

# Action Plan



## Student Well-Being & Course-Related Stress: Student Perspectives

<b>Teaching practices that help maintain student well-being</b>	<b>Next Step/Action:</b>
<b>Clarity about Course Organization</b>	
<b>Instructor Behavior</b>	
<b>Course Workload</b>	
<b>Flexibility</b>	
<b>Instructional Strategies/ Content Presentation</b>	
<b>Exams &amp; Exam Preparation</b>	
<b>Grading Practices/Policies</b>	
<b>Existing Resources?</b>  <b>Resources Needed?</b>	

## Executive Summary

Faculty and Instructor Committee of the Provost's Council on Student Mental Health (PCSMHFI) and  
Provost's Advisory Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Technology (PACTLT)  
July 15, 2019

The Faculty and Instructor Committee of the Provost's Council on Student Mental Health (PCSMHFI) focuses on mental health as it relates to academic instructional organization and settings as well as academic department and instructor roles. Committee members review current policies to assess impacts on student mental health; propose policy changes in collaboration with the Provost, FCC, and other governing bodies. Although many instructors are concerned about the mental health of their students, several say they are not aware of how their interactions with students may influence students' stress levels.

The PCSMHFI and the Provost's Advisory Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Technology (PACTLT) subcommittee on Serving Students with Mental Health Concerns collaborated to develop a UMN student survey to glean data regarding how UMN students experience course-related stress. The intent of the survey was to help faculty and other instructors become aware of student perceptions and suggest ways to reduce this stress.

In April-May, 2019, the PCSMHFI and PACTLT Committee members invited faculty, instructors, departments and colleges throughout the UMN community to encourage their students to complete this brief online survey with ensured anonymity and confidentiality. By mid-May, approximately 660 students throughout the UMN system completed the survey. The table below summarizes the percentages of respondents who reported the characteristics listed; the last column includes any identities or factors that students thought may be relevant to their experiences in their courses.

Undergrad	83	1st year of program	31	Twin Cities	73	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	25
Graduate	10	2nd year of program	34	Rochester	14	Physical, mental, learning disability	23
Professional	4.5	3rd year of program	18	Morris	6	LGBTQ	13
Non-degree	0.47	4 <sup>th</sup> year of program	13	Duluth	5.9	URM (under-represented, racial/ethnic minority)	12
PSEO	0.32			Crookston	0	International	8
						Returning/veteran	5.8

Importantly, respondents described teaching practices or policies that helped them less stressed and able to maintain their wellbeing and productive levels of stress. The responses fall into seven main themes: 1) clarity/clear communication; 2) instructor characteristics; 3) course workload; 4) flexibility; 5) effective teaching and learning strategies; 6) exam preparation; 7) grading policies

### Clarity

Respondents emphasize the importance of clearly described (verbally and in writing) expectations for assignments, homework, and especially all assessments/exams, from the beginning of the semester. They also frequently mentioned having clear deadlines, a clear syllabus, including a specific calendar of class activities, and course materials with detailed instructions and grading rubrics. Respondents also suggest that a detailed description of the grading system, frequent reminders about deadlines, and ongoing verbal or written communication with the instructor helped reduce unnecessary course-related stress.

### Instructor Characteristics

UMN Students repeatedly mentioned several instructor characteristics that helped maintain their student well-being and reduce course-related stress. Primarily this included instructors who are approachable, and demonstrate an openness to discuss course content or personal student issues impacting their course performance. Likewise, students appreciated instructors who were open to and accepted student feedback such as early or mid-term feedback.

Students frequently shared examples of caring, empathetic instructors who checked in with students, were willing to talk with them, and cared that they succeed in the course. They were knowledgeable about and responsive to mental health concerns. Many instructors provided extra help and created an overall supportive climate throughout the course.

Students mentioned instructors who effectively both taught course content and demonstrated effective teaching and learning strategies (also described further in the Instructional Practices section).

