Texas State University

Roles and Responsibilities of Faculty to Support Students Facing Mental Health Challenges

Final Report from the Faculty Workgroup for Supporting Students Facing
Mental Health Challenges
Presented to Dr. Gene Bourgeois
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Faculty Workgroup Purpose and Process

A 2020 report by Dr. Emilio Carranco, Director of the Student Health Center, revealed that Texas State University students are experiencing a myriad of mental health challenges.

To address the rising cases of students experiencing mental health challenges, Dr. Gene Bourgeois, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, formed a Faculty Workgroup Spring 2020. The Provost's charge for the Faculty Workgroup was to "develop recommendations on the roles and responsibilities of faculty members dealing with students facing mental health challenges."

The Faculty Workgroup developed this report outlining faculty roles and responsibilities when dealing with students facing mental health challenges. Also included in the report are signs of distress students may exhibit and/or report, and best-practice recommendations for faculty to utilize when assisting students.

Faculty Workgroup Members:

Dr. Angela R. Ausbrooks,
College of Applied Arts, Chair

Dr. Natalie Ceballos,
Faculty Senate

Dr. Lisa Chrans,
University College

Dr. Susan Dey,
College of Liberal Arts

Dr. Kevin Fall,
College of Education

Dr. Andrea Golato,
The Graduate College

Dr. Cassandra LeClair,
College of Fine Art and Communication

Dr. Jennifer Palomino,
College of Science and Engineering

Dr. Paula Rechner,
McCoy College of Business Administration

Ms. Kim Rosenbaum,
College of Health Professions

Roles and Responsibilities of Faculty Members To Support Students Facing Mental Health Challenges

To support the rising cases of students experiencing mental health challenges, a Faculty Workgroup was formed April 2020. The Faculty Workgroup developed an outline of faculty roles and responsibilities when dealing with students facing mental health challenges, identified signs of distress students may exhibit and/or report, and created best-practice recommendations for faculty to utilize when assisting students. While faculty were the primary focus of these recommendations, they may also be applicable to staff as well. These definitions and recommendations are provided below.

Faculty Roles & Responsibilities

Faculty are usually the first point of contact for students as they provide guidance for academic success and serve as mentors for professional and personal development. Thus, faculty have an opportunity to identify changes in behavior that impact academic performance and the ability to assess when students may need more than additional course instruction to achieve and/or maintain academic success. Inherent in their traditional academic role is the added responsibility to assist students facing mental health challenges with identifying viable options and resources to address said challenges and continue successful matriculation through their degree program.

Please Note: It is expected that faculty develop and maintain an instructor/student, academic relationship with students that is based on appropriate and healthy boundaries. To maintain appropriate boundaries, faculty should remain cognizant that their role does not include development of a therapeutic relationship with students. Therapeutic intervention and services should be provided by the Counseling Center or another therapeutic provider available to the student.

Signs That Students May Be in Distress and/or Facing Mental Health Challenges

Feelings of anxiety, sadness, and stress may be part of everyone's existence. Therefore, discerning the difference between expected reactions to life events and distress, can be difficult. In addition, some student behaviors can be addressed and resolved using classroom management techniques and are not an indication of a mental health concern. However, if faculty have developed a baseline relationship with the student, they may be able to notice significant changes. Below are some observable behaviors and reported symptoms that can indicate a student needs emotional health support:

1. Consistent disruptive behavior: interrupting or disrupting class and not being responsive to redirection, destroying property, displaying volatile emotional reactions.

2. Precipitous decline in class functioning: stops coming to class, turning in assignments that represent less quality than previous work, sleeping in class, neglecting personal hygiene.

3. Reported decline in usual functioning: increase or decrease in sleep and/or appetite, inability to concentrate, increase in substance use.

In addition, students may present behaviors or report symptoms that exceed the role of a faculty member which include, but are not limited to, the following:

4. Suicidal thoughts and/or expressed intent
5. Threats to hurt others
6. Difficulty with communication: incoherent speech, rambling, ideas or thoughts that go off on tangents or seem out of touch with reality.
7. Auditory or visual hallucinations

Best-Practice Recommendations for Supporting Students Facing Mental Health Challenges

When faced with a student experiencing mental health challenges, it is recommended that faculty follow these **best practices** to proactively prepare to offer assistance, assess a student's situation, determine their mental health status, and provide the best resource options available:

To effectively assist students, faculty can/should:

- **Commit to developing appropriate, academic relationships with students in their classes.**
  All faculty can have a vital role in the academic lives of their students. Taking the time to know a little about each student via in-class interactions, small group discussions, and office hours, can help build a relationship with students that may be helpful if a student begins to struggle. The knowledge inherent in this type of relationship can also provide a useful baseline of a student's behavior for the faculty to use if problems begin to surface.

- **Think of and use the course syllabus as a healthy boundary.**
  Focus on what the student needs to be successful in meeting the expectations of the class. Although you always can be flexible, modifying your syllabus is not always necessary or advisable for students who are not experiencing the distress signs mentioned above.

