Creating a Culture of Care: A Case Study of Finals Week Activities and Student Wellbeing Assessment

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Keywords: Academic libraries, Outreach, Final exams week, Wellbeing, Assessment, Programming

INTRODUCTION

Institutional support for student wellbeing is an increasingly critical focus in higher education, particularly given the rising prevalence of mental health concerns among college populations. While libraries may traditionally be perceived primarily as academic resources, they hold a unique and vital position in fostering student wellbeing through targeted initiatives. This case study explores the role of Auburn University Libraries (AUL) in enhancing and assessing student support during finals week, a time often associated with heightened stress and anxiety among students.

As Auburn University experienced a significant increase in enrollment—welcoming 5,900 first-year students in 2023—it had become imperative for the institution to actively engage in initiatives that assist students in navigating academic challenges, especially during pivotal transitional periods such as the first semester. Historical efforts by AUL to provide "de-stress" services, including board games, a quiet reflection room, and therapy dogs, underscored a

commitment to student wellbeing. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a re-evaluation and restructuring of these offerings.

The 2019 strategic plan for Auburn Libraries emphasized student success as a primary goal, calling for collaboration with various campus units to develop effective engagement strategies. With the reintroduction of in-person services in fall 2021 and the subsequent hiring of a new Instruction and Student Success Librarian in fall 2022, AUL has reinvigorated its focus on wellbeing initiatives, particularly in the context of finals week programming.

From spring 2024 to spring 2025, two librarians at AUL conducted a multi-stage assessment of AUL's efforts to enhance student wellbeing through activities during finals week. The goal was to address gaps in knowledge regarding the effectiveness of these initiatives. The research specifically addresses four core questions:

1. How do students perceive the library's involvement in finals week activities?
2. What is the perceived impact of these activities on students' stress and anxiety levels?
3. What specific recommendations do students have for future initiatives?
4. How can the Libraries effectively evaluate the return on investment for the resources allocated to these initiatives?

By exploring these questions, this case study aims to contribute to the broader conversation surrounding the role of academic libraries in supporting student mental health, ultimately ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of wellbeing initiatives within the educational landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Mental Health and Wellness

Colleges and universities in the U.S. have escalated their responsiveness to student mental health concerns in the past couple of decades, coinciding with rising student needs. Looking at data from 2010 to 2015, Xiao et al. (2017) found an increase in conditions such as general anxiety, depression, and social anxiety. Research attributes increased student stress to technology and social media use (Lattie et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2016), substance abuse (Mochrie et al., 2020), identity-based discrimination (Gopalan et al., 2022; Travia, Wall, et al., 2022) and campus culture pressures (Byrd & McKinney, 2012; Donovan et al., 2013). Students' mental health concerns only intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic. As universities shifted to remote instruction, students faced isolation, uncertainty, and external pressures, affecting their academic performance and persistence (Elharake et al., 2023; Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Gopalan et al., 2022; McAfee et al., 2025). College students reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidality in post-COVID years (American Council on Higher Education, 2025). University provided counseling centers and broader campus wellness initiatives aim to address this need, especially in providing community and reducing social isolation (Gopalan et al., 2022; Legros & Boyraz, 2025), with some positive effects, but student mental health and help-seeking rates remain worrisome (Brown, 2018; Copeland et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2024). Colleges and universities increasingly invest heavily in developing networked cultures of support outside the classroom, especially for underrepresented students, despite variance across institutions (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024; Travia, Larcus, et al., 2022). Strong student services programs are regularly upheld as key

contributors to student retention, persistence, and graduation, highlighting the connection between student wellbeing outside the classroom with performance inside the classroom (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Ehrenberg & Webber, 2010; Ciobanu, 2013).

Academic Libraries and Student Wellbeing

Academic libraries in recent decades have already been sensitive to students' emotional states. Library anxiety, defined as the uncertainty and inadequacy students feel when searching for resources (Mellon, 1986), is something that librarians have actively combatted through student-centered spaces and outreach (Lackner et al., 2023; Larsen et al., 2019; McPherson, 2015). However, with this growing focus on student mental wellness in the broader academic sphere, academic libraries continue to refine their services with an eye toward factors beyond the academic sphere that affect students' mental states (Deeken et al., 2019). Moreover, libraries increasingly position themselves as collaborators with other campus units to promote student success, aligning themselves with institutional priorities (Brewster & Cox, 2023; Croxton & Moore, 2020). Language relating to whole-person development, wellness, wellbeing, and mental health occurs regularly in literature overviewing academic libraries' engagement initiatives (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2024; Bladek, 2021; Blummer & Kenton, 2019; Brewster & Cox, 2023; Cox & Brewster, 2021; Grimes, 2024; Hall & McAlister, 2021; Ramsey & Aagard, 2018). Parallel to the broader university, academic libraries have also identified COVID-19 and its aftereffects as stressors to students, as they have seen fluctuations in student performance and engagement (Jackson et al., 2023). In the past five years, academic libraries have re-examined their programs, positions, services, and spaces with a strengthened sensitivity to student mental health (Bladek, 2021; Bowman et al., 2025; Johnson, 2023; Kim & Yang, 2022; Simms & Paschke-Wood, 2022).

