

Caring for the Whole Student

How Faculty and Department Leaders Can Address Their Students' Mental Health



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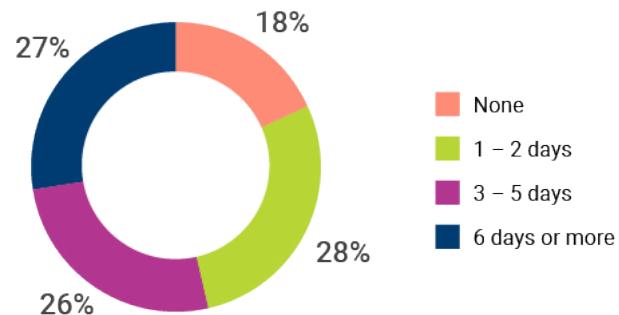
Introduction

Students today are facing major, compounding challenges as they traverse their degree programs toward an uncertain tomorrow. Not only do they have to learn how to navigate life as new adults and manage competing deadlines without the level of support offered throughout high school, but they also must think about major global issues, including climate change, and stagnating wages combined with rising costs. This often leads to heightened stress and anxiety. In the 2020–2021 academic year, almost a third of students linked challenges with their emotional and mental well-being to a longstanding decline in their academic performance ([Eisenberg et al., 2021](#)).

For example, **in fall 2020, 27% of surveyed students reported that for at least six days out of the past four weeks, they felt like emotional or mental difficulties had hurt their academic performance.** Indeed, only 18% of students reported that their emotional and mental health had not negatively impacted their performance in that time period. Academic pressures paired with the host of challenges students, especially racially minoritized, poverty-affected, and disabled students, are facing will inevitably show up in the classroom. Missed deadlines and assignments, wandering attention, a drop in grades, and skipped classes are often surface-level indicators of the mental health challenges, life pressures, and precarities outside of the classroom that students

ACADEMIC IMPAIRMENT

In the past four weeks, how many days have you felt that emotional or mental difficulties have hurt your academic performance?



face. Moreover, in [The State of Higher Education 2022 Report](#), Gallup (2022) found that students who were pursuing a bachelor's degree in 2021 were 34 percentage points more likely to cite emotional stress as a reason they considered **stopping out** than those who took the survey in 2020 (76% vs. 42%). Similarly, 63% of students pursuing an associate's degree cited emotional stress as a reason for stopping out in 2021 versus 24% in 2020 (a 39 percentage point increase).

There are a few things that colleges and universities can do to help alleviate the burden students face every day, including restructuring mental health support on campus, providing options for digital learning, encouraging teachers to apply trauma-informed teaching practices, and connecting students with the resources they need to thrive. However, first **educators must know and understand the ways in which their students are burdened**, some of which are outlined in the next section.



