

# STUDENT SUPPORT GUIDE

*Supporting Student Well-Being & Responding to Students in Distress*



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The University Counseling Center (UCC) and The Center for Teaching and Learning have prepared this quick-reference guide for faculty and staff to support student emotional well-being. This guide is not intended to be all-inclusive or exhaustive. UCC staff (412-648-7930) are available to consult with you on any concern that might arise from your work with students.

**IN CASE OF AN EMERGENCY OR A SITUATION IN WHICH AN INDIVIDUAL'S HEALTH, SAFETY, OR WELFARE OF OTHERS IS THREATENED, IMMEDIATELY CALL 911 OR CONTACT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH POLICE DEPARTMENT AT 811 (ON-CAMPUS) OR 412.624.2121 (OFF-CAMPUS).**

# A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

As a faculty or staff member, our collective goal is to provide our students with the best collegiate experience in the world. Research demonstrates that well-being has an impact on the overall student experience. Student well-being has a measurable impact on retention and persistence, and the general estimate is that 3-5% of college students withdraw due to mental health related problems (Hunt, 2010, Eisenberg 2013). Graduates who were emotionally supported during college are three times as likely to report they are thriving after college and are six times as likely to be attached to their alma mater (Gallup, 2020). Therefore, supporting and attending to the well-being of our students is a responsibility we all share—regardless of our role.

[The Center for Teaching & Learning](#) and the [University Counseling Center](#) offer a number of learning opportunities for faculty and staff who are interested in learning more about how they can support student well-being.



# SUPPORT

## STUDENT WELL-BEING

### TIPS FOR PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT WELL-BEING

- Build in opportunities to highlight well-being throughout the semester:
  - Convey compassion by spending a few minutes at the beginning of class and/or meeting to check-in to see how students are doing
  - [Invite a member of the UCC Team](#) to share tips on self-care, managing academic stress or peak performance skills
- Consider holidays and academic breaks in creating assignment deadlines and encourage students to utilize breaks to engage in self-care activities
- Encourage sleep by having assignments due by 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. instead of 11:59 p.m.
- Consider creating flexible deadlines on assignments when possible
- Discuss the best way to prepare prior to high-stakes moments (e.g. mid-terms, comprehensive exams, defense, finals)
- Create a well-being resource section on your course site and in your syllabus, highlighting well-being resources on campus
- Talk with members of your department/division about ways you can proactively support students
- Model self-care for your students:  
Visit [Wellness for Life at Pitt](#) and [Life Solutions](#) for ideas and support
- Learn insights and best practices to support [Student Success at Pitt](#)
- Explore [Thrive @ Pitt](#) to learn more about well-being resources available to students



# SUPPORT

## A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

### UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES

It is important to know and understand the specific procedures your department/division has regarding supporting a student in distress. You are encouraged to utilize the prompts below to outline this procedure:

*Department-specific procedures* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Colleagues with whom I can consult:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Additional Notes:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### RECOGNIZE COMMON SIGNS OF DISTRESS

#### Academic

- Sudden decline in academic performance
- Inconsistent attendance
- Disruptive classroom behaviors
- Difficulty with focus/attention
- Repeated request for extensions and/or special considerations
- Excessive procrastination
- Heightened anxiety regarding assignments

#### Social

- Unusual patterns of interaction
- Difficulty getting along with others
- Difficulty communicating effectively
- Isolation and/or withdrawal from friends
- Inappropriate communications
- Peers expressing concern for student

#### Emotional

- Self-disclosure of personal distress
- Excessively anxious or erratic behavior
- Unusual or disproportionate emotional response to situations
- Excessive tearfulness
- Panic reactions
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Sudden changes in emotional states

#### Physical

- Decline in personal hygiene
- Sudden change in physical presentation
- Rapid & sudden weight change
- Evidence of regular drug and/or alcohol use
- Fatigue/lethargy/low energy
- Regular signs of injury (e.g., bruising or cuts)



## RESPOND EFFECTIVELY

### Understand Your Role

- Understand and clearly communicate the boundaries of your role
- Try to convey your concern and willingness to help within those boundaries
- Be aware of your biases

### Show That You Care

- Conduct a Wellness Check:
  - A Wellness Check is a general communication initiated by a faculty or staff member when they have general concern for a student
  - Wellness Checks can be done via email, phone call, in-person or virtual meeting
- Avoid downplaying or minimizing; instead, acknowledge and validate their experience
- Minimize distractions when talking with students
- *"I'm concerned about your well-being and want to check in to see how you are doing."*

### Describe What You See

- Stick to the facts: share your observations while avoiding judgments or assumptions
- *"I haven't seen you for two weeks and I usually see you every day."*

### Actively Listen without Judgment

- Be open-minded and affirming of student's diverse identities and experiences
- Ask for feedback on what the student has heard to ensure your message is accurately received
- Respond with empathy and validation
- *"What a tough situation. You have a lot on your plate right now."*

### Know the Available Resources

- Familiarize yourself with campus and community resources, including crisis resources
- Be prepared to provide general information about resources
- Consult with the UCC as needed

### Connect to Help

- Directly inform the student of your concern and that you believe they would benefit from connecting to a service/program
- Offer to support the student in taking the first steps to get connected
- *"I've heard that some students find \_\_\_\_ helpful, perhaps it might be helpful for you, too. Would you like any help connecting to them?"*

# SUPPORT

## A STUDENT IN CRISIS

### RECOGNIZE COMMON WARNING SIGNS

- Oral, written, or implied intent to harm self or others
- Talking directly about suicide
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Researching methods to harm themselves
- Reckless, disorderly, or dangerous conduct
- Communication of threats/disturbing comments
- Conversations/social media posts/assignments/communication dominated by themes of extreme hopelessness, helplessness and/or despair
- Unprovoked anger, hostility, physical violence
- Talking about death/suicide
- Increased use of substances
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Giving away prized possessions
- Saying goodbye to loved ones

### IF THERE IS CONCERN THAT A STUDENT IS A DANGER TO SELF OR OTHERS, RESPOND IMMEDIATELY:

**If a student is in imminent and immediate danger, call 911.**

#### **Initiate a Welfare Check.**

A Welfare Check is an immediate, in-person check-in with a student on or near campus due to heightened concern about their well-being and safety. Welfare Checks are conducted by the Pitt Police Department or other appropriate first responders.

