

FCC-Provost Joint Task Force on Student Mental Health

Student mental health problems impede the academic mission of the University of Minnesota. Instructors (faculty, instructional staff, adjuncts, and teaching assistants) are at the front lines of students' struggles with mental health. The Task Force has developed recommendations to help instructors, units, and University leaders address student mental health needs as they arise in academic settings. To achieve an optimal approach to student mental health and its impact on learning, the Task Force sees the following as essential:

1. **Instructors understand the key role they play in student mental health.** Because instructors interact with students most directly and frequently, they are in an opportune position to recognize, respond to, and refer students to mental health professionals in a preventative and proactive manner. The Task Force believes it is important to clarify instructor roles as well as empower instructors with the knowledge and skills to address mental health issues. In addition, instructors should recognize the opportunities they have to help prevent unnecessary stress and poor mental health in students through instructional planning and self-care promotion.
2. **Instructors adopt instructional strategies to prevent unnecessary stress without compromising academic rigor, and provide reasonable accommodations for students with mental health disabilities.** Reasonable efforts to reduce stress by instructors need not sacrifice high expectations and academic rigor or forgo student accountability; rather, they can create the conditions for more focused and mindful student learning and performance. It is well documented that instructors who use sound evidence-based principles of teaching and learning in their course design and delivery not only ease student stress but also maximize student mastery. The Task Force report outlines multiple strategies for establishing a learning environment that supports student mental wellness.
3. **Instructors strengthen proficiency to respond to students in distress and refer them to suitable resources.** Instructors are often in a position to first recognize signs that a student is struggling with a mental health issue and to influence students to seek appropriate resources. The Task Force recommends that instructors acquire the knowledge and skills to strengthen their role in student mental health and to promote a culture of compassion, respect, and support. This can be achieved by participating in professional development opportunities that clarify how instructors optimally respond to distressed students.
4. **Units foster an environment that promotes positive mental health and supports professional development of instructors in student mental health.** Instructors need proactive and continuous support from their academic unit, which can facilitate training and practices to address student mental health needs. Units should take time to reflect on their particular student mental health needs regularly through anonymous surveys of students or other available data, as well as through discussions with advisers, students and instructors. This will assist in identifying critical needs and in developing strategies for addressing them. The Task Force report identifies best practices for several specific unit-based actions.
5. **University leaders continue to show a strong commitment to student mental health by strengthening relevant policies, planning strategically, and allocating sufficient resources.** The Task Force recommends that University leadership focus on policies, plans and resources that support strong instructor practices around student mental health, and that mental health strategies be included in training for all instructors, from TAs and adjuncts through to full professors. The Task Force also believes resources should be strategically applied to increase capacity for treatment and support services for students as well as for professional development programming for instructors related to student mental health.