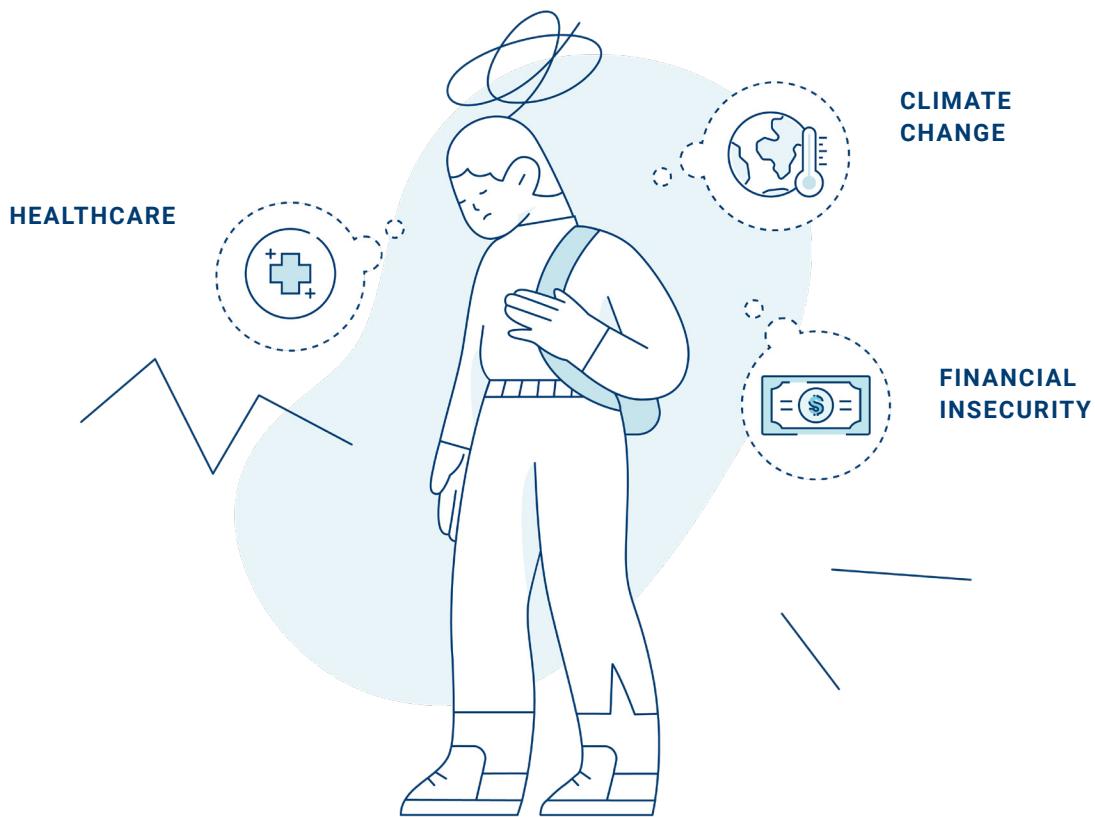
Stopping out

Temporarily withdrawing from enrollment in a college or university

What is burdening students and how can educators and administrators help?

For Generations Y (Millennials) and Z, **financial insecurity**, **climate change**, and **healthcare** are the three biggest concerns ([Deloitte Global, 2021](#)). Education comes in fourth place for Generation Z (Gen Z). Each of these issues has compounding effects and intersectionality with systemic oppression. Such extreme pressures, when combined with the pressures of day-to-day student life, can cause students' mental health and future thinking to suffer.

The three biggest concerns for Generations Y and Z



Financial insecurity

The ever-rising cost of higher education continues to most harshly impact minoritized populations and discourage many prospective students. Over the past 40 years, **the cost of obtaining a college degree has increased by 169%, while wages for workers between 22 and 27 years old have only increased by 19%** ([Hess, 2021b](#)). And with the increased reliance on student loans, feelings of financial insecurity continue to grow, both for students individually and for the nation as a whole. Some students, particularly Latinx students, are left struggling with an impossible scenario when it comes to continuing their education: Either take out student loans and risk their financial stability or work longer hours to pay their way through school, leaving less time for studying ([Elengold et al., 2021](#)). Both options can have grave impacts on students' mental health, presenting a lose–lose situation for Latinx students who make up more than a fifth of the higher education population.

In addition to the skyrocketing cost of education, the cost of everyday expenses continues to climb as the United States grapples with inflation, supply chain issues, and sanctions on foreign powers that impact the cost of imported goods. Due to systemic racism, these issues impact Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people and people who are affected by poverty more than others. In [Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy](#), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere shares:

"In addition to achievement gaps and lack of device access and good broadband, [minoritized students'] circumstances in life include unemployment, unequal health care options, housing inequity, food insecurity, and numerous other problems."

A survey of nearly 5,000 students from 14 private and public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) found that 46% lacked sufficient food, 55% were housing insecure, and 20% were homeless at some point during the year ([Weissman, 2022](#)). To keep up with rising costs, many students take jobs while they go to school, but entering the workforce has its own implications on students' mental health. When students were asked about their top three feelings upon doing so, 60% of students chose "Anxious", "Uncertain", or "Overwhelmed", whereas only 37% chose either "Confident" or "Excited", and a meager 3% of students reported feeling "Relaxed" ([Hewitt & Black, 2020](#)). Unfortunately, **disaggregated datasets for these sentiments are nearly impossible to come by**. This is a persisting problem in higher education, which, if solved, could have a plethora of positive impacts on racially minoritized students.

