

# CREATING A CULTURE OF CARING AT UMASS LOWELL:



Learning with Purpose

## Supporting Student Well-being and Mental Health

Student mental health is a growing issue on college and university campuses, with increasing rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts. Approximately one in three students meet criteria for a clinically significant mental health problem. UMatter2 at UMass Lowell was developed to support our students and help faculty and staff recognize and respond to students in distress.

### Helpers, Not Clinicians

Faculty are experts in their disciplines, and for most, mental health is not their field. Although faculty cannot (and should not) be expected to replace the role of mental health professionals, they can take actions as helpers, not clinicians, to support struggling students. Please consider incorporating these classroom practices:

#### 1. NORMALIZE THE NEED FOR HELP

Students say they value the quality of approachability the most in a professor. Let students know you are a safe person to talk to:

- Share with your class at the beginning of the semester that they can talk to you if they are struggling for any reason.
- Include mental health resources on your syllabi.
- Ask students about how much sleep they are getting and if they are feeling stressed. Urge them to practice self-care.
- Check in with individual students you are concerned about and ask directly how their semester is going.
- Share a story about when you needed help while in school, if you feel comfortable. Doing so is a powerful way to show students that seeking help is a sign of strength.

#### 2. ACTIVELY LISTEN WITH VALIDATE, APPRECIATE AND REFER (V-A-R)

In many cases, struggling students can be helped through a show of compassion, with active listening and appropriate responses:

- **Validate** their experience. (Use phrases like "That makes sense" and "That sounds difficult.")
- **Appreciate** the student's courage for being open with you (e.g., "Thank you for sharing with me").
- **Refer** them to support services. (See next page for referrals.)

#### 3. EMBED COURSES WITH WELL-BEING PRACTICES

Include practical activities to promote well-being:

- Set deadlines for assignments at a time of day that encourages students to get enough sleep. (Avoid midnight or late-night deadlines.)
- Start class or take a break between topics with a mindful moment or meditation.
- Assign self-care as a homework assignment (e.g., encourage students to get at least seven hours of sleep, or unplug from social media for a period of time and to reflect on how they feel afterward).
- If a major event has happened on campus, in the community or nationally that you suspect may be on the students' minds, consider spending a few minutes discussing it before moving on to the lesson.

#### 4. REMEMBER TO PRACTICE YOUR OWN SELF-CARE

Model the healthy behaviors we want our students to cultivate:

- **Set boundaries:** It's OK to not always be available. You cannot and do not need to operate as a 24-hour student help desk.
- **Take a daily "10-minute sabbatical":** Reconnect to the world beyond yourself and your work.
- **Prioritize your own well-being:** Take time to eat nutritious foods, exercise, play, rest, reflect, stretch and grow in your life.



Adapted with permission from "Creating a Culture of Caring: Practical Approaches for College and University Faculty to Support Student Well-being and Mental Health," a faculty resource developed by Active Minds and The Association of College and University Educators (ACUE).



## Syllabus Statement:

### SUGGESTED STATEMENT TO INCLUDE ON ALL COURSE SYLLABI

We are a campus that cares about the mental health and well-being of all individuals in our campus community. Your personal health and well-being can impact your success in this course. Students sometimes experience mental health problems that interfere with academics and have a negative impact on everyday life. If you or someone you know are experiencing mental health challenges at UMass Lowell, please contact Counseling Services (information below). Their services are free and confidential and same-day appointments are available.

I am available to talk with you about stresses related to your work in my class. Furthermore, services are available to help navigate the challenges you face. I can assist you in reaching out to any one of a wide range of campus resources, including:

- [Counseling Services](#) provide crisis intervention, assessment, referrals, short-term individual counseling and group therapy; **978-934-6800** or [uml.edu/counseling](http://uml.edu/counseling).
- [UMatter2](#) is a university-wide initiative to support students and promote mental health; **978-934-6671** or [uml.edu/umatter2](http://uml.edu/umatter2).
- [Disability Services](#) assists students with documented disabilities by providing reasonable accommodations, coordinating services and creating accessibility through assistive technology and other means; **978-934-4574** or [uml.edu/student-services/disability](http://uml.edu/student-services/disability).
- [Centers for Learning and Academic Support Services](#) (CLASS) provides advising services including planning, course selection, SIS functions, changing majors and course deletion/repetitions; **978-934-2936** or [uml.edu/CLASS](http://uml.edu/CLASS).
- [College-based Advising](#) provides advising services to first- and second-year students, as well as all first-year transfer students; [advisement@uml.edu](mailto:advisement@uml.edu) or [uml.edu/advising](http://uml.edu/advising).

*"I start the semester by sharing an introduction letter with students. In the letter, one of the things I mention is my own experience with anxiety and depression. My hope is that this helps reduce the stigma students might feel."*

– UML faculty member

## Toolkit of Ideas:

### ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FACULTY ARE USING TO ENGAGE STUDENTS AND CREATE CONNECTIONS

- Greet students as they come into class and chat about your weekend, current events, family, sports or whatever feels natural.
- Ask students to write down in the chat or discussion board where they're at, using different prompts or visuals (e.g., thumbs up/down/sideways, mental health continuum, or their temperature on a thermometer).
- Offer optional meditation for 5-10 minutes before or after class. It benefits you, too!
- Be available for five or 10 minutes at the start or end of class for students to connect with you and each other. Chat about anything and nothing.
- Acknowledge your own struggles and difficulties, if comfortable. It helps build community.
- Use more intentional prompts for connection (e.g., what are you putting aside to be here today?).
- Ask students to write in the chat one thing they've done for self-care today/this week.
- Model being gracious with yourself.
- Create social connections in class when and where appropriate so students can get to know each other and have study buddies.
- Share campus resources that are there to support them (see below).
- Avoid stress-promoting language. (e.g., "This is high stakes" or "This course weeds out students not suited for the major.")
- Share your strategies and ideas with other faculty.

*"I have a link to U Matter2 and support services on my Blackboard and go over those things with students several times throughout the semester."*

– UML faculty member

## Student Support Resources

### ACADEMIC SUPPORT

- [Office of the Provost](#)
- [Centers for Learning, Advising & Student Success \(CLASS\)](#)
- [Academic Advising](#)
- [Writing Center](#)

### STUDENT SERVICES SUPPORT

- [Counseling Services](#)
- [Student Affairs](#)
- [Health Services](#)
- [Disability Services](#)
- [The Solution Center](#)
- [Smart Money](#)
- [Equal Opportunity & Outreach](#)