Stress-relief in Academic Libraries

Derived from this desire to support student wellbeing beyond the classroom, academic libraries in recent years have offered a great deal of extra-curricular programming and services. Predictably, some of this programming is book-related. Beyond offering texts for academic research, academic libraries may offer student-centered book clubs (Jansen, 2019; Lackner et al., 2023; Szempruch & Hinds, 2022) or small sub-collections focused on leisure reading and popular books (Brookbank, 2023; Brookbank et al., 2018; Dewan, 2010; 2023; Trott & Elliott, 2007). Bibliotherapy, emphasizing the therapeutic benefits of reading, has been in practice since the early 1900s, and continues in many academic libraries today (Grimes, 2024). Besides books, academic libraries may offer other items intended to relieve stress, such as Legos or games for checkout (Nance, 2022). Academic libraries with makerspaces frequently offer student engagement events, helping not only to build skills but also to create community and a sense of student belonging (Beavers et al., 2019; E. C. Bell et al., 2023). Other common events centered on wellness include yoga sessions (Burns et al., 2024; Carson, 2019; Casucci & Baluchi, 2019; Humphries, 2021; Rose et al., 2016) and therapy dogs and other animals (A. Bell, 2013; Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015; Smith et al., 2022). Finally, academic libraries are increasingly attuned to the effect of the physical environment on students' mental state, with much literature focusing on sensory-friendly study spaces (Boyer & El-Chidiac, 2023; Francis, 2025), quiet meditation rooms (Bremer, 2019; Eberhart, 2018; Morgan, 2020), and relaxation spaces (Downey et al., 2024; Wise, 2018). Additionally, hiring dedicated

student success librarians has become increasingly common as libraries seek to address a broader range of student intellectual and emotional needs (Rood, 2025).

Finals Week Activities in Academic Libraries

During finals week specifically, many activities organized by libraries are supported by research demonstrating their effectiveness in relieving stress. Coloring for adults emerged as a popular stress-relief option in libraries during the 2010s and has since become a staple in finals week programming (Blackburn & Chamley, 2016). Both video and board games have also been popular options for decades (Bowman et al., 2025; Newton, 2011). Pet therapy has been validated by extensive research showing the calming effects of animals. Libraries often collaborate with campus mental health partners to provide therapeutic animals for students (Barker et al., 2016; S. Bell, 2015.; Edwards et al., 2022; Flynn, 2017; Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015). Furthermore, providing food, promotional items, and stress balls has proven to be a popular choice for giveaways that not only foster goodwill but also offer nourishment for students during a critical time (Atilano, 2018; Bowman et al., 2025; Brewerton & Woolley, 2016; Rose et al., 2016). Additionally, offering stress toys that feature the library's logo and are designated as a library mascot are increasingly well-received branding bonuses for libraries (Brewerton & Woolley, 2016).

In recent decades, academic libraries have increasingly integrated wellness-focused physical activity initiatives into their finals week programming. These initiatives often include yoga sessions, walking challenges, or similar meditative practices that encourage stress relief and mindfulness, designed to promote mental wellbeing among students. (Bowman et al., 2025; Humphries, 2021; Lenstra, 2020; Rose et al., 2016). This shift reflects a growing awareness of the importance of holistic support in academic settings, particularly concerning the mental health needs of students during critical periods. Walking activities are less common in the context of physical activities offered during final exams. Prichard and Brazer (2020) highlight the "Finals Fairy" activity, a large-scale effort that involves gathering prizes, coordinating schedules to hide these items in the building and promote them, and concealing a grand prize ticket in a book within the library's stacks each semester. This initiative aims to help students destress and encourage them to explore areas of the library with which they may be less familiar. In 2014, the University of Oklahoma's Bizzell Library generated excitement with a walking maze, or labyrinth, activity. Students could follow a path projected onto the library floor, allowing them to walk and concentrate on mindfulness (Chant, 2014). Labyrinth walking has been shown to have overwhelmingly positive effects on mental well-being (Cook & Croft, 2015; Zucker et al., 2016). While some libraries may not have a physical labyrinth for students to use, others encourage walking by providing routes based on the desired number of steps participants wish to take (Lenstra, 2020).

Outreach Frameworks and Assessment

As libraries incorporate student wellbeing outreach into their user-centered services, considering a framework for centering and developing these programs is beneficial. The Wellness Wheel framework encourages libraries "to create an environment for holistic student development and growth using the library's existing spaces and resources" (Hinchliffe & Wong, 2010, p. 219). Additional frameworks that prioritize wellbeing services to students are The Hierarchy of Library User Needs, which adapts Maslow's theory of motivation to consider a community's motivation

for using the library (Logan & Everall, 2019), and the Framework for Flourishing, which highlights the human experience with information, addressing the social and emotional needs of college students and their connection to information systems (Langan, 2025).

Upon adopting a framework, libraries should strive to set specific goals for initiatives focused on student success and assess these goals using suitable evaluation methods (Oakleaf, 2010; Soria et al., 2013; Mezick, 2007). A variety of assessment strategies are recommended to aid in prioritizing activities, allocating resources, and managing time effectively, validating libraries' relevance and effectiveness in an evolving information landscape (Farrell & Mastel, 2016). The ACRL Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries guide library assessment practitioners, encouraging both leaders and non-leaders to engage in assessment. They emphasize the importance of focusing on people's needs and clearly communicating the purpose and goals of assessment projects (Emmons & Oakleaf, 2016).

For libraries evaluating their outreach activities, several studies offer examples of tactics to employ. For example, Farrell and Mastel (2016) offer various strategies and illustrative scenarios. Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015) conducted a survey of librarians involved in outreach efforts. They found that the most common approaches for assessing the impact of finals programming involve librarians' collecting user feedback in person and tracking attendance numbers. Their research also indicated a significant majority of respondents (59%) do not have a designated coordinator for activities during finals week. Typically, outreach responsibilities fall within the job descriptions of most librarians in public service departments, along with various assessment duties. Additionally, Meyers-Martin and Borchard highlighted the need for the evolution of finals week assessment strategies, suggesting that further research should investigate how libraries modify their programming based on these assessments.