- **Listen!**
  Listening is the most effective tool faculty can use to connect with a student and assess the severity of the situation. Listening helps build rapport and provides an avenue to gather information. Reflecting feeling and content conveys empathy, which is essential in these circumstances. Reflecting feeling conveys an understanding of the emotional state of the student. A simple, "You feel <insert feeling>" or "You seem to be feeling <insert feeling>" is all that is required to help a student feel heard and understood. Reflecting content demonstrates an understanding of the themes or general message the student is trying to

communicate. Think of this as a summary of what the student is telling you.

Using these listening skills will be effective in helping a student feel understood and will give you the information you need to decide what next steps may be necessary.

- **Explore the student's perception of the issue and their current level of support.**
  How the student views the issue will provide a wealth of information about the nature of the problem and their level of distress. Learning about the student's level of support can also be helpful in assessing the severity of the situation. For example, someone who is struggling with class work and has anxiety about failing may be less of a concern if they identify a group of friends or classmates they study with or feel comfortable seeking out for tutoring. Whereas a student with the same issue may be at greater risk if they mention feeling isolated and do not feel confident in reaching out for support services.

- **Avoid rushing to "solve" the problem.**
  Most students need to feel heard and understood by their instructor. Moving quickly to solutions can frustrate the student and lead to responses of "I've already tried that" or "That won't work because…". Instead, help empower students to find a solution through the other techniques mentioned.

- **Focus on the class or program experience**.
  When talking with a student about their struggles, consider the following:
  - "How does your anxiety (or other concern) impact your class work?"
  - "How do you think your feelings of depression (or other concern) impact your ability to focus in class?"
  - "If you experienced these feelings before, were you able to manage them and successfully complete assignments? If so, how?"

  At the end of the conversation, you can always ask:
  - "What do you think you need to assist you with this issue or concern?"

  Asking this question keeps you out of a problem-solving mode and encourages student responsibility and empowerment in generating alternatives, solutions, and resources that best fit their situation.

- **Collaborate on possible resources.**
  Based on the information gathered, collaborating with the student on possible resources that meet their needs is a good way to end the meeting. If the identified concern is academic, the best recommendations may be SLAC, the Writing Lab, tutoring, or further mentoring by the faculty. If the concern is medical, perhaps the Student Health Center is a good resource, while social concerns may be best handled via Student Affairs. Mental health concerns may lead to recommending the University Counseling Center. The faculty role is focused on helping the student identify potential resources and assisting them with connecting with those resources. However, it is the student's responsibility to follow through and make use of the resources provided.

For those concerns where collaboration with the student is not appropriate or possible, that are beyond the faculty's capacity to address, or are beyond the capacity of other resources; faculty response alone may not be sufficient or appropriate. In these situations, contacting the University Behavior Assessment Team, University Police Department, or the city police department may be the most viable option.

Current Mental Health Resources on Campus

Texas State University has a myriad of resources available which faculty can utilize to assist students and provide to students for them to pursue on their own. These resources include:

- The University Counseling Center
- Resources for students, faculty, and staff via the website
- The Clinic in Counseling Program (Assessment and Counseling Clinic in San Marcos, Counseling Practicum Clinic in Round Rock, referral for counseling services). https://www.txstate.edu/clas/Professional-Counseling/counseling-services.html
- University Police Department (UPD)
- The Student Health Center
- PAWS Alert (Student Affairs – Retention, Management, & Planning)
- Behavior Assessment Team (BAT) – Student Affairs

Although there are existing mental health resources on campus, the Faculty Workgroup identified that gaps in mental health resources on campus could interfere with faculty's ability to adequately and effectively assist students as needed. The identified gaps are listed below:

- Lack of capacity in the Counseling Center to assist all students seeking services.
- Lack of immediate-level resources. The Behavior Assessment Team (BAT) may not respond to a contact attempt, and the BAT, Counseling Center, and Dean of Students are not available after hours or on weekends.
- Discrepancies in Behavior Assessment Team's (BAT's) reported purpose and response. Faculty perception is that the BAT is the entity to respond to emergency, immediate situations. However, when a faculty member reported bizarre student behavior, they were informed by the BAT contact that they could not respond because the student had not threatened others or themselves. Although the student had not made threats, the need for immediate response was evident to the faculty reporting the incident and others consulted.
- In a crisis, UPD is the best resource, however, they will refer the situation to local police who need an address to conduct a wellness check. Faculty may not have access to this information.

Recommendations for Dissemination and Sustainability

The Faculty Workgroup recommends dissemination of the information provided in the section above entitled "Recommendations for Assisting Students Facing Mental Health Challenges" to all Texas State stakeholders: 1) Faculty; 2) Staff; 3) Graduate Assistants; 4) US 1100 Instructors; 5) US 1100 Peer Mentors; 6) Academic Affairs; 7) Student Affairs; 8) the University Counseling Center, and 9) the Behavior Assessment Team. It is also recommended that sustainability of information dissemination is vital to ensure all future faculty and instructional stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities when a student demonstrating signs of distress and/or mental health concerns is identified. Ideas for sustainability include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Inclusion of recommendations and other key content in this report in training for all Graduate Assistants before assuming their positions.
- Inclusion of recommendations and other key content in this report in New Faculty and Staff Orientations.
- Inclusion of recommendations and other key content in this report in training for all US 1100 Instructors and Peer Mentors.

Respectfully Submitted May 8, 2020 by:

Angela R. Ausbrooks, PhD, LMSW on behalf of the Faculty Workgroup Members