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Debunking myths about WISHES

(The Wellbeing Improvement Survey for Higher Education Settings)

What is WISHES?

The Wellbeing Improvement Survey for Higher Education Settings (WISHES) is a brief survey, available **free-of-charge**, that provides colleges and universities with **timely and actionable data** to adapt and improve institutional norms, structures, and processes to enable all students to thrive and flourish.

To date, **eleven schools** have administered WISHES at least once and over **50,000 students** have completed the survey. Preliminary data show **higher response rates** and **positive feedback** from students typically underrepresented in campus surveys.

Read on to learn what makes WISHES different to other survey tools and about the common misconceptions and myths that arise for colleges and universities looking to implement WISHES at their campuses.



MYTH: We already administer surveys on campus and WISHES would be redundant.

WISHES is designed to complement existing instruments—such as NCHA and Healthy Minds—which are valuable and essential to the field but serve different purposes than WISHES.

WISHES can be an 'and'—not an 'or'. WISHES intentionally includes several of the same scales as NCHA and Healthy Minds so that schools can effectively

leverage multiple data sources.

WISHES was designed for the specific purpose of advancing **systemic change** across campuses to **improve student wellbeing outcomes as quickly as possible**. WISHES collects data on the measures that are important and actionable to leaders, administrators, faculty, and students and enables institutions to improve their norms, structures, and processes. The data collected using this tool have helped institutions have important conversations and led to insights that other instruments may not have uncovered.

In addition to its other benefits and use cases, WISHES helps to accelerate the pace of improvement. Since it's shorter than many other surveys, WISHES can be administered multiple times a year which helps you to learn quickly if a change you tried didn't work as expected, understand and respond to the variation in student wellbeing throughout the year, and rapidly assess trends in your data.

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At one college within the Rochester Institute of Technology, WISHES data demonstrated that students who didn't feel like they had a professor who cared about them as a person were more likely to experience poor or fair mental health. In presenting WISHES data to faculty, the data exposed a contradiction between how students were connecting with faculty and faculty perceptions of their relationships with students. These data opened the door for the Student Affairs team to have conversations with faculty and college leadership, allowing them to experiment with changes in the classroom to improve support for students, without sacrificing academic rigor.



NYU's WISHES data changed hearts, minds, strategy, and action around pursuing health equity for trans and non binary students. The WISHES data showed profound disparities in traditional health indicators (e.g. psychological distress) between LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts AND LGBTQ+ students were accessing clinical and campus resources at equal or higher rates than their peers. These insights from WISHES led to deeper probing into the root causes of inequitable wellbeing for LGBTQ+ students, such as the experience of being misgendered or deadnamed (referred to by the gender or name assigned at birth) was frequent and a cause of distress for trans and non-binary students, which prompted significant investment in changes that made a concrete improvement in reducing these incidents.



One institution started administering WISHES on a monthly basis in February 2019 and when the COVID-19 pandemic hit a year later, they were able to, in close to real time, understand the specific ways in which the pandemic was impacting student wellbeing and access to mental health treatment. Valuable, real-time data collected by WISHES allowed the institution to identify needs, opportunities, and important insights by observing patterns over time. Their WISHES data revealed that while more students experienced psychological distress, their rates of treatment engagement among students with need remained unchanged. Their data also suggested improvement in students feeling like their professors cared about them, leading the institution to ask: How can we capture these positive effects when we're not in the midst of a crisis?

Many schools continue to administer NCHA and/or Healthy Minds on a yearly basis (or less frequently) while administering WISHES several times per year. A few schools have even administered WISHES and NCHA at the same time (randomly assigning students to complete one of the two surveys). These institutions saw significantly higher response rates for WISHES, including for traditionally under-represented student populations.



MYTH: Students won't complete yet another survey and surveying multiple times per year will negatively impact response rates.