ACRL's "Value of Academic Libraries" initiative encouraged libraries to align their services with institutional priorities and to use robust assessment methods (Oakleaf, 2010). A common model used to approach this is the return on investment (ROI), which can be used to relay the value of the library to its stakeholders (Kelly et al., 2012). ROI frameworks for assessing library services are typically focused on the monetary value of these services, such as how the cost of library collections relates to student retention rates. It is less common to use ROI as a tool to evaluate outreach programming (Santiago et al., 2019).

Finals Week Activities at Auburn University Libraries

Finals week activities at AUL in the post-COVID years have centered around revitalizing student engagement with library programs and spaces, specifically focusing on wellness-based and stress-relief activities. Free food, crafting events, and evidence-based therapeutic activities such as yoga and therapy dogs are long-running staples in the Libraries' offerings. Most events are held at Ralph Brown Draughon (RBD) Library, the central campus branch, though the Library of Architecture, Design and Construction (LADC) held programming as well. Events are promoted through social media, primarily Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Typically, the library will post on its profile page about main events to be held during the week, reinforced with posts to its stories the day before or day of. Physical and digital signage is also present throughout the building for individual events.

Events at RBD are run by a range of departments within the library: Research and Instruction Services (RIS) hosts an adult coloring room, movie night, and yoga session, and organizes a giveaway of 600 chicken sandwiches; Special Collections runs a postcard printing event using letterpress printing; the Innovation and Research Commons offers virtual reality (VR) play, crafting in the makerspace, and digital art activities with Adobe products; and the administrative office oversees marketing, purchasing, and set up of a variety of these programs. One of the Libraries' most popular events is the distribution of roughly 2000 stress toys in the shape of a tiger, Auburn University's mascot. During the fall, the stress tiger, named Ralph after the library building, are placed on a Christmas "book tree" for distribution, while in spring semesters, they are hidden throughout RBD's stacks. Additionally, in spring 2025, a handful of "special" tigers wearing miniature costumes were also hidden (see Figure 1), which could be redeemed for a library prize package when found. This event is primarily run by the administrative and RIS departments, with additional volunteers from around the library. Finally, some programs involve collaboration with other campus units, such as the Student Government Association's (SGA) Up All Night event, held Sunday-Thursday of finals week, in which the SGA distributes donuts and orange juice at midnight, or the visitation of therapy dogs from the student counseling office.
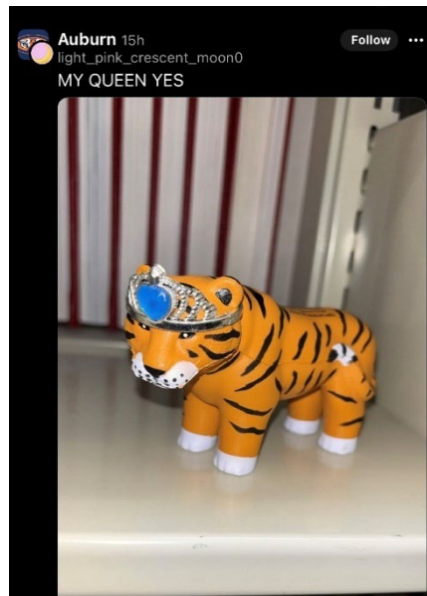

Figure 1. Spring 2025 Finals Week Special Ralph Stress Tiger Social Media Post

This study covers three finals week periods from spring 2024 to spring 2025. Most of the Libraries' core events remained consistent between semesters (see Table 1); however, there were minor fluctuations in the timing or organization of several. For example, movies changed between semesters, as did the themes of the makerspace activities and letterpress postcard printing. Saxophone carols are held only in the fall semester to coincide with the upcoming holidays. As mentioned, the stress tiger giveaway format shifts between semesters. Chicken sandwiches were initially distributed in two waves, 10 am and 10:30 am, but after observing foot traffic patterns, librarians settled on distributing them all at once, at 10 am, from fall 2024 onwards. Origami

instruction was dropped in spring 2025, but additional events in the LADC branch were added. Still, event offerings during this period were stable enough to allow for relatively consistent assessments.

Table 1

Finals Week Activities at Auburn University Libraries, Spring 2024 - Spring 2025

Spring 2024	Fall 2024	Spring 2025
Chicken Sandwich Giveaway	Chicken Sandwich Giveaway	Chicken Sandwich Giveaway
Tiger hunt	Tiger book tree	Tiger hunt
Therapy Dogs	Therapy Dogs	Therapy Dogs
SGA Giveaway of donuts and orange juice	SGA Giveaway of donuts and orange juice	SGA Giveaway of donuts and orange juice
Yoga with Campus Rec	Yoga with Campus Rec	Yoga with Campus Rec
Coloring Room	Coloring Room	Coloring Room
Movie Night: *Twilight*	Movie Night: *Elf*	Movie Night: *Inside Out*
VR Drop-In Time	VR Drop-In Time	VR Drop-In Time
Creative Fun with Adobe	Creative Fun with Adobe	Creative Fun with Adobe
Makerspace Activities	Makerspace Activities	Makerspace Activities
Letterpress Postcard Printing	Letterpress Postcard Printing	Letterpress Postcard Printing
Origami Instruction	Origami Instruction	Panera Breakfast at LADC
	Saxophone Carols	Scavenger Hunt at LADC

METHODOLOGY

Survey

To assess students' perceptions of the impact of the library's efforts on their own stress levels and feelings toward the library, the research team conducted a survey via Qualtrics. Understanding that students' stress levels are high and their free time is limited during finals week, the survey was

designed to be intentionally low-stakes, quick to complete, and short. Following an information letter—linked in a separate window, to minimize scrolling and remove barriers for students—the final Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved survey consisted of only three questions (see Appendix A for full survey):

- Q1: Do you feel that the library providing stress-relief centered finals week activities lowers your finals week anxiety?

