

Northern Arizona University

Mental Health for Students and Faculty

Creating a Positive Campus Environment

Statement Paper

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Mental health has become an increasingly important focus in our society. The importance of mental health in an educational setting is just as important for students as it is for faculty and administration. There is a strong connection between mental health, and student success, with mental health being linked to physical health. Providing opportunities in education for mental health and physical health for both students and faculty will increase student success and faculty effectiveness. This is a key component to creating a better culture in education as it impacts both students and faculty.

Faculty is incredibly influential in a student's life and is one of the top three resources when students make big choices after school (Flaherty, 2024). Because of this influence, pursuing mental health as a faculty member is important not only for the student but especially for the faculty whether they are on campus or online. Even faculty can feel isolated and need to find support from each other to prevent burnout and to stay engaged. For many faculty being part of a supportive community that is broad and diverse helps faculty cope with mental health issues (Heidt, 2023). In a survey conducted by the American Council on Education in 2020, the top two most pressing issues for presidents of Universities were mental health for students followed closely by mental health for faculty and staff (Turk, 2020). This is encouraging because it shows awareness of the importance of mental health for both students and faculty. Some faculty face similar challenges to the students when it comes to burnout and working in a stressful work environment. Research shows that both academics and students with some form of mental illness, or mental disability, are experiencing a unique form of stigma which adds extra pressure in a demanding workplace that values mental acuity (Walter, 2023). Without proper support of

faculty, thirty to fifty percent of the academic workforce may leave which threatens the diversity and educational quality that can be offered (Gewin, 2022).

Mental health is strongly related to the stress a college student experiences. This stress negatively impacts the academic performance of around thirty percent of the college student body. Some consequences of poor mental health include problems with sleeping and eating, physical ailments, and anxiety and depression. Mental health concerns in a student body are significant and can impact a large portion of the students. More than a third of students showed a mental health problem when screened with various tools including the PHQ-9, the PHQ anxiety module, and the SCOFF which evaluates for an eating disorder (Zivin, et al. 2009).

A strong link between mental health, student persistence, and a sense of belonging increases a student's persistence and success (Blaney et al, 2022). In general, supportive programs in a university setting can look like public community events. Back-to-school nights, offering a chance to be involved and look at various clubs, events, activities, parent weekends, and sporting events on campus are all activities that students can choose to be involved in and provide ways for them to connect to the student community and even faculty. The Northern Arizona University (NAU) website information on Student Services and activities promotes student activities including concerts, speakers, movies, Homecoming events, Family Weekend, leadership programs, and recreational activities. These activities are aimed at promoting community and the enhancement of campus life (Student Services and Activities at NAU, 2022).

Providing students with an opportunity to pursue social mental health activities that feel less intrusive or less serious than pursuing a clinical counseling session can be a good start. A

program promoting physical interaction with the outdoors can be a soft start to the pursuit of increasing mental health for a student. One study shows that spending time in the presence of bird songs will increase attention spans and perceived psychological restoration. There is an increase in interest in nature studies that show similar effects (Ferraro et al. 2020).

Some of the benefits of adding an outdoor interactive program are that it encourages students to get involved, be more social, be less isolated, and encourages them to interact with others outside of their usual, and more comfortable, group of friends or peers. Dartmouth developed an outdoor orientation program that was initially only to help freshmen transition from high school to the first year at the university. The program saw great success and it eventually turned into easing the students' transition to medical school as well. The research shows that this program increased the participants' self-esteem, leadership and social skills leading to emotional, personal, and social growth of participants by encouraging teamwork and building resilience. Of equal importance, the formation of social connections shows a positive impact on the psychological and developmental growth of participants (Kercheval et al, 2022). Resilience defined as tenacity, tolerance of stress and negative emotions, positive acceptance of change, control, and spirituality is positively linked with higher cumulative GPAs (Hartley, 2011).

NAU also has a program called The Mental Health Support Squad. This a group made of undergraduate and graduate students interested in providing mental health education, outreach, and advocacy to their peers. This program provides student-mentors a chance to offer one-on-one mental health peer mentorship, supports student-led general mental health support groups, and many wellness workshops throughout the semester. These services are free of charge to the students as they are part of the student fees and are even available to online students (Mental

Health Support Squad, 2023). Programs like this have benefits to both the students who are involved as leaders in addition to those who are seeking support.

To support these findings, pursuing social activities, the act of spending time outdoors with peers has been shown to increase the overall well-being of humankind, especially in college students who are working to find their place in school and their social setting. Developing and encouraging programs that facilitate outdoor interactions with peers in a college setting can encourage student persistence and success while increasing mental health and is a start to creating a safe space for the students (Blaney et al, 2022).

Faculty also face stress in their workplace. This stress can negatively impact the students. When teachers face stress and burnout it has been shown that they create distance from the students, feel less sympathy towards them, and their effectiveness as teachers declines (Zhang & Sapp, 2008). Supporting a positive work environment by supporting faculty mental health increases the success of both faculty and students. Many schools are looking at developing workplace wellness programs for educators which has shown improvement in teacher satisfaction, health, and wellbeing. These factors have a positive impact on student performance and also show a reduction in costs related to faculty burnout because they can need additional time off to recover from negative health issues (Lever, et al. 2017).

When it comes to faculty mental health and retention, the solutions are similar. Being supported and developing a sense of belonging and camaraderie are important to faculty retention. One recommendation to support educators, especially after it was shown that just over 50% of faculty reported probable depression, is to promote a whole university approach to

supporting mental health so that faculty are included with the students in pursuing mental health and well-being for all involved in the campus environment (Jayman, et al 2022).

Research has shown that educators report the need for positive management, recognition and praise, developing positive relationships within the campus setting, and professional acknowledgment and value. Educators have also indicated that they thrive when their mental health is prioritized in the same way as the students's wellbeing is promoted in addition to feeling a sense of stability in their positions. In this way, educational faculty have indicated a strong link between being supported at work and their own mental health (O'Brien & Guiney, 2018).

In conclusion, there has been more research into the impact of faculty and student mental health especially in a post-pandemic atmosphere. It is an important topic but even more so now that many students and faculty are in recovery from such a high-stress time. Looking into how to make campus culture a place for psychological health and safety is a big step toward developing successful students and effective faculty. When up to 93% of educators including college professors say that they are experiencing burnout (Zhang & Sapp, 2008), further research is required to determine the best way to fully understand how to provide support for both faculty and staff in the pursuit of mental health. It is a vital and relevant area of study and it would be a disservice to the future of education to overlook the importance of making mental health and stability a priority.

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