



# Building an Organizational Culture of Work/Life Balance and Wellbeing

**F**or many of us, work is no longer simply an eight-hour day in the office. With more and more to do, and with the technology to be able to get it done from just about anywhere, work has become a constant presence. Add to that the stresses and busyness of everyday life, and trying to get everything done we need to get done in a day can quickly become overwhelming, and sometimes seemingly impossible.

In an effort to increase morale and engagement and reduce employee stress levels, George Mason University (Mason) is placing a strategic emphasis on work/life balance and employee wellbeing. Part of Mason's strategic plan is

to “become a model well-being university that allows all of its members to thrive.” As such, the university's human resources organization has gone to great lengths to implement a wide range of programming and resources to help Mason employees navigate the ins and outs of work and life and focus on their wellbeing.

## Supporting the Whole Person

Mason's life/work connections team (which is housed in HR) has created and/or sponsors several wellbeing and work/life programs and events designed around Gallup's five essential elements of wellbeing: career wellbeing (liking what you do every day); social wellbeing (having

strong relationships); financial wellbeing (effectively managing your economic life); physical wellbeing (good health and enough energy to get things done); and community wellbeing (engagement with where you work and live).

### ***Who's Walking Wednesday***

Every Wednesday, each Mason campus hosts a 30-minute lunchtime group walk with a designated “walk leader.” Walk leaders have included the university’s president, the provost and several other senior leaders. Those who wish to lead the walk can sign up online, and walkers simply meet at a designated start spot.

The walk leader can take the group anywhere on campus. When the vice president of student affairs led the walk, she took the group to one of the student centers to play skee ball. The route taken by the vice president of facilities had some interesting stops along the way, including a construction project that was underway, circus animals outside Mason’s event area, and the university’s hydroponic greenhouse.

Says Janet Walker, life/work connections manager at Mason, “Aside from getting people out and moving during their day, these walks are an excellent way to showcase different parts of the university that some people may have never seen. They’re a great way to promote collegiality, collaboration and a feeling of community — and they don’t cost a thing.”

### ***Mason Walk In’***

Exercising outdoors isn’t for everyone, so Mason’s wellness team has mapped out one-mile “trails” within 18 campus buildings. “If it’s too cold or too hot outside or if it’s raining or snowing, employees can still get in a one-mile walk during their workday,” says Walker.

### ***DMV2Go***

Once a month, the department of motor vehicles mobile services unit comes to Mason. This DMV “office on wheels” offers services like driver’s license and license plate renewals, driving tests, issuing identification cards and hunting and fishing licenses, and more. In 2016, there were more than 1,000 transactions at DMV2Go at Mason.

### ***Employee Resource Groups***

Mason has several employee resource groups — working mothers, working fathers, a needlework group (which does

charitable projects outside the university but also makes baby hats in Mason colors that are given to new parents who work at the university), a vegan society, a group for administrative professionals, a toastmasters group, an adult caregivers support group and more.

### ***Caregiver Support***

Through a vendor, Mason faculty, staff and graduate students have access to a database of in-home caregivers for childcare, eldercare, pet care and home care, as well as resources related to caregiving.

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### ***Financial Wellbeing***

Human resources has teamed up with several of Mason’s financial services providers and other experts to bring seminars and resources to campus and online with the goal of providing opportunities for faculty and staff to increase their financial knowledge and prepare for life’s expected and unexpected events. Programs are held throughout the academic year and, according to Walker, are always well attended.

### ***Flex Work***

Mason offers many options for a flexible work schedule, including a compressed work schedule, flex time, job sharing, and remote work and telework (both long-term and short-term). “The flex work option is very popular, and we try to accommodate whenever we can,” says Walker.

### ***Spring Into Well-being***

HR has partnered with Mason’s Center for the Advancement of Well-Being and student affairs to promote under one umbrella all of the various health and wellness activities happening across campus each spring.

### ***If at First You Don't Succeed ...***

While Mason’s leadership is supportive of HR’s efforts around employee wellbeing and work/life balance, there were a few hard-fought wins along the way, says Linda

Harber, head of human resources. She credits persistence and thoughtful timing for gaining university leadership support in these instances. For example, Harber and her team tried several times to rework the university's maternity leave policy for nine-month faculty, but the idea never gained traction with leadership. But she stuck with it. "After a significant leadership change a couple of years ago where we saw some new individuals and some women move into leadership positions, I again brought up the possibility of a parental leave model to replace our maternity leave policy, and they showed some interest," she says. Working with faculty groups, deans and senior leadership, Harber was able to implement a robust parental leave policy for the university's faculty.

Another example: an extended winter break for staff. Harber presented the idea to leadership year after year, but was met with resistance for various reasons. One year when the university was facing a budget crunch and was unable to provide salary increases, Harber again pitched the idea as a perk for staff. "Since staff weren't seeing raises that year, I thought some extra paid time off around the holidays might be a nice way for Mason to say 'thanks for all you do,'" she says. Leadership agreed to a trial run that year, and it stuck. "This extra time off around the holidays to truly unplug from work is incredibly appreciated and valued by Mason staff and leadership."

### How to Be a Culture Turner

When embarking upon an effort to embed wellbeing and work/life balance into organizational culture, Harber notes that it's important to distinguish between "perks" and "culture." Perks, she says, are a material investment to achieve short-term happiness. They are easy to implement and easy to replicate. While flashy perks may attract talent, they won't help an organization retain talent. Culture, on the other hand, is an emotional investment. Organizational culture is difficult to build and hard to replicate. "However, when done right, organizational culture can not only help bring people in, but also make them want to stay and bring their best selves to work every day," she says.

Harber offers the following tips on how HR can be a culture turner in an organization:

- Engage senior leadership, faculty and staff in the effort;
- Place a continuous focus on listening;

- Collaborate whenever and wherever possible, and find your natural partners within the organization;
- Keep track of results and present this data to leadership on at least an annual basis; and
- Be flexible, be patient, and be nimble.

"The most difficult part is getting started," says Harber. But she has some suggestions for action steps that can get the ball rolling:

- Reach out to a potential university partner;
- Reach out to a potential community partner;
- Survey faculty and staff on what they need (Harber and her team, along with representatives from across the university, collaborate with a psychology faculty member to design Mason's wellbeing and work/life survey, which is administered every three years);
- Create a working group to look at wellbeing options;
- Have a conversation with senior leaders; and/or
- Brainstorm low-cost/no-cost wellbeing options that are easy to implement.

### A Happier, Healthier Workforce

Walker sums it up perfectly. "You can't just turn off work when you go home at the end of the day, and you can't turn off home when you walk in the door to work. Home and life circumstances have an impact on your work, and work has an impact on your home and life circumstances." It's Walker's team's job to help lessen that impact.

"By providing the level of support and resources we do, we're taking deliberate steps to shift perceptions around work/life and wellbeing; attract, engage and retain talented staff and faculty; and create a happier, healthier workforce," says Walker. "People want to work here, and they want to stay here, because they know Mason cares about their wellbeing, their health and their happiness." 

To learn more about George Mason University's life/work and wellbeing efforts, visit the life/work connections web page at <http://hr.gmu.edu/worklife/>, view the CUPA-HR on-demand webinar "HR Be Nimble: Work/Life and Well-being" ([www.cupahr.org/events/webinars.aspx](http://www.cupahr.org/events/webinars.aspx)), or contact Mason's life/work connections manager, Janet Walker, at [jwalker8@gmu.edu](mailto:jwalker8@gmu.edu).