### **Course workload**

Respondents described course workload experiences that decreased course-related stress. This included helpful and meaningful assignments that furthered their knowledge and competencies, rather than mere memorization and unhelpful busywork. Students also suggested that options to improve a grade, such as extra credit options, helped their well-being. One of the most frequently mentioned suggestions related to the need for a balanced work distribution throughout the semester, both within and between courses. Students strongly preferred a balanced workload, rather than a piling up of assignments, projects, and assessments at the end of the semester.

### **Flexibility**

Respondents shared numerous experiences of course flexibility that helped maintain their well-being. These experiences included course/instructor flexibility in attendance, homework deadlines, office hours, assessments (e.g., arranging make-up exams/quizzes), course scheduling (e.g., more time for specific topics), and even course delivery formats.

### **Instructional strategies**

Students mentioned a multitude of effective teaching and learning strategies that helped reduce course-related stress. Aligned with universal design for learning principles, students preferred multiple course assessments (e.g., in-class activities, clicker questions, homework/assignments, projects, quizzes, etc.) throughout the semester instead of just one or two exams. Likewise, they liked engagement in class with a variety of interactive classroom activities (discussion, labs, peer teaching, group work during class, use of active learning in class, case studies, applied learning formats in authentic situations), rather than disengaging lectures. Also, students mentioned that aligned course design in which objectives, activities, and assessments are directly connected helped students reduce course-related stress. Instructors who provided constructive, timely feedback to students also helped maintain well-being. Likewise, respondents mentioned that scaffolding of large projects into manageable chunks, use of relevant examples and topics, along with effective use of learning management systems (e.g. Canvas) to post lectures, slides, and other resources, significantly reduced course-related stress.

### **Exams**

Several respondents described a range of exam preparation activities that instructors provided that helped reduce course-related stress. These included study guides, working through the most difficult problems/applications in class, practice exams, and review sessions during class as well as outside of class time. Aligning exam questions with stated learning outcomes and other course activities, and keeping exam length reasonable also received attention.

### **Grading policies**

Finally, several suggestions described by respondents related to grading policies that helped maintain student well-being. Frequently mentioned were the option to drop some grades (e.g., dropping lowest exam or assignment grade or certain number of quiz grades); course points distributed across a variety of exams, assignments, and activities; grade based on competence, so that all can succeed; and curving in a manner that has low scores still resulting in passing grades. Students also supported the current UMN policy to allow them to request to reschedule a final exam if they have three scheduled in the same day.

### **Recommendations**

Based on these student survey findings we recommend dissemination of a UMN faculty survey to ascertain current practices and policies that align with the student responses to reduce course-related stress. Second, we propose developing and promoting a myriad of UMN faculty development options/opportunities to disseminate effective instructional practices that reduce course-related stress. Third, we will examine specific groups of student respondents [undergraduate students, graduate students, professional students, non-degree seeking students, and pre-college program (PSEO) students] to glean detailed response trends and needs tailored to each surveyed subgroup. Finally, we will further examine and document the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles that align with respondents' suggestions/experiences to prevent undue student stress and increase student well-being.

## Student Well-Being & Course-Related Stress: Student Perspectives

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## Where did this UMN student survey come from?

- The Faculty & Instructors Committee of the Provost's Council on Student Mental Health (PCSMHFI) identified a primary goal to identify faculty and instructor development needs regarding prevention of undue student stress and response to student mental health problems, including potential opportunities to address those needs.

## Where did this UMN student survey come from?

- The (PCSMHFI) and the Provost's Advisory Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Technology (PACTLT) subcommittee on Serving Students with Mental Health Concerns collaborated to develop a UMN student survey to glean data regarding how UMN students experience course-related stress in order to help faculty and other instructors become aware of student perceptions and suggest ways to reduce this stress.

## Survey Demographics

Percentages of respondents who reported the characteristics listed:

Undergrad	83	1st year of program	31
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## Survey Demographics

Q5 - On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, 5 being moderate but manageable, and 10 being extreme, how much stress do you perceive in all aspects of your life?