- Q2: How does the library engaging in finals week activities impact your perception of the library?

- Q3: Do you have any feedback or recommendations on how the library engages with students during finals week?

Responses to the first two questions were multiple choice, with students rating the impact on their stress levels and the favorability of their perceptions of the library. The third question allowed for free-response comments, giving students space to add context to their ratings.

Figure 2. Flyer Promoting the Research Study Containing QR Code to Survey

The survey was accessible through a link and QR code (shown in Figure 2), and it was distributed in several ways. Printed flyers were placed around the building throughout study and common areas, and the library's digital signage also included a slide for the survey in its rotation. The survey flyer graphic was also resized for sharing on the library's social media accounts, including Instagram and Facebook, via a post and stories throughout the week. The researchers concentrated their recruitment of participants in these library-centered spaces, both physical and virtual, since their target population was library users rather than the broader campus. No

demographic restrictions were placed on potential participants, other than that they were age 18 or up, and no demographic data was collected.

The study was conducted during finals week of three consecutive semesters: spring 2024, fall 2024, and spring 2025. Once the survey results had been collected, researchers examined the quantitative data and qualitative comments. For Q1 and Q2, researchers analyzed the numerical data about students' reported perceptions of the library's activities for statistical significance, looking to see if there was a correlation between the two research questions. For Q3, researchers collaboratively coded comments in Excel, identifying themes that emerged from users' feedback.

Other Assessment Methods

In addition to conducting a survey to understand students' views on the library's role during finals week, the research team also carried out informal assessments of their programs throughout the week to collect data on user participation in various activities. For yoga and movie nights, librarians kept track of participant numbers. For the coloring room, they procured a people counter for the door, informally observed use, and retained the finished coloring sheets users left behind for display. Some programs, such as the chicken sandwich and stress tiger giveaways, had set numbers of items distributed, so participant counts do not fully capture student enthusiasm. Whatever type of data was possible to gather, however, the research team used what they could to demonstrate engagement with events.

RESULTS

Survey Results

Quantitative

Over the three semesters during which the study was conducted, researchers received 100 responses to the survey, all of which answered Q1 and Q2, and 53 of which left comments under Q3, 51 of which were valid responses. The responses to Q1 (see Figure 3) and Q2 (see Figure 4) indicate an overwhelmingly positive impact of the library's finals week activities on both student stress and perceptions. When asked about the impact of the library's programming on their finals week anxiety—the purported purpose of such stress-relief events—80 percent of students reported a positive impact, with 47 percent rating that impact as slight and 33 percent as significant. Only 6 percent of participants indicated the impact was negative to some degree.

Q1: Do you feel that the library providing stress relief centered finals week activities lowers your finals week anxiety?

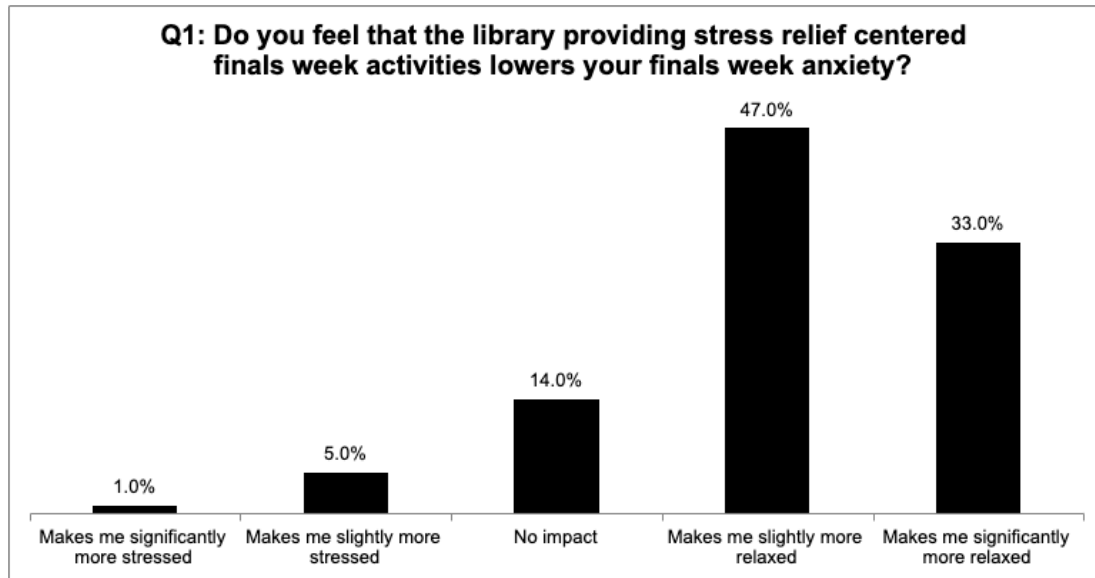|				
1.0%	5.0%	14.0%	47.0%	33.0%
Makes me significantly more stressed	Makes me slightly more stressed	No impact	Makes me slightly more relaxed	Makes me significantly more relaxed

Figure 3. Survey Responses to Q1

In response to Q2, interrogating students' perceptions of the library as impacted by the library's involvement in finals week, there was an even stronger lean toward the positive end of the spectrum than seen in Q1. Reflecting on their attitudes, 94 percent of students answered that they saw the library more favorably to some degree, with 15 percent saying that impact was slight and 79 percent rating it as strong. Only 1 percent—that is, 1 respondent—answered that the impact was in any way negative.