Our experience has shown this concern is unfounded. WISHES has consistently higher response rates than many other national health surveys. Institutions have the flexibility to create their own sampling strategy and determine the frequency of administration. For example, several institutions have seen success with randomly dividing their student population to limit the number of times an individual student receives the survey per year. Other institutions have repeatedly surveyed the same group of students with little impact on response rates over time. We encourage you to experiment with WISHES, gauge response rates, and adapt your survey strategy to find what works best for your students. The survey is 48 questions, inclusive of demographic questions, and typically

takes students less than 10 minutes to complete, which is significantly shorter than many other national surveys.



Texas A&M University yielded response rates for WISHES that have been consistent over time and higher than some other surveys they administer, and they received positive feedback from students who were thankful that they were being asked these questions about their wellbeing.



For two institutions who administered NCHA and WISHES at the same time, they saw significantly higher response rates for WISHES for completed surveys. The bonus? You get WISHES data even if the survey is incomplete, meaning response rates were higher still for some questions.



MYTH: We have a limited budget and don't have the funds to pay for WISHES.

WISHES is available at **NO COST** to all colleges and universities to help advance their student wellbeing efforts. The Launch Lab is also available at **NO COST**.



MYTH: Implementing a new survey tool is too much of a commitment.

You can have the survey up and running in a few weeks, or less. You may also choose to test your administration strategy with a small subset of students before expanding to larger populations, which will allow you to learn what works—before any longer term planning. Additionally, if you administer WISHES more than once, you will receive a dashboard with the key WISHES measures plotted over time, which minimizes the resources needed for data analysis.



MYTH: Our institution needs a flexible survey approach, so this tool wouldn't work for us.

You have the option to add unlimited custom questions and the flexibility to use different administration methodologies depending on what best serves your unique and specific needs. You build the survey in your own platform (e.g. Google Forms or Qualtrics) and decide on a survey strategy. This is **YOUR** survey instrument. Because the purpose of WISHES is to advance systemic change, we encourage institutions to experiment with different strategies (e.g., frequency, promotion, invitation to participate) to determine what works best for your institution. You can modify your strategy at any time based on what you learn and evolving needs.



Texas A&M used WISHES data to evaluate the impact of Fish Camp, an annual extended orientation program for first year students occurring before classes start each Fall. The data showed that students who attended Fish Camp reported a higher sense of belonging, better wellbeing, and better connections to the campus community compared with those who did not attend. This showed how the program is meeting its core goals and opened up conversations across the institution with other departments that interact with first year students.



One institution initially piloted WISHES with students who engaged with the economic crisis response team to learn about other aspects of these students' wellbeing. Later, they surveyed students at different residence halls and found that the further from campus the halls were, the lower students' sense of belonging—data they shared with ResLife. These smaller scale experiences led to a presidential task force on wellbeing recommending and getting approval to use WISHES for ongoing campus-wide wellbeing assessment.



MYTH: We don't have data specialists so this survey won't work for us.

You do not need a data analyst to use WISHES. You will need to identify a person who can set up the survey (e.g., on paper or on a survey platform such as Google Forms or Qualtrics), promote the survey to students, and send the raw data to the WISHES team. No data analysis is required. Institutions that administer WISHES more than once will be provided with a password-protected dashboard with your institution's key experience and outcomes metrics graphed over time. Certainly, if you do have a data analyst available to your team, you will be able to do more with your data, but it is not a requirement.

Learn about **next steps** for administering WISHES on your campus

☆☆ STEP ONE:

Sign the [WISHES data use agreement](#) (requires users to create an account on the ANEW website and be logged in in order to access). Once you sign the agreement, you will receive the WISHES questions and an onboarding packet.

☆☆ STEP TWO (OPTIONAL):

[Apply to the WISHES Launch Lab](#), a four month, cohort-based collaborative learning experience for institutions that are new to administering WISHES. The Launch Lab focuses on building foundational knowledge and skills for effectively using WISHES data to improve student wellbeing outcomes.

APPLICATION DEADLINE: AUGUST 15



ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [More information about WISHES](#)
- [About the Action Network for Equitable Wellbeing](#)
- [Watch the May 3 webinar about WISHES](#) (requires users to create an account and be logged in to the ANEW website)



QUESTIONS?

Email wishes@nyu.edu.