020). By working to cultivate an environment which encourages health, balance, playfulness, and learning, libraries can provide access to initiatives and resources that bolster their student's mental health while also effectively working to minimize feelings of library anxiety.

## Colouring Initiatives

The act of colouring has proven to be a powerful mechanism for relieving feelings of anxiety among many students due to the activity's customizable, structured, and social aspects. The highly detailed nature of adult colouring pages, often used by academic libraries, promote active engagement, concentration, and mindfulness without requiring excessive skill or focus (Eaton & Tieber, 2017). The repetitive shapes and patterns found within mandalas and geometric images, often favoured by adults, provides ". . . an opportunity to suspend their 'inner dialogue' and to deeply engage in an activity that removes them from the flow of negative thoughts and emotions that can sometimes dominate their lives" (Curry & Kasser, 2005). This activity can often result in fostering mindfulness as this state is commonly, "achieved through guided meditation, with an increasing number of

studies showing its effectiveness in reducing both psychological and biological markers of stress, e.g., blood pressure and heart rate" (Desai et al., 2021). The repetitive and engaging nature of colouring combined with its ability to temporarily pause inner dialogs and negative thoughts provides a similar effect to meditation. Most notably, colouring provides students with an opportunity to take a much-needed break from intensive study while also keeping their brain engaged by focusing on an unrelated task and "works many of the same mechanisms as yoga or meditation" (Shields et al., 2020). Research indicates that taking small breaks or "micro-breaks" can be ". . . beneficial for cognitive function, attention and fatigue reduction" (Rose et al., 2016). As a result, students are able to return to their work feeling refreshed and better able to focus and retain information.

Providing colouring materials continues to be one of the most popular services offered by academic libraries due to its inexpensive nature and effectiveness as a vehicle for stress relief and relaxation. This activity continually appeals to a large demographic often drawing a significant number of participants of varying ages, fields of study/concentrations, or cognitive abilities. Students are often able to customize their experience with these materials as they can choose their design, whether to participate individually or as a group, colouring medium, or whether to take materials with them for later. Although these details may appear inconsequential to some, for students experiencing high levels of stress or anxiety making these decisions can serve as grounding actions which can result in individuals feeling more in control. Additionally, interacting with the repetitive nature of mandalas and other complex designs, often displayed in adult colouring books, ". . . helps in entering a meditation-like state that can lead to self-discovery and helps remove negative thoughts and emotions" in both children and adults (Noor et al., 2017). Similarly, colouring pages allow participants to think creatively without the pressure of having to create from scratch, as colouring, ". . . provides more structure than . . . drawing task[s], but not so much structure that it increases anxiety" (Eaton & Tieber, 2017). This flexibility promotes mindfulness by actively engaging the individual's brain (making colour choices, patterns, shading, etc.) without the overwhelming feelings of not knowing what to draw or the fear of messing up.

 As college and university aged students focus on building career knowledge and professional skills, they are also working to identify and hone coping mechanisms that they will continue to use to help navigate their present and future feelings. By providing access to colouring materials and encouraging patrons to participate, academic libraries can help their students utilize this method of play to help practice mindfulness while also prioritizing their mental and academic health and wellness. Similarly, providing these materials throughout the year, and not specifically during seasons of high stress could help to facilitate a reduction in the number if students who may choose negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, isolation, or denial by encouraging their patrons to choose healthy methods of stress and anxiety relief.

## Legos and building materials

The Lego company is well known not only for their world-famous toy but also for their product's widespread

applications. Since their inception, Lego has evolved from toy to tool - benefitting both children and adults developmentally, creatively, and emotionally. Over the past ten years Legos have been welcomed into professional and educational settings for their documented ability to encourage and facilitate creative thinking/problem solving, collaboration, and stress relief. This application has proven so successful that the company spent years developing their signature Serious Play® campaign which was designed to facilitate corporate and educational group work, thinktanks, and creative development (Wengel, 2020). The foundational research which culminated in the Lego® Serious Play® initiative, ". . . shows that this kind of hands-on, minds-on learning produces deeper, more meaningful understanding of the world and it's possibilities" (Lego®). These sentiments are echoed in research analysing the effectiveness of Creative Arts Therapies (CATs) on stress management and mitigation as CATs often feature music, art, dance, or drama related exercises which work to provide participants with the opportunity to identify, express, and interact with their concerns, frustrations, feelings, and thoughts in a safe and constructive manner (Sandmire et al., 2012). As a result, academic libraries have been working to introduce more kinetic materials into their holdings to help students cope with and combat stress, anxiety, and burnout.