Q2: How does the library engaging in finals week activities impact your perception of the library?

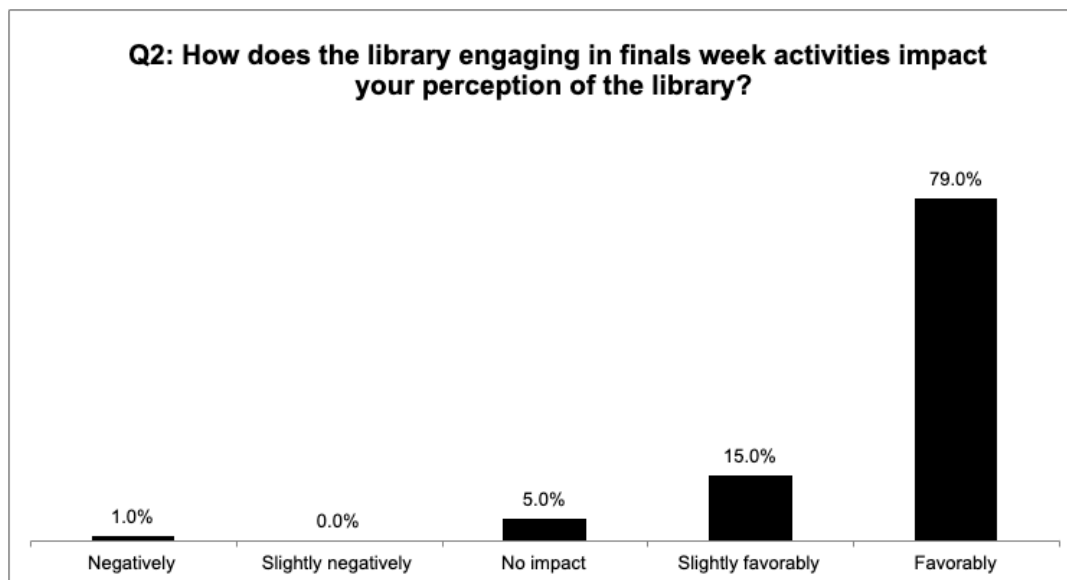|				
1.0%	0.0%	5.0%	15.0%	79.0%
Negatively	Slightly negatively	No impact	Slightly favorably	Favorably

Figure 4. Survey Responses to Q2

Given the strongly positive trend to both quantitative research questions, researchers sought to determine if there was a correlation between the two sets of responses. When the library offers wellness programming, is there an effect beyond the stated purpose of student stress relief,

giving the library some additional return on its investment? To assess the correlation between ranked values, a Spearman's correlation was run using the responses (n=100) to Q1 and Q2, coded as Likert-style values from 1 to 5. This statistical test resulted in a p-value of 0.000003612, with a rho or effect size of 0.44. A p-value is the probability that the null hypothesis is true, or that it is likely that the two data sets are related only by chance. As p-value approaches zero, this indicates a stronger probability that the null hypothesis is false. Given the low p-value here, with $p<0.05$, there is a strong statistical significance to the correlation of the research questions. The rho of 0.44 is moderate, meaning there is a moderate positive correlation within the data (Peter Statistics, n.d.)—generally, as the positive impact on student stress increases, favorable student perceptions of the library will also rise (see Figure 5).
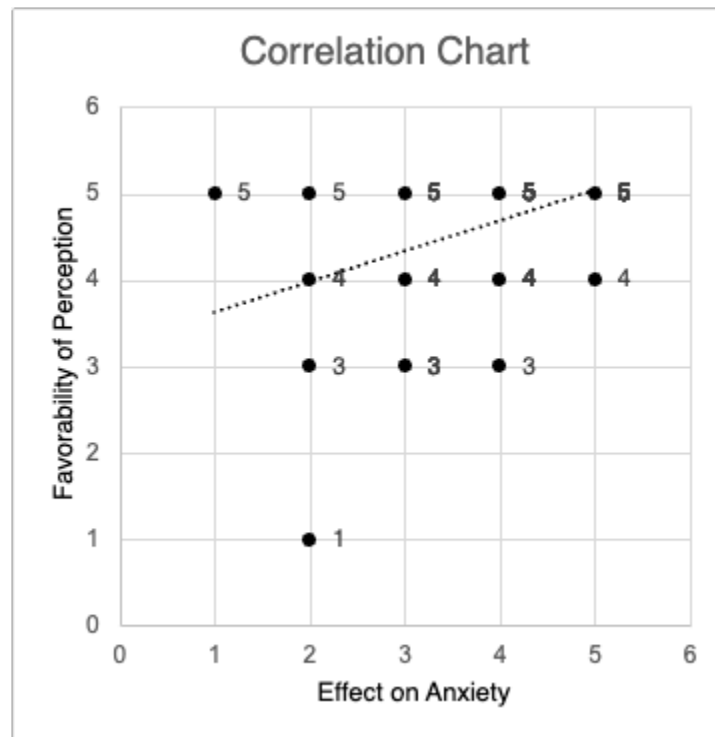

Figure 5. Correlation of Q1 and Q2 Responses

Qualitative

Researchers coded the qualitative comments from Q3 by category (see Figure 6). The comments were largely positive. Sometimes woven into comments regarding food, the theme of caring was evident, as respondents acknowledged the care the library extended (3) or directly expressed appreciation (10). Additional frequent themes were suggestions for improvements or additional activities (30), stress tiger comments (21), and food-related comments (13). In the spring 2024 survey responses, one respondent commented, "I feel like the Ralph [stress tiger] hunt just causes more stress because everyone wants one. I feel like it was better in the winter because they were all in one place if anyone wanted one," while another respondent shared "Finding Raplhs [sic] around the library was a very much needed mental break from studying." The following semester,

when stress tigers were instead placed on the book tree, of the 6 comments related to the stress tiger, 4 mention specifically bringing back the "tiger hunt." The next semester, spring 2025, when the stress tiger hunt was back on the roster of events, of the 13 comments that were received, 7 mentioned the stress tiger, or "more ralphs" and "we need more ralphs!!"