#### **To initiate a Welfare Check:**

- If possible, directly express your concern to the student and explain that you are seeking additional support for them
- Call [Pitt Police Department](#) (412.624.2121) and explain your concerns. You will be asked provide information regarding student's identity and current location
- If possible, remain with the student—either in-person, virtually or on the phone—until they are connected to professional support staff. While you wait for Welfare Check to arrive, continue to support and validate the student

### **ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY CRISIS RESOURCES**

**resolve Crisis Services**  
1-888-796-8226

**Western Psychiatric  
Hospital**  
412-624-2100

**Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**  
988

**Crisis Text Line**  
Text HOME to 741741

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **What guidelines does the University of Pittsburgh follow regarding student privacy?**

The University values and respects the privacy of students and, consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), permits communication about student well-being and distress in several circumstances, as discussed in more detail below. *Note:* Mental health records created or maintained by a physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, or other recognized professional acting or assisting in that capacity, are subject to additional privacy rules and restrictions on use and disclosure and cannot be released to a third party without written consent from the student.

## **I overheard a student expressing their concerns about a fellow student's mental health and/or safety.**

### **How should I respond?**

Student well-being is a shared responsibility. At times, this may mean embracing an awkward encounter with another member of the Pitt community. If you find yourself in this situation, take a moment to let the student(s) know what you've overheard and provide campus resources that might be helpful, like the [UCC](#).

## **I have a concern about a student in my class, can I discuss my concern with other faculty members, staff or administrators at Pitt?**

Provided the faculty member or administrator has a legitimate educational interest in the information, yes. FERPA permits you to disclose, without consent, personally identifiable information from students' education records to school officials within the University that have legitimate educational interests in the information. Generally, a school official has a legitimate educational interest if the official needs to review an education record in order to fulfill their professional responsibility. The UCC (412.648.7930) or the University's Care and Resource Support Team (412.624.5756) can also assist you with providing further support and resources to the student.

*However, if there is a concern that the student is a threat to self or others, initiate a Welfare Check immediately (see Support a Student in Crisis).*

## **I am concerned for a student in my class, can I call their parent or guardian to express my concern?**

Generally, absent the written student permission, no, you may not contact a student's parent or guardian. *If there is a concern that the student is a threat to self or others, initiate a Welfare Check immediately (see Support a Student in Crisis).* If you do not have a concern that the student is a threat to self or others, talk to the student and express your concerns, inquire if they would like you to contact their family or guardian, and provide support with making that connection. You could also offer to connect the student to other resources on campus. The UCC (412.648.7930) or the [University's Care and Resource Support Team](#) (412.624.5756) can assist you with providing further support and resources to the student.

## **Is calling 911 in the event of an emergency or initiating a welfare check with the Pitt Police a FERPA Violation?**

No. In some situations, University administrators may determine that it is necessary to disclose personally identifiable information from a student's education records to appropriate parties in order to address a health or safety emergency. FERPA's health or safety emergency provision permits such disclosures when the disclosure is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals. This exception to FERPA's general consent requirement is limited to the period of the emergency and generally does not allow for a blanket release of information from a student's education records. Rather, these disclosures must be related to an actual, impending, or imminent emergency. When an educational agency or institution makes a disclosure under the health or safety exception, it must record in the student's education records the articulable and significant threat that formed the basis for the disclosure, and the parties to whom the information was disclosed.

## **Who can I contact if I need more information about FERPA?**

[The Office of University Registrar](#)

# RESOURCES

## ON CAMPUS

### **Pitt Police Department**

3412 Forbes Avenue  
412-624-2121 (emergency)  
412-624-4040 (non-emergency)

### **On-Campus Emergency**

811 (from a campus phone)

### **University Counseling Center**

2nd Floor, Nordenberg Hall  
412-648-7930

### **Care & Resource Support Team**

412-624-5756  
Care Referral: [pi.tt/careferral](https://pitt.edu/careferral)

### **Pitt Concern Connection**

Phone: 800-468-5768  
Text: 412-903-3456

### **Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**

412-648-7860

### **Student Health Services**

2nd Floor, Nordenberg Hall  
412-383-1800

### **Disability Resources & Services**

412.648.7890

### **The Office of Civil Rights & Title IX**

Cathedral of Learning, 31st Floor  
412-648-7860

### **Office of the Dean of Students**

412-648-1006

## COMMUNITY

### **resolve Crisis Services**

1-888-796-8226

### **Pittsburgh Bureau of Police**

911

### **Pittsburgh Action Against Rape (PAAR)**

1-866-363-7273

### **Center for Victims of Violence and Crime**

412-392-8582

### **Western Psychiatric Hospital**

412-624-2100

### **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**

988

### **Crisis Text Line**

Text HOME to 741741







**University Counseling Center**

Nordenberg Hall  
Wellness Center 2nd Floor  
119 University Place  
412-648-7930  
[counseling.pitt.edu](http://counseling.pitt.edu)



University Center for  
**Teaching and Learning**

**Center For Teaching & Learning**

824 Alumni Hall  
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412-624-3335  
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