Neither rising costs nor employment concerns can be easily addressed by educators or institutional administrators. Still, students who have to take on extra work to afford regular cost-of-living increases are often looking for ways to relieve their budgets and schedules. More and more students are considering the advantages of digital learning and recognizing the value of being able to complete their schoolwork from any location (Hess, 2021a; Kelly, 2021). Schools should consider providing online learning opportunities that extend beyond the pandemic so that students have the flexibility needed to continue their education while also managing a work schedule that supports their lives outside of the classroom. Online course offerings at schools such as the University of Central Florida have been linked to faster graduation rates and reduced costs for students; thereby providing a path for students who are poverty-impacted and those need to join the workforce more quickly (Vignare et al., 2019).

It is important to note that implementing online learning without appropriate provisions can perpetuate harm, particularly to students' mental health. For example, some students are easily able to manage asynchronous online learning while others need more structure. Students should be given regular opportunities to meet synchronously either in person or online to keep them engaged in the course. This will also help faculty to build relationships with their students. Another issue for instructors to keep in mind is that lockdown browsers and proctoring software have been sowing excessive feelings of anxiety and fear in students. This software allows their head movements and mouse clicks to be policed during their already-stressful exams, which has accessibility implications for students with disabilities (Harwell, 2020). Students fear being flagged for cheating for situations out of their control, such as someone walking into their test room or their room being too noisy (Harwell, 2020). The equity implications of proctoring software are significant. Many Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, as well as students who are impacted by poverty, do not have a private space in which to take exams for extended periods of time. Beyond equity and accessibility implications, there are also privacy concerns. Proctoring software forces students to share their homes and workspaces in ways that are excessive and intrusive, every time they take an exam (Cahn et al., 2020).

Regardless of how faculty and students facilitate and participate in class, there are some things faculty can be mindful of and do to support their students. **Practicing sensitivity and empathy during engagement with students can create positive and meaningful relationships** between students and faculty that can improve both mental health and educational outcomes for students. In the *Caring for Students Playbook*, Adams et al. (2021) share that, "authentic, consistent, and frequent communication with students in an online course fosters student engagement and develops instructor presence." These meaningful relationships also offer an opportunity for faculty to see the signs when students may need support. Another recommendation from the *Caring for Students Playbook* is that faculty should maintain an awareness of the support services available on campus and should do their best to destigmatize getting help when needed.

How can instructors and departments aid for reducing the cost and promoting access for students?



- **Instructors should consider switching to low/no-cost instructional materials, such as [Open Educational Resources \(OER\)](#).**
- If using digital courseware products that students are required to purchase, **instructors should identify options that are low/no cost**, or provide at least two weeks of free access to *all* content. Students dependent on financial aid, including grants, scholarships, and student loans, may not receive their funds until the term has commenced. This places students at risk of falling behind in their courses because they did not have access to the funding they needed to purchase the course materials in time. Vendors are also typically willing to provide a small percentage of access codes for free if faculty or program managers request them.
- **Departments can partner with and/or identify student support programs that provide extra course materials beyond textbooks.** Educators should ensure students are made aware of these programs through the course syllabus and their Learning Management System (LMS).
- **Create a consolidated resource in the LMS that orients students to the availability of resources for basic needs on campus and in the local community.** The LMS [Canvas](#) suggested using the pop-up option to advertise services available to students on campus. Services should include (but not be limited to):
 - Food pantries and food banks
 - Low/no-cost child care and youth program providers
 - Housing resources (including bill payment assistance)
 - Low/no-cost legal services
 - Transportation assistance and resources
 - Mental health resources and services
 - Identity-specific services and resources (e.g., LGBTQI+, Indigenous, recent refugees, etc.)

Climate change

Climate change and protecting the environment consistently rank among the top priorities for students. There is an overwhelming body of evidence that supports climate change and young people who have access to this information are faced with the reality that this will be one of the major crises of their lifetime. Not only are millennial and Gen Z students being taught about the dangers of climate change in school, but they are also seeing the effects on the news and in their communities. Students are actively watching as the ice sheets melt, glaciers retreat, snow cover decreases, sea levels rise, and extreme weather events wreak havoc around the world.

“

“I’m from Washington state, and my birthday is in November. It snowed on my birthday all the time when I was a kid, and now it never snows that time of year.”