The food-related comments were broad, with only one mentioning the specific chicken sandwiches that are given out. Among the 13 food-related comments, 5 mentioned "more" in front of the word "treat" or "food." One respondent commented, "I know it's more expensive on you guys but the food is great because it's one less meal I have to plan and one less thing I have to think about." Another comment wove care and appreciation into food: "I love the free food being handed out because during finals week I often forget to eat so it is almost like yall are checking in on my health and I really appreciate it." The word "love" also made a frequent appearance (13) in the context of the stress tigers and food, with one comment relaying a mixed response: "they were really cute ideas i just didn't want to go the library bc of how crowded it gets during finals week. usually love it there tho and this makes me love it a little more."

The remaining themes that emerged from the comments related to the timing of events (5), suggestions for the SGA event (4), better advertising and promotion efforts (3), and complaints about the crowded building (2). Additional codes included single comments about therapy dogs, movies to show, yoga, coloring, crafts, and music events.
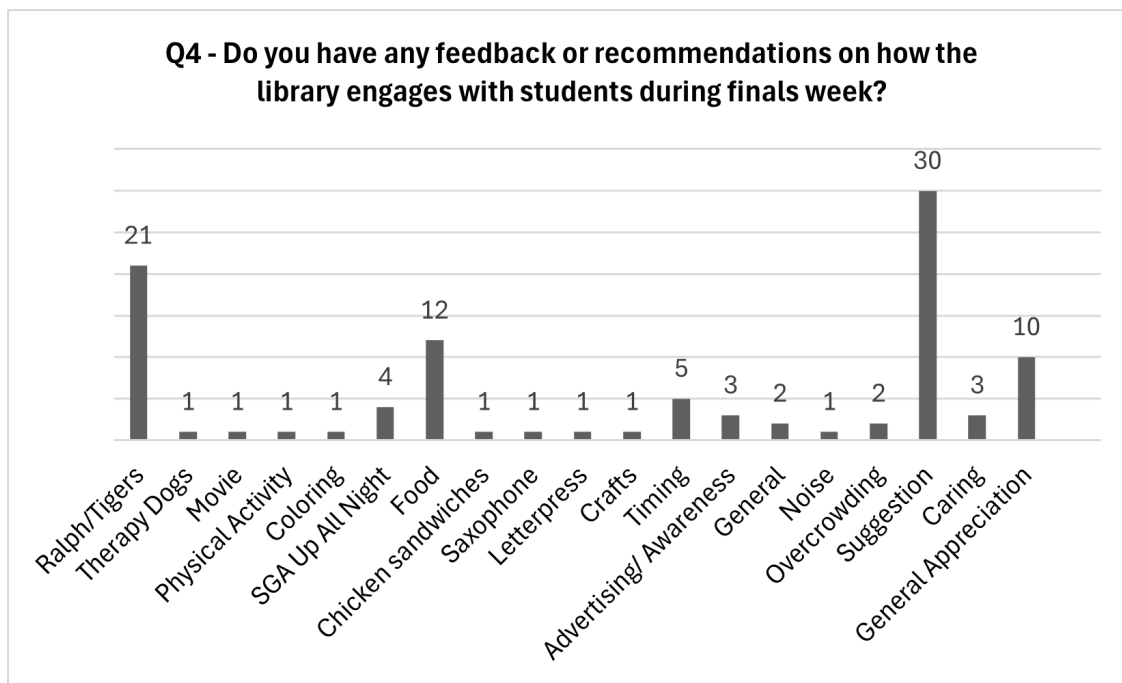

Figure 6. Coding Categories from Q3

Other Assessment Data

Some of the other assessments the project team undertook resulted in less clear data. For example, the library installed a people counter on the door to the coloring room to track participant numbers. However, in addition to serving as the coloring space, the classroom was also used for the movie night and for storing the tables used during SGA giveaways—thus, not all foot traffic into the room truly reflects coloring event participants. Researchers know many students *did* use the room for coloring, based on personal observations, the evidence (finished coloring sheets) left behind, and the assumption that at least some traffic on the counter came from this source, but it cannot be relied upon as a representative assessment for the event.

Other events lend themselves toward easier data collection since they are staffed rather than passive programs. Librarians could simply count the number of movie night and yoga session attendees (see Table 2). For giveaways such as stress tigers or chicken sandwiches, the number of items distributed is set, and the Libraries certainly have been able to disburse all items; however, numerical tallies do not capture student sentiment or feedback. Thus, asking students directly about the effects of the events results in a fuller picture of the impact of library programming.