The need to make or build things with our hands is a residual primal instinct. Meaningful hand movement often results in an elevated sense of accomplishment, pride, and satisfaction – these feelings often help to bolster self-esteem, confidence, and overall mood (Lambert, 2010). Legos, Play-Doh, kinetic sand, and building materials often appeal to uninhibited play-types as the level of structure present within these activities is customizable. Building with Legos and sculpting with Play-Doh allows participants to fully immerse themselves in the task at hand and offering them a break from studying, problem solving, or worrying. Statistically, individuals who participate in creative opportunities feature lower stress levels, advanced problem-solving skills, and better overall well-being (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Research indicates that individuals experiencing feelings of stress often engage more with playful tasks such as sculpting and Lego building because these tasks are easily identified as fun and entertaining – participants often exhibit an improved mental state and increased confidence and feelings of accomplishment afterwards (Shields et al., 2020). While not as effective as working out, the physical act of stepping away from studying, putting together blocks, digging for a specific colour or shape, and looking at building examples can also benefit students as this physical activity increases blood flow which benefits cognition and brain activity (Hillman et al., 2008). Rutgers librarian, Megan Lott, introduced a Lego playing station at the university's Art Library citing the tool's ability to establish a, "common language that helps people unlock their imagination, communicate and build critical thinking skills" (Verbanas, 2016). Over the years several academic institutions have worked to incorporate Legos and other building or sculpture materials into their holdings including Princeton University, which has worked to include a Build and Play section in their library's MakerSpace, and Columbia University which has added several loanable Lego build kits to their catalogue for in-library use only.

While professional development and real-world job skills are often the main priority of college and university

students, libraries have the unique opportunity to help students practice self-awareness and achieve balance by providing access to materials that encourage and facilitate these practices. Participants in a 2020 study reported that the use of colouring books and Legos as stress relief had a significant impact on, "improving positive states of calm while reducing the negative states such as hostility, irritability, and anxiety/worry" (Shields et al., 2020). Providing access to a shared space where students can engage with friends and classmates, focus on something other than course work, and create something encourages students to reach for healthy and engaging methods of stress relief and to take a break when they feel as though they need to.

## Video Games

The effectiveness of video game play in relieving feelings of psychological and physiological stress and their ability to increase self-esteem has long been overshadowed by the negative qualities often associated with the practice. Since their creation, video games have been blamed for a number of qualms including lower academic achievement, violence, aggression and laziness. While there can indeed be negative effects associated with many coping mechanisms, the prevalence of negative research relating to video games has worked to detract from the multitude of positive effects that can be gained with video games. Research has shown that the immersive nature of video game play allows users an opportunity to momentarily escape their everyday lives and stressors. The distractive nature of engaging in focused gameplay allows the brain to focus on restoring mood levels, lowering stress, and recovering from work-related exhaustion. A recent study indicated that stress reduction enjoyed by students who engaged in a short session of casual gameplay was nearly as effective as the stress reduction experienced by students engaging in mindful meditation (Desai et al., 2021). Interactivity is a key component in the role of video games on mental health and well-being. The active nature of video games provides the player with the opportunity to influence the appearance, goal, or outcome of the game which, like individuals crating with Legos and clay, results in an increased feeling of satisfaction. Similarly, successfully completing a task or beating a level can have a significant impact on a player's self-esteem and overall mood (Kowert, 2020). The immersive, challenging, and customizable nature of video games makes them an ideal resource for students struggling with stress, low self-esteem, balance, or burn out.