Second-Year Student, University of Hawai‘i
([Hiser & Lynch, 2021](#))

Data shows that climate change disproportionately impacts Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and students who are impacted by poverty, putting these communities directly on the front lines of the crisis. Black people are 75% more likely to live in communities that border commercial facilities that produce emissions, odor, noise, or traffic; ocean acidification impacts Indigenous communities, which are more likely to rely on seafood; and aid disbursal for minoritized communities impacted by natural disasters lags behind the aid disbursed for whiter or wealthier communities ([Patnaik et al., 2020](#)).

And while the idea and prognostication of climate change can be scary, living through the harshest of the day-to-day impacts of climate change first-hand is horrifying. In October 2019, students at colleges and universities in Santa Ana were forced to evacuate from their dorms at 3 a.m. as a raging wildfire encroached on their communities ([Svrluga, 2019](#)).

“

“I think it’ll take years to recover from the Thomas Fire. I’ll remember the panic and chaos it created for the rest of my life. My friends don’t have homes, people lost their clothes, their photos, their whole entire life.”

Julie Madsen,
Buena Vista High School Senior, Ventura, CA
([Papagelis & Volin, 2018](#))

A flood on a Saturday in August of 2021 swept through four counties in Tennessee, killing 22 people and injuring many more ([Mattise & Collins, 2021](#)). Governor Bill Lee shared that had this flood happened just a day before, hundreds of children may have been killed as there are 14 schools located in the floodplains. He is now working to relocate those schools as persistent flooding is expected in the area ([Mitchell, 2022](#)). And in February of 2021, Texas students were trapped on campus as a winter storm plunged the unprepared state into below-freezing temperatures. Pipes froze and burst, the electrical grid failed, and some off-campus students were essentially left to fend for themselves ([McGee, 2021](#)).

“
“It was all pretty chaotic. Our grocery stores were emptied. Even fast food restaurants had to close early because they didn’t have any more food.”

Giovanna Milano,
Brown University Remote Learner
([Mullett, 2021](#))

Furthermore, a heatwave in the Pacific Northwest in 2021 caused a dramatic spike (≈ 600) in the number of deaths than would have been typical for the same time period in years past ([Popovich & Choi-Schagrin, 2021](#)). In an area known for temperate weather and having few air-conditioned spaces, the heatwave disproportionately impacted racially minoritized people due to racist housing policies that created **urban heat islands** ([Seattle Office for Civil Rights, 2021](#)).

Students have shared their awareness of the looming crisis, explaining that they are often frightened and frustrated by the lack of progress in trying to correct course ([Hiser & Lynch, 2021](#)). Britt Wray, a climate researcher, author, and communicator, shares that folks who have seen the grim picture painted by the research on climate change are likely to experience “bouts of fear, fatalism, and hopelessness.” And she says that, for those who have been impacted by a climate disaster, oftentimes these feelings can be more intense and lead to “shock, trauma, strained relationships, substance abuse, and the loss of personal identity and control” ([Wray, 2019](#)).

Again, educators and administrators cannot be expected to be able to fully ease the burden caused by climate change, but there are ways to care for the students who are impacted the most.



Urban heat islands

Structures such as buildings, roads, and other infrastructure absorb and re-emit the sun’s heat more than natural landscapes, such as forests and water bodies. Urban areas, where these structures are highly concentrated and greenery is limited, become “islands” of higher temperatures relative to outlying areas. ([US EPA, 2014](#))

How can teaching pedagogy and course policies adapt to climate change?