Table 2

Participant Counts of Select Events

	Spring 2024	Fall 2024	Spring 2025
Movie Night Attendees	40	7	19
Yoga Attendees	8	3	3

DISCUSSION

Student Perceptions Data

The quantitative results indicate that students perceive the library's efforts during finals week in a strongly positive light. Most students (80 percent) perceived their stress levels to be positively impacted, and an even larger share (94 percent) saw their perceptions of the library to be more favorable. This measurement does not necessarily reflect students' actual physiological stress metrics such as cortisol, blood pressure, or other biometric markers (Crosswell & Lockwood, 2020), and it does not use a formal measurement tool for self-perception such as the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), common in longer-term assessments of stress on population health (Cohen et al., 1983). This initial study used an accessible research instrument tailored to participants' specific circumstances, yet the results still offer valuable and statistically significant insights into students' self-reported feelings. And it is interesting to note that the skew of the quantitative results is even more positive regarding students' perceptions of the library. Yes, most students enjoy the finals week events offered, but even more so, the results indicate they recognize and feel holistically supported by the library's efforts in offering these and in creating a welcoming space.

When considering the return on the investment of libraries' time, labor, and money into finals week activities, it is tempting to ask what the effect is in terms of concrete stress measures or even on factors such as exam performance or student retention. However, in this case, the impact on student feelings is the entire point. Other studies on student engagement in library activities have also focused on student self-perception, determining that feelings of community, belonging, and kindness are valuable markers of engagement (Binfet et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2023). Does the academic library engaging in finals week programming actually reduce student stress? Maybe. Does it make students *feel* less stressed, and does that in turn make them feel more cared for by the library? This current study would indicate it does.

Student Comments Discussion

While the comments elicited only one response regarding the movie ("I loved the Elf movie!"), that response additionally suggested offering more than one movie, which librarians had not considered. The selection of movie titles was based on specific criteria: they needed to be relevant to the undergraduate student demographic, capable of eliciting nostalgia from their childhoods, and possess a humorous, light-hearted, or campy nature. Research has demonstrated that humor serves as an effective intervention for stress relief (Rose et al., 2016; White & Winzelberg, 1992).

The popularity of the stress tiger turned out to be a successful decision, with numerous comments requesting more of them and expressing excitement about the much-needed "break" they provided while searching for them in the building (Johnson, 2023; Lenstra, 2020). Moreover, the excitement surrounding their discovery sparked significant activity on social media, showcasing the potential for the toys to help establish a brand for the Libraries (Brewerton & Woolley, 2016).

Attendance and Enthusiasm

For events where set items for distribution translate to stable participation numbers, assessment continues to be complicated. Six hundred sandwiches and 2000 tigers are given away each semester. On the one hand there is not much data to compare, but on the other hand, librarians' own observations of student enthusiasm provide context to the success of these events. The sandwich giveaway is always popular: students regularly line up nearly 10 minutes before the start time, with a line stretching halfway through the library building. Yet, librarians noticed that once the initial crowd subsided, it was hard to distribute all sandwiches, hence the scheduling shift to giving all sandwiches away in one wave versus two. Likewise, the growing intensity around the stress tiger giveaway was not only seen in the survey responses but also reflected in librarians' encounters with students. Several librarians reported being followed by students as they hid tigers during the tiger hunt and had discussions with students about when the tigers would be hidden. Additionally, social media post comments showed a rising intensity especially around the spring 2025 "special" tigers.

Events where participation was tracked allow for easier assessment. Both the movie night and yoga saw a dip in attendance in fall 2024 (See Figure 7). This may be due to the academic calendar scheduling classes to end closer to the Christmas holiday than usual. Many students reported that professors were opting for alternatives to traditional in-class exams, which allowed students to leave campus earlier. Attendance for the movie night increased again in spring 2025,

while yoga attendance remained stable, suggesting that this program needs to be rescheduled or reevaluated.

Figure 7. Spring 2024 Movie Night "Twilight"

Return on Investment

Over the past decade or so, academic libraries have focused on connecting library usage and students' grades, retention rates, and graduation rates (Oakleaf, 2010; Soria et al., 2013; Mezick, 2007). While quantifiable metrics found in a typical return on investment (ROI) would be used to convey such a narrative for finals week, this study does not attempt to do so. Translating qualitative impacts, such as that of finals week activities on students' perceived stress levels and feedback, into quantitative metrics involving monetary costs would be challenging, if not impossible. While the data exists for the costs of some of the finals activities, such as the chicken sandwiches ($5.07 per sandwich X 600), the costs of the stress tigers and materials used in coloring room, yoga room, and elsewhere are not easily quantifiable due to some items being collected over the years or donated by personnel. While the finals week activities require labor, some of the labor is donated, such as the yoga instructor's, and outreach responsibilities are part of the researchers' job duties. Therefore, quantifying time and effort for these tasks would be ineffective.

Still, with so much effort spent planning and executing finals week activities, libraries should consider whether there is a return on investment. To demonstrate the impact of the finals week activities, the researchers hypothesized that if student wellness initiatives were offered during finals week, students' perception of the library would improve. Asking students directly if the library's activities affect their stress levels and if those efforts improve their perception of the library does not necessarily imply a correlation to student retention. But it does help demonstrate the library's value and impact on student wellness initiatives. In library assessment, it is common practice to utilize ROI as a framework for evaluating various alternatives and for the strategic allocation of resources, enabling libraries to make informed and effective decisions aligned with

their goals. Of the many library-related ROI frameworks to consider, Santiago et al. (2019) offered a strategy for outreach assessment. This framework suggests the following stages: environmental scan, define scope, categorization, and analysis. The environment scan of collaborators and people/units available for finals week activities had taken place prior to the present study. The scope of this study was student-focused and evidence-based activities, which were then categorized into wellbeing and wellness initiatives, and identified with purpose and demonstrable impact on the student success goal. The analysis stage is the student survey, which determines the impact of finals week programming on student perceptions of the library and stress levels, and offers suggestions for improvement. Students' perceptions of the library improved through activities that supported their growth and success during a high-stress time. Additionally, they *felt* less stressed, which was the entire point of the activities. If the feelings of love, care, and support for an academic library represent the return on investment, then this is a successful endeavor.