	N	Overall Stress Perceived
All surveyed	(651)	6.7
1st-generation	(122)	7.2
Disabilities	(116)	7.6
LGBTQ	(62)	7.5
URM	(60)	7.2
International	(41)	6.5

## Survey Demographics

- Q6 - On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, 5 being moderate but manageable, and 10 being extreme, to what degree does **course-related stress** impact your total stress levels?

	N	Course-Related Stress
All surveyed	(651)	7
1st-generation	(122)	7.4
Disabilities	(116)	7.6
LGBTQ	(62)	7.4
URM	(60)	7.2
International	(41)	6.8

## Survey Demographics

- Q7 - On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest degree, to what degree are you **managing your stress**?

	N	Degree of Managing Stress
All surveyed	(651)	5.9
1st-generation	(122)	5.7
Disabilities	(116)	5.3
LGBTQ	(62)	5.4
URM	(60)	5.8
International	(41)	6.6

## Q8: What do you do to manage your stress or anxiety?

- Adaptive-- Constructive**
  - Time management--plan things out (i.e., calendar, organize, goals, schedule, reminders, short breaks, eat and sleep well, reward self after a chunk of study,
  - Time for relaxation (i.e., meditation, yoga, music, judo, boxing, watching/playing sports, , recreation/work out, crocheting, study breaks, walks, movie, time with friends or family or pets, doing art, brief nap to reset, etc.)
  - See a professional (i.e., psychologist, psychiatrist, success coach)

## Q8: What do you do to manage your stress or anxiety?

- Maladaptive--Less than constructive**
  - Drugs/chemicals-self-medicating (CBD, alcohol, etc.)
  - Compulsive behavior (eating, cleaning, shopping, etc.)
  - Not sleeping or too much sleeping

## Q9 In particular, are there any specific things that you do to manage course-related stress?

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### Next Steps:

- Faculty survey to ascertain current practices
- Faculty development to increase student well-being based on student perspectives
- Expand this pilot UMN Student Survey
- Align student findings with empirical strategies and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).



### References

About Universal Design for Learning. Accessed 8.14.19 at:

<http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html>

University of Minnesota Joint Task Force on Student Mental Health Report (2017):  
<http://mentalhealth.umn.edu/facstaff/pdfs/JTFSMH%20Report%20Sept%202017.pdf>



### Questions?

Thank you!

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**Q8: What do you do to manage your stress or anxiety?**

*(Sample of maladaptive, unedited responses from students indicating identities or factors that might be relevant to one's experience in courses such as: disabilities, URM, LGBTQ and/or other)*

Fetal position. Seriously, I lie in fetal position on my apartment floor and think about my mother. It's kind of sad. No friends, no activities outside, just an unrelenting wall of pressure bearing down on me. Making myself physically smaller keeps me from psychologically suffocating.

Cry in the shower

Smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol on the weekends, walk around

Nothing, I don't have time to relax. I work 30 hours a week in my job, have a 10-hour work-study position and I am a full-time student.

I don't have time to manage my stress!!! 7 days of the week, always doing homework. Don't have time for anything else.

To manage my stress and anxiety, I find sleep to be the most effective tactic.

I like to watch Netflix, try not to procrastinate, drink hot tea, and get drunk. In that order.

Sleep

Ignore it

Party on weekends

Currently, I sleep a lot.

Take pills that I don't want to be taking. I cry daily to get some of the feelings out. I take baths when I actually have time. I try therapy but most of the time have to cancel due to school or work

....I try to plan my work but often leave it for last minute.

I have not been able to this semester, I used to be able to calm myself down during panic attacks but am having a more difficult time.

Smoke weed, cry (a LOT), sleep (probably an unhealthy amount), remind myself that it's just another week to get through

Shut down, try to hang out with friends

Ignore it and grow up. You will be more stressful if you think about it too much.