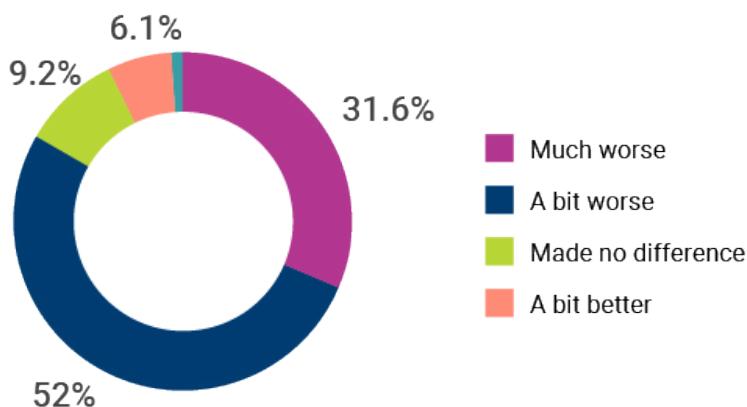
- **Create a course that has flexible deadlines.** Communities are experiencing unpredictable weather events in unprecedented numbers, many of which result in the loss of utility services, including electricity, water, and the internet, last-minute evacuations of entire neighborhoods, and cut off access to roads and highways. Flexibility in deadlines can provide some immediate peace of mind for students navigating these circumstances in their communities.
- **Ground instructional materials in emerging needs for students and their communities and remain culturally responsive in your approach.** As Dr. Elaine Villanueva Bernal, a chemistry professor at Long Beach State University, stated in a recent Every Learner Everywhere Blog, "One thing I always tell my students at the beginning of the semester is that chemistry is literally everywhere. My job is to help you look for it and see it." Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRE) acknowledges that students come into the classroom with a wealth of knowledge and experiences. CRE insists that materials should reflect students' individual and intersectional identities in a positive and affirming way that allows them to connect what they are learning to their lived experiences and histories. Resources such as NYU's [Culturally Responsive Scorecard](#) (while originally created for secondary settings) can help faculty evaluate their curriculum and embed in more culturally responsive content (Peoples et al., 2021).
- **Approach teaching and learning from a trauma-informed perspective.** In recent years, research has investigated how trauma impacts learners in postsecondary classrooms. Learners who have experienced trauma may exhibit the following signs in the classroom ([Davidson, 2017](#); [Hoch et al., 2015](#)):
 - Difficulty focusing, attending, retaining, and recalling
 - Tendency to miss a lot of classes
 - Challenges with emotional regulation
 - Fear of taking risks
 - Anxiety about deadlines, exams, group work, or public speaking
 - Anger, helplessness, or dissociation when stressed
 - Withdrawal and isolation
 - Involvement in unhealthy relationships
- **Education Northwest has created an [extensive guide](#) for institutions and teaching faculty to learn how to shift campus and classroom practices to become more trauma-informed.**

Healthcare

Finally, as COVID-19 ravaged communities and shuttered schools across the country, students who had never previously experienced such a deadly and widespread virus were suddenly forced to learn the criticality of a well-functioning healthcare system and of taking appropriate disease prevention measures. **The pandemic affected everyone, but the impacts were not equal.** Poverty-impacted students were 55% more likely to delay graduation and 41% more likely to report that COVID-19 had impacted their major choice (Aucejo et al., 2020). For racially minoritized students, the pandemic caused disruptive changes in finances, living situations, academic performance, educational plans, and career goals. Each of these has its own impact on stress, anxiety, and depression (Molock & Parchem, 2021). And just at the time when many students needed mental health support the most, their campuses shut down and they were sent home without a set return date. Although telehealth was made an option for some students, others were unable to access any kind of mental health provision.

Even setting COVID-19 aside, the healthcare system in the United States is inadequate in numerous ways. It is costly to be treated, even for people with insurance; it is unevenly assessed, preventing many Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people from accessing healthcare services; and there is an overindex on reactive care versus preventative care, which further drives up costs and negative health impacts (Shmerling, 2021). Further, **many of those who are not able to get mental health treatment end up in jails and prisons across the country.** According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), just 63% of people who are incarcerated in state and federal prisons and have a history of mental illness receive mental health treatment, and even fewer (45%) receive mental health treatment while being held in local jails (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017). Faculty may not be able to do anything about the failures of the healthcare system or the policies that have led to the criminalization of mental illness, but there are important ideas they can explore to support students right in the classroom.

COVID-19 MADE MY MENTAL HEALTH...



What can educators advocate that their institutions do to support the mental health needs of their diverse student populations?