Future Action

Though the comments from the survey were generally favorable, there were several specific recommendations for improvement that librarians can consider in future planning. Of the comments about event timing, 4 out of 5 supported events being held earlier in the day versus late-night activities, though 1 person complained they missed out on early events. One participant wrote that earlier events "encourage students to sleep," which is something planners should consider if they are prioritizing whole-person care.

Most of the suggestions are related in some way to the Ralph stress tiger giveaways. Some of these comments are easier for the library to act on than others. Several students (9) requested more tigers typically, RBD already places around 2,000 stress tigers per semester, and within current budget parameters, distributing more may not be realistic; however, this data is useful for consideration in future allocations. Likewise, the request to "have a countdown of Ralph's left" is not actionable, since that would require somehow tracking or reporting every stress tiger students find. Other adjustments are more feasible and are considered lessons learned: improving advertising and communication around events is an ongoing effort at AUL, especially concerning details of stress tiger giveaways, such as how many are available and when they are placed out. The giveaway format was one unexpected theme to surface, with strong support expressed for the tiger hunt. The book tree is a long-running tradition at RBD, but if student-centered programming is the priority, then this may bear reconsideration.

Overall, the comments do not suggest a need for a complete overhaul of AUL's current activities. Most respondents appreciate the events and efforts already in place. Continuing to lean into the practices that emerged most strongly from the suggestions—offering food and other giveaways, communicating clearly to reduce stress on students, and providing a range of programs and times to accommodate erratic schedules—will help the library remain responsive to expressed needs. Furthermore, senior administrators at AUL have utilized this data to inform their support and funding decisions. By taking into account feedback and participation metrics, they have made well-informed choices, such as increasing funding for the distribution of chicken sandwiches. Our assessment of outcomes during finals week has underscored the positive effects of these initiatives, thereby emphasizing the significance of funding requests for future projects that prioritize student wellness initiatives.

Having completed this first stage of finals week assessment, and as the Libraries move into a new strategic plan, the researchers are moving toward more direct user experience methodologies, observing students' use of finals week spaces and programs. This project aims to enhance the understanding of library usage during finals week from the students' perspective and provide insights into students' perceptions of the library, helping inform further wellbeing initiatives, resources, and space.

Implications for Librarians and Assessment of Wellbeing Initiatives

The pivotal role that academic libraries can play in supporting student wellbeing is clearly underscored in this case study. Findings reveal that targeted wellness initiatives, including organized activities like the tiger hunt and chicken sandwich giveaway, significantly contribute to reducing student stress and anxiety. Feedback from students highlights the value of these services in creating a supportive environment that fosters both academic success and mental health.

For library professionals, the study emphasizes the importance of actively engaging with student needs and perceptions. Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms should be established to evaluate the effectiveness of wellness initiatives continuously. Librarians are encouraged to collaborate with campus mental health services and other departments to create holistic support networks that extend beyond traditional library functions.

Moreover, integrating wellness programming into library strategic plans not only enhances student satisfaction and retention but also positions libraries as essential contributors to student success in the broader educational ecosystem. Recommendations include diversifying activities to cater to varied student interests, increasing marketing efforts to ensure awareness of available resources, and promoting data-driven assessments to demonstrate the impact of these services on student wellbeing. Ultimately, by prioritizing student mental health through innovative programming, librarians can significantly enrich the academic experience, fostering an environment where students thrive both academically and emotionally. This proactive approach will help sustain library relevance in a rapidly evolving higher education landscape.

CONCLUSION

This case study emphasizes the importance of academic libraries in facilitating wellbeing initiatives, particularly during high-stress periods like finals week. Through the introduction of diverse wellness activities during finals week, AUL has demonstrated its commitment to supporting students as they navigate one of the most stressful periods of the academic calendar. The evaluation of these initiatives revealed positive perceptions from students regarding the library's involvement and its impact on reducing stress and anxiety levels. Furthermore, the insights gained from student feedback have provided valuable recommendations for future programming. Librarians may choose "unobtrusive and easy to administer" assessment methods (LeMire et al., 2018), but this raises the question: What happens to a program after it has been assessed? If a program fosters supportive environments, could it inadvertently become a defining characteristic of the library? As the landscape of student mental health continues to evolve, it is crucial for academic libraries to adapt and innovate in their approach to supporting student wellbeing. This study lays the groundwork for future research and assessment, paving the way for

libraries to play an even more integral role in promoting a culture of care within the academic community.

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Appendix A: Finals Week Activities Survey

This survey is for an IRB-approved research study on the library's involvement in finals week activities (IRB Protocol# 23-612 EX 2312)

[Click here for a full information letter and details on the study.](#)

By clicking "Agree," you agree to let your answers be used in the results of the study, and that you are age 18 or older. Contact Piper Cumbo at plc0022@auburn.edu for questions.
- o   Agree (1)
- o   Disagree (2)

Do you feel that the library providing stress-relief centered finals week activities lowers your finals week anxiety?
- o   Makes me significantly more stressed (1)
- o   Makes me slightly more stressed (2)
- o   No impact (3)
- o   Makes me slightly more relaxed (4)
- o   Makes me significantly more relaxed (5)

How does the library engaging in finals week activities impact your perception of the library?
- o   Negatively (1)
- o   Slightly negatively (2)
- o   No impact (3)
- o   Slightly favorably (4)
- o   Favorably (5)

Do you have any feedback or recommendations on how the library engages with students during finals week?