The rapid intake of information present within most popular video games requires players to think, react, and move quickly in response thereby engaging nearly all their cognitive functions – this ultimately helps to strengthen information processing skills while also working to stave off cognitive decline often associated with age (Etindele Sosso & Ouali, 2018). Moreover, playing video games can, engender feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness", three of the primary needs for psychological wellness, which can have a positive impact on emotional stability as well as provide an increase in the amount of an individual's positive emotions (Ryan et al., 2006). Research has also identified a link between video games and stress relief and relaxation as video games allow individuals to enter a trancelike state (Snodgrass et al., 2010). Furthermore, video games are no longer solitary activities, with an increasing number of games featuring multi-player functions community has

become one of the most valuable mental health supports. Playing video games with friends allows individuals to engage in focused game play without becoming so immersed in the game that they lose track of time (Jones et al., 2014). A growing number of academic libraries have begun offering access to gaming systems via circulation and designated gaming spaces. Video games have the ability to draw a variety of library users in, build community, and have a positive impact on their patrons' stress levels, well-being, and mental health. Similarly to colouring, puzzles, and Lego stations, providing access to video games provides students with another varied opportunity to take a break from demanding study sessions while also keeping their minds engaged. Research indicates that almost half of the American adult population plays video games with 59% identifying as male and 41% identifying as female (Boyle, 2018). The popularity of video games provides academic libraries with an opportunity to reach a large demographic who might not otherwise participate in, or pursue, other means of stress relief.

## Conclusion

Academic libraries serve a large and diverse population which often features individual and varying needs. As colleges and universities continue to pivot in favour of taking a more holistic approach to supporting their students' academic and emotional health – campus libraries are also answering the call for more diverse, holistic, and accessible means of student support. In addition to collaborating with campus counselling and health centres to host wellness events, campus libraries are harnessing the power of play to help support their students' mental, emotional, and academic health. As the climate of academia continues to evolve, an increasing amount of research has identified a strong connection between student mental health and well-being and their overall academic success. As a result, libraries are working to diversify their holdings to include colouring materials, video game consoles and accessories, Legos, crafting supplies, and more to better support the mental health and emotional wellness needs of their patronage. Over the past decade academic libraries have worked to provide access to these materials to encourage students to take a break, play with their friends, and distance themselves from the stress and demands of school, work, and exams. Supplying patrons with access to these resources helps in supporting their student's mental health by providing not only a space and the materials needed for students to play and engage in social, engaging, creative, and fun activities but also endorsing the often negatively viewed act of taking a break. Students often study for hours on end without interruption – the stigma surrounding taking breaks has resulted in an unhealthy and imbalanced perception of dedication and accomplishment. By encouraging students to engage with these materials, academic libraries working to destigmatize the idea of taking a break, and helping their students to practice mindfulness, meditation, and balance through play.

As the number of students reporting anxiety, depression, and stress continues to increase so must the number of on campus resources available to them. Library based play initiatives have continued to evolve from seasonal offerings accompanying high-stress seasons, such as mid-terms and exams, to permanent collection materials,

spaces, and sessions. The familiar, and often nostalgic, feelings associated with colouring, building with Legos, and playing video games with friends have each proven to have multiple mental health benefits including a reduction in stress, anxiety, and boredom, and an increase in engagement, productivity, social skills, use of health coping mechanisms, and quality of work. The mission of most academic libraries is to support their patrons in their pursuit of knowledge, academic success, and growth by providing access to academic support materials, resources, references, and more. The correlation between overall illbeing (stress, anxiety, mental health crisis, etc.) and poor academic success has introduced a new area of need for library users. By providing access to play materials including more expensive resources such as Lego kits, virtual reality, and gaming systems, academic libraires can help to provide increased accessibility to healthy methods of coping for their student patronage. Although a great deal of progress has been made in creating a more holistic library environment for college and university students, academic libraries must continue to diversify their holdings and services in support of their student's academic and mental health.

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