- **Employ culturally diverse mental health professionals and culturally-relevant mental health practices** to reduce harm for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students
- **Offer community- and system-centered approaches to therapy**
- **Survey students on their needs** instead of assuming what they need
- **Provide digital resources**, like text chat bots or online well-being platforms, to allow students to connect privately in their dorm, at home, or during a commute
- **Ensure everyone on campus is trained** to be able to address someone experiencing a mental health crisis, especially campus police
 - Make sure students – particularly racially minoritized students – who are experiencing a mental health crisis are taken in by paramedics or other healthcare professionals, not police

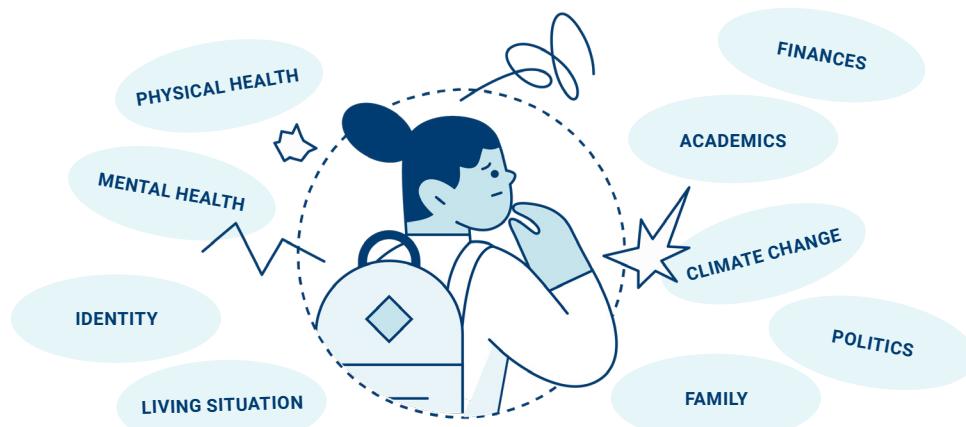
Seeing the whole student

Although the list of burdens herein is not exhaustive, these are some of the issues at the forefront of students' minds as they try to put their best foot forward as learners. Other pressing issues include wealth inequality, particularly for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students; war and political instability, particularly for international students from Myanmar, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine; and systemic oppression, including racism, sexism, and ableism.

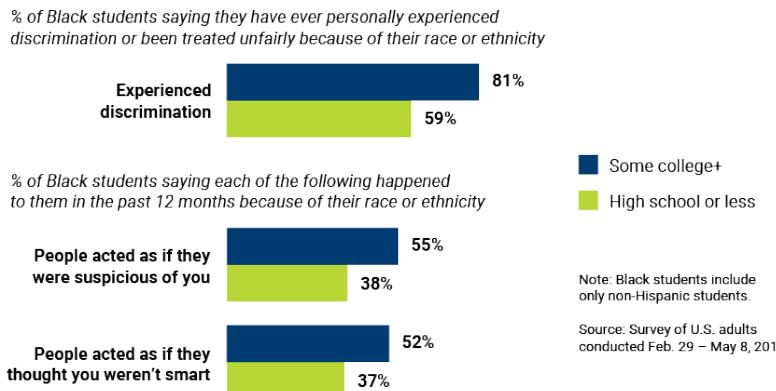
Because higher education originated in the United States to serve the needs of white, non-disabled, middle-to-upper-class men ([Museus et al., 2015](#)), **racism, ableism, and sexism are deeply ingrained into the very foundation of many institutions**. As they have struggled to cope with the inherent challenges that come with attending postsecondary school, racially minoritized students must also navigate the challenges presented by both the covert and overt racism they experience daily, both on and off campus.

School does not appear to alleviate this burden. In fact, Black students who attended at least some college report *higher* levels of discrimination than their peers who have not attended college at all ([Anderson, 2016](#)). As for sexism, according to [Reeves and Smith \(2021\)](#), male students made up just 41% of students enrolled in a postsecondary institution in fall 2020, whereas female students made up 59%. Despite this fact, women are not proportionately represented in faculty positions. Women occupy just 31% of full-time faculty positions in the United States, and among tenured faculty at four-year institutions, women account for just 27% ([Kelly, 2019](#)). And as students with disabilities aim for higher education, they also have to learn how to work through an education system that was not built for them – physically or otherwise. Educators need not only to understand that these issues play a part in shaping all of higher education in the United States, but also how they deeply impact students' individual and collective mental health and well-being before, during, and after their academic career.

Students are often facing intense and concurrent pressures.



