

2023 University of Illinois Faculty Annual Retreat
Reflective Practice and Student Mental Health:
The Faculty and Staff Mental Health Ambassador Program
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Student mental health trends

Research indicates an eight-year upward trend in college student psychological distress and a downward trend in flourishing for all ethnic-racial groups. Cross-sectional data for 2021 show high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, with higher levels among transgender and gender non-conforming students compared to cis gendered men and women. In contrast to national data, our campus does relatively well in providing services to traditionally underserved groups.

What are University of Illinois faculty and instructors encountering?

Many indicated in the retreat sign up a dilemma of **balancing rigor with flexibility** to support students. Many noted student **mental health concerns**, in general, and identified many specific issues: **disengagement**; **stress**; **anxiety**-- ranging from anxiety about performance evaluation to state of the world; **depression**; basic needs; inclusion and belonging; neurodiversity-- attentional disorders and learning disabilities; fatigue; overwhelm; self-esteem; struggles with persistence, motivation, and preparedness; and suicide.

Definitions

- **Psychological distress:** construct underlying diagnoses such as “major depression, dysthymia, panic disorder, [generalized anxiety disorder], social phobia, specific phobia, and [bipolar disorder]” (Hankin, 2019).
- **Neurodiversity:** One definition reflects a social model wherein “neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one “right” way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits” (Baumer & Frueh, 2021). A second reflects a medical model that frames neurodiversity in terms of disorders-- attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disorders, autism spectrum disorder (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Ed, Text Revision).
- **Basic needs:** “nutritious food, stable housing, healthcare, childcare, transportation, and financial resources” (Office of the Dean of Students, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

What are University of Illinois faculty doing that’s working?

The most common responses related to providing **flexible policies**—flexible due dates, multiple attempts on assignments, time-adaptive models; **communicating empathy** and receptivity to students; **referral to resources** and **sharing resources**. Many indicated changes to course structure/strategies including no exams, providing low-stakes discussions, group check-ins, structuring online student workflow. Some responses reflected a shift in emotional and cognitive orientation: meeting students where they are, not assuming what students going through. Other responses indicated offering “parental” or “mentoring” perspectives—how to navigate college, how to create tasks lists.

Faculty and Staff Mental Health Ambassador Program

- Designed to increase knowledge, comfort, and skills to address student mental health
- Reviews resources specific to University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Offers strategies for responding to student disclosure and proactively addressing mental health
- Delivers content through different modes (text, video, simulation)
- Engages user in reflective practice
- Is self-paced and voluntary

Case Scenarios

Scenario 1: Two students in your class email you around 1am, on a day you'll be teaching.

- Student A writes: "Hi Professor X, I'm having a really rough time. I have no more interest in my classes and can barely sleep or eat lately. I feel like I'm about to fail this class and all my other classes this semester and I'm so exhausted. I'm really sorry for missing assignments but I'm so overwhelmed. I just want to give up and I don't know what to do anymore."
- Student B writes: "Hey there, I was wondering if I can have an extension for my project. I have a lot going on right now. Thanks."

Q1: If you write back to the students, what would you say?

Q2: What do you notice about your personal reaction to each email?

Scenario 2: Two students show up at your office hours around mid-semester.

- Student A arrives at the end of your in-person office hours. You have a meeting scheduled for right afterwards. The student states they are having trouble keeping up with the material and understanding a particular assignment. The student tears up and reveals they are depressed and suicidal.
- Student B logs on to your Zoom office hours. They admit they have not been attending your online class and are trying to catch up. They share that they are taking 15 credit hours, working over 30 hours a week, and returning home almost every weekend. You notice they seem distracted.

Q1: What would you say or do in response to either student?

Q2: What do you notice about your personal reaction to each of them?

Resources

- Wellness website: <https://wellness.illinois.edu>
- FSMHAP page: <https://wellness.illinois.edu/faculty-ambassador-program/>
- To enroll in FSMHAP, email mentalhealth@illinois.edu
- Student Success Initiative: <https://publish.illinois.edu/studentsuccess/>
- University of Illinois System: https://www.vpaa.uillinois.edu/student_mental_health/

References

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Office of the Dean of Students, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, <https://odos.illinois.edu/community-of-care/basic-needs/>