(Rape survivor) Compulsively cleaning, stress eating, breaking out into song, planning every minute of my day, friends/family venting, insomnia followed by periods of narcolepsy, double-fisting coffee/caffeine, crying over vines & memes.

Sleep despite having busywork to complete.  
Cry.

cry and take naps

CBD

I put my headphones in

Bottle it up I have no choice

Watch Netflix on Friday. Talk to RXXXXXX. Go to Minneapolis so i'm away from Rochester.

I don't really. I just kind of live in it, I'm considering dropping out actually.

sleep, take medications, try to distract myself when I am feeling stressed and anxious

Push through it because things need to be done

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- Push through because society says you need that piece of paper
- Push through because college won't allow you to get that good grade even though you are a good student
- Talk to anyone about it but they tell you "That's life"
- Deal with it because everyone else is doing it too

Exercise, cry

Take a long nap.

Ignore it and try to maintain some semblance of calm. Like having the TV on static in the background for so long that it fades away.

Honestly I would get drunk

work out, sleep, hang out with friends, play music, drink and smoke,

I was having anxiety attacks on a fairly regular basis starting this school year and I realized I really needed help or I wasn't going to make it through the semester. I have started seeing RXXXXXXXXX once every week to week and a half. He has been a HUGELY helpful resource that I think more students could benefit from. I have been trying to remind myself to take time for myself at some point in the day, although that can be really hard sometimes with the amount of coursework we have.

Drinking, playing videogames, exercise, sex ECT.



**Q9 In particular, are there any specific things that you do to manage course-related stress?**

*(Sample of maladaptive, unedited responses from students indicating identities or factors that might be relevant to one's experience in courses such as: disabilities, URM, LGBTQ and/or other)*

I have to maintain calm, read the material several times and push-through.

I wish I had a better way. I keep feeling stuck with regards to keeping on top of everything grad school throws at me and I'm exhausted all the time. It's doing nothing good for my pre-existing mental health concerns and the last thing I want to do is end up killing myself over this goddamn program.

Again, I don't really, the amount of time and energy my courses take along with my family expectations mean that it's just sort of an everpresent force.

Skipping class days when I'm too exhausted or skipping homework assignments in favor of more important assignments.

Go to office hours. I skimp on the readings and only read the bare minimum, but then I get stressed because I'm lost and behind.

I struggle.

Study, cry, exercise

drink with friends and play video games. (I know drinking due to stress is bad, but there are not many options when you don't have a lot of time to relax)

Procrastinate

There,Ãs nothing I can do it,Ãs like getting hit by a bus

Not really

I try to go to the gym or take a nap, but if I want to finish my homework by 1 am then I don't have time to do those things.

You can't really manage stress if you feel like it's impossible to overcome the source (classwork)

Sleep

cry on the floor

(rape survivor) Compulsively cleaning, stress eating, breaking out into song, planning every minute of my day, friends/family venting, insomnia followed by periods of narcolepsy, double-fisting coffee/caffeine, crying over vines & memes.

Not take time for myself- I have had to pull multiple all-nighters during my two years. And the tiredness was better than the stress I had.

Drop out of a science school.

Prioritize classes I'm struggling in/classes with the lowest grade, ask for help from friends who have taken the course before, cry.

No, I end up not completing the assignments, breaking down over that and having anxiety trying to play catch up. It is a horrible cycle.

Take extra medication.

Sleep despite having busywork to complete.

Cry.

I hangout with my friends, walk my dog, drink, eat, smoke, and sleep

I haven't figured this part out yet

Cry for about an hour, take a 30 minute depression nap, caffeinate until I'm manic, and do EVERYTHING

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no

nothing specific to course load

Not care about it.

usually avoid studying when I get overwhelmed. This is obviously stupid, but I am just being honest. I kind of shut down when it gets to be too much and work on other classes or focus life tasks and troubles instead of the class that I am worried about. (first generation student)

Nothing specific.

Honestly, I dont go to class and try to "catch up" while missing class.