Among Black students, those who've attended college are more likely to say they've experienced racial discrimination



The impacts of mental health on college students extend beyond just their academic performance. **For years, suicide has been a leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults**, a group that includes many college students. During 2020, the CDC reported a significant increase in suicidal ideation, especially among young adults aged 18–24 years old (25.5%), Latinx respondents (18.6%), and Black respondents (15.1%) ([Czeisler et al., 2020](#)). Universities around the country are contending with an increase in suicides on campus. In the fifteen years from 2006 to June 2021, Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) lost two students to suicide. In the following eight months, however, three students have died by suicide and two other student deaths are being investigated ([Moody, 2022](#)). Dartmouth, St. Louis University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton are among the many universities experiencing an outbreak of suicides.

With students returning to campuses, institutions are having to look outside conventional approaches to effectively support the diversity among their student bodies. For example, students who are working either part- or full-time while they obtain their degrees often have schedules that make it difficult to attend to their mental health during normal business hours. Other students might have personal experiences in which mental health care was stigmatized, making seeing a counselor feel shameful. In either case, higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure these students get the support they need to be successful.

“The common thread there is a lot of times students who are minoritized do not feel like a lot of interventions on campus are specifically made for them.”
([Diverse Education, 2022](#))

How can teaching faculty in both virtual and in-person environments cultivate a supportive learning environment?



- **Create alternative methods for assessment.** Offering assessments other than traditional multiple-choice exams can lower test anxiety for students and provide students flexibility and agency over how they demonstrate mastery of the material. *Caring for Students* outlines several examples of methods, including:
 - Peer review
 - Self-assessment
 - Experimentation
 - Problem-based learning
 - Discussion boards
 - Role playing
 - Online journaling
- **Be mindful of the use of online proctoring software (such as Respondus) in virtual learning environments.** Since the rapid shift to remote learning due to COVID-19, K-12 and higher education institutions have increased their use of online assessment procuring tools that monitor student movements in their internet browsers and their physical environments while they are taking exams ([Young, 2021](#)). Though intended to be a safeguard against academic dishonesty, students have shared their anxiety and distrust about using this type of software ([Cahn et al., 2020](#); [Anonymous, 2021](#)). There are also accessibility, equity, and privacy concerns that come along with these tools.
- **Create a syllabus that is welcoming and inviting.** In the *Caring for Students Playbook*, Adams et al. (2021) share that, “An inclusive syllabus has a welcoming tone, and carefully selected content that is culturally responsive and relevant to the student population, as well as options for how students demonstrate their learning.”
- **Other helpful ideas:**
 - Offer low-stakes assignments that give students a chance to learn from mistakes
 - Provide content warnings
 - Facilitate peer groups
 - Practice grading policies that reward success rather than punish failure
 - Integrate student self-evaluation
 - Use multiple discussion modes, including options to start or join a conversation anonymously (with student names only visible to instructors) so that every student finds an opportunity to contribute
 - Provide well-defined grading rubrics
 - Use both formative and summative assignments

Conclusion

Ideally, education allows for the intellectual, social, and emotional development of students while helping lay the foundation for their future. However, when educational institutions neglect the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of students, the experience can have harmful effects. Too often when support is provided, institutions default to models of support based on white, abled, and higher socioeconomic students' needs. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, disabled students, and students experiencing poverty deserve to be seen and heard too. They deserve for their experiences, including their experiences with mental health, to be centered in the services that should support them as they pursue a postsecondary education. Advocating for and implementing practices and policies like culturally relevant teaching, community-based approaches to therapy, mandatory campus-wide training in crisis intervention, and reducing police involvement in mental health crises are impactful first steps. Most importantly, the people who work with and for students should listen to the students and not assume they know what the students' needs are more than the students themselves. Students are so often burdened by financial insecurity and a lack of access to necessary resources, symptoms of climate change that inhibit their ability to learn, and a failing healthcare system that perpetuates oppressive practices. While substantially addressing these issues along with the failings of higher education will require time and resources, the return on investment cannot be understated. Students' well-being, futures, and even lives are at stake, and they deserve better.

I often get the sense ... that in all of our talk about 'core' curricula we are still not reaching students at their core. I wonder if perhaps we are working with a flattened notion of a human being, or the human condition, or only approach human beings within a very narrow range of what may actually be *an extraordinarily expansive, multi-dimensional continuum*, a continuum that includes flourishing and perishing as *essential aspects of our humanity*."

Susan Kassouf, Program Officer,
Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation
([Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013](#))

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