

# 7 Ways Professors Can Prioritize Student Wellness

Because of their frequent interactions in class, faculty members can play a big role in ensuring students' well-being and connecting them to help when needed. Informed by data from a Student Voice survey of 2,000 college undergraduates, the following actions and approaches can foster a better understanding of the challenges students are facing and ensure professors are equipped to assist when an individual needs help.

## 1. Get to know your students' top stressors.

**4 of the top 7**

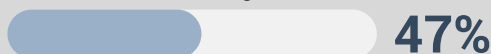
Stressors identified by students (who could select up to 4 of 17 options) that are related to coursework or student success

**57%**

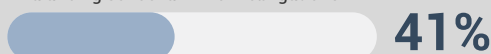
Students who identified "keeping up with my coursework" as a top stressor from the prior month

### Other Top Stressors

Pressure to do well at college

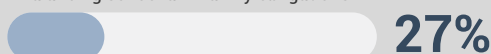


Balancing school and work obligations



52% of two-year college students

Balancing school and family obligations



39% of two-year college students

### ONE STUDENT'S VOICE:

"I feel like school is so overwhelming, I have had very little time for much else in life."



## 2. Take an active role in student well-being.

**33%**

Students who say COVID has made them more focused on taking care of their mental health

**17%** are less focused on mental health

### A PROFESSIONAL'S PERSPECTIVE:

"The responsibility of campuswide mental health cannot fall solely to the counseling center or wellness center. We need academic chairs bringing this to all faculty members. Right now the approach to seek help is a really proactive one. [But there are] ways we can put mental health more into students' daily lives and into the curriculum. We can reach students where they're at."

—Sarah Ketchen Lipson, principal investigator, Healthy Minds Network, and assistant professor, Boston University

## 3. Show empathy by being flexible and mindful about deadlines.

**56%**

Students (full survey sample) who say their overall mental health is fair or poor

**70%**

LGBTQIA+ students whose mental health is fair or poor

**71%**

Students who identify as being part of the lower class socioeconomically whose mental health is fair or poor



### A PROFESSIONAL'S PERSPECTIVE:

Assignments due at 9 a.m. encourage students to pull an all-nighter. Midnight deadlines often result in skipping dinner.

"I think 5 p.m. is the healthiest time to have an assignment due. I tell students, 'It's because I want you to have dinner, because I want you to sleep.'"

—Sarah Ketchen Lipson, Boston University

### ONE STUDENT'S VOICE:

"Teachers need more training and understanding of how different mental illnesses affect schoolwork. I have had many teachers be patient with me but also a handful who have completely blown me off and wouldn't help me in any way."

### IDEA TO MODEL:

The Well-Being for Life and Learning initiative run by the University of Washington Resilience Lab aids instructors in designing learning environments that promote well-being. In 2020, the Resilience Lab published an 87-page guidebook combining research, best practices and personal testimony about supporting the whole student. All instructors, deans, chancellors and advising staff received the guidebook, and staff representing all three campuses meet monthly to exchange ideas and teaching strategies.



#### ONE STUDENT'S VOICE:

"Schoolwork doesn't put itself on hold while we try to find help. It's not like we can focus on our mental health because we have work to do."

#### 4. Include wellness resources in syllabi and class sessions.

75%

Students who say they've struggled with anxiety during college

17%

Students who have struggled with suicidal ideation

24%

Students who don't know where to seek help on campus if they're struggling with mental health

#### IDEAS TO MODEL:

- ▶ Boston University professors receive a weekly PowerPoint slide featuring wellness events and resources. The slide is easy to add to lecture presentations and also helps faculty members to know about wellness happenings.
- ▶ University of Washington encourages professors to regularly ask students, either directly or via a poll, how they're doing or to share something that helps them relax.
- ▶ Professors at UW also get the suggestion to start class sessions with a quiet "minute to arrive" or deep breathing exercise. A trained colleague can be invited to lead the class in a guided meditation.

#### 6. Participate in training to pick up on signs a student is in crisis.

30%

Students who have used on-campus counseling or telecounseling offered by their college to support them during the pandemic

30%

Students who, when asked to grade their college on its mental health services, did not know enough about them to assign a grade

#### IDEA TO MODEL:

Gatekeeper training programs, which train laypeople to recognize signs and symptoms of distress so they can approach the person and suggest how to get help, are often delivered to specific groups on campus. "We would call that a targeted approach. Because the risk is so widespread, we need a saturation approach, where every single person on campus—faculty, staff and students—has training. There needs to be a no-wrong-door culture," says Sarah Ketchen Lipson of the Healthy Minds Network.

#### 5. Strive for equity and access in the classroom environment.

Black students who say their mental health is fair or poor, compared to 59% of Hispanic students, 56% of white students and 54% of Asian students

62%

Black students who name racial tension or discrimination as one of their top four stressors from the past month

9%

2% Students in the full sample feeling stressed for that reason

#### PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVE:

▶ "We have heard from students that when there is a major trauma in the world, and often targeted specifically to students of color, when you start a class and don't recognize a recent event that has happened, that's already creating a situation where students feel like they're not seen."

—Sarah Ketchen Lipson, Healthy Minds Network

▶ "If we look at data, we know that the mental health realities for BIPOC students have to do with the social context, microaggressions and feelings of disconnection. ... If stress is based on social context, traditional notions [of stress relief] aren't taking into account how to get through the environment. Rather than asking students to breathe through oppression that exists, we should rather ask the system to rethink the ways it helps students feel more connected."

—Megan Kennedy, University of Washington Resilience Lab

#### 7. Make time for self-care, since constantly supporting students can be draining.

90%

Students who have personally struggled with one or more mental health challenges during college, such as anxiety, depression, disordered eating, significant mood swings, obsessive-compulsive behaviors or suicidal ideation

#### IDEA TO MODEL:

Faculty and student-serving staff at the University of Washington who are enrolled in the Resilience Lab's six-week Be REAL (REsilient Attitudes and Living) program are taught skills and mind-sets to learn to be more resilient as they support students. Participants are also reminded that they aren't being asked to become students' therapists.

#### A PROFESSIONAL'S PERSPECTIVE:

When professors receive training on how to focus on student well-being and connect students to services on campus that might ease their stressors, they'll express concern that they don't know how to be counselors. "I say, you don't need to be. You don't need to be the clinician. You don't need to be giving prescriptive things. But you can, for example, ease students' perfectionist tendencies."

—Jenny Ortiz, associate director of wellness and health promotions, St. Olaf College

Source: Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; explore the data.



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