

STUDENT SUPPORT GUIDE

Supporting Student Well-Being & Responding to Students in Distress



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).

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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.
- Cultivate an environment that promotes psychological safety for 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?"*

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](#)

SUPPORT 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

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



PROVIDE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CARE

Universal Design

Exploring Universal Design

Our students stand at the intersection of multiple identities that may or may not be apparent during your interactions with them in the classroom. Remember, for all of us our cultural experiences are much deeper than everyday interactions would showcase. Each of us are like icebergs: there are parts that are visible and parts that remain below the surface.

Therefore, approaching your interactions with students through a culturally humble framework can create a welcoming environment. Cultural humility is entering a relationship with another person with the intent of honoring their beliefs, customs, values, and differences. This approach suggests we continue to learn about the world's diverse multicultural social identities, while acknowledging our own stance and limitations around possibly knowing everything.

When designing aspects of your class experience (e.g., syllabi, learning objectives, presentation materials, classroom set-up, project rubrics, etc.), universal design can present a framework to guide a culturally humble classroom. Universal design is an approach to make the learning environment accessible and usable for the largest possible audience without adaptation. By considering multiple intersecting identities, everyone can benefit.

What is often helpful in enacting the approaches of cultural humility and universal design is being able to step into the shoes of students with an appreciation of their diverse intersecting identities. With that appreciation and consideration comes the opportunity to imagine what could enhance your students' experiences in the classroom.

EXAMPLE:

Including closed captioning on the videos you play in the classroom specifically allows students with hearing challenges to better receive information. However, this aspect of universal design also allows for better retention of student who have a preference for visual learning or English language learners.

RACIAL TRAUMA

WHAT IS RACIAL TRAUMA?

Racial trauma, or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS), is the emotional, psychological, and physical reaction BIPOC students experience as a result of exposure to ongoing or persistent acts of hate, bias, discrimination, or intolerance. Racial trauma builds over time as a student experiences large and small racial events over time that contribute to chronic stress. Racism and racial discrimination can negatively impact a student's well-being.

EXPERIENCING RACIAL TRAUMA

Racial trauma can be experienced in the body and mind in many ways. Common signs of racial trauma include:

- Avoiding places/people/situations that are reminders of racist experiences
- Being mistrusting of others
- Feeling triggered by internal or external reminders of racist experiences (that can cause emotional or physical reactions)
- Difficulty controlling emotional responses
- Being hypervigilant (or paranoid) about potential negative experiences
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Guilt and shame
- Mood instability including depression, anxiety, and/or anger
- Confusion or denial

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH RACIAL TRAUMA

It can be difficult to know where to begin when a student is experiencing racial trauma. Here are some suggestions to offer students:

- Share the pain with others; this can help increase understanding of feelings and coping skills.
- Acknowledge feelings of anger in healthy ways and channel it into promoting meaningful change.
- Limit media intake (avoid doom scrolling).
- Seek out social support and connection.
- Take care of basic needs (e.g., eat, sleep, rest, etc.).
- Cultivate hopefulness and optimism.
- Engage in self-care activities that are pleasurable.
- Focus on empowerment through resistance; speak up and engage in community service or activism.
- Seek professional mental health support.

SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

LEGAL RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING STUDENTS

ENROLLMENT REQUIREMENTS

In general, international students may not have less than full-time enrollment to remain in the United States. Therefore, they cannot drop a class if they are not performing well or struggling with the material. Legally, there are only a few, very specific reasons that a student can be below full-time status, such as a medical condition or only needing a few credits to graduate. If any student has questions about dropping below full-time status, they should be directed to their Immigration Specialist in OIS, since OIS is the only office that has authority to approve these immigration-specific exceptions.

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Many students struggle with finances, but international students have limits on how they can work. Almost every international student is in F-1 or J-1 status, which means they cannot work off-campus without specific permission from OIS, and under very specific situations. In addition, they are only permitted to work less than 20 hours per week on campus during their studies. In addition, there can be rapid economic changes in their home country that impact their family's financial support and needs.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON HEALTH

Cultural Adjustment

International students experience significant cultural adjustment when they arrive to study in the U.S. The constant need to think and act in a way foreign to their home culture is both mentally and emotionally taxing. Culture shock can manifest in different ways and can include sadness, exhaustion, boredom, lack of motivation, disorientation, and physical discomfort.

Language Concerns

While many of the international students have had to demonstrate strong English language skills, not all English is the same. American English includes words, expressions, references, and non-verbal components that are unique and challenging to international students. The addition of academic jargon in their courses can add another frustrating level of complexity to their daily life.



CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON HEALTH (CONT.)

Loneliness

Loneliness is not something exclusive to international students, but it can be much harder for these students to make connections here, to communicate with family, and to travel home than their classmates. While many international students have friends at Pitt from their home country, over the last 5 years Pitt has had students from 65 countries who were the only student from that nation.

Family in Pittsburgh

Some of our older international students, mostly graduate students, have brought their spouses and children with them to Pittsburgh. While their family is a great support to them, living in the U.S. can be significantly more isolating for their family members. There are no English language requirements for family members and trying to navigate a foreign city without language skills or community can be a challenging experience affecting the entire family.

LGBTQIA+ SUPPORT

SUPPORTING LGBTQIA+ STUDENTS

- Use pronouns that students share with you.
- Don't force students to share pronouns – this may not feel safe for them.
- Having just one setting where a student's pronouns are respected can reduce suicidal thoughts.
- Avoid the use of gender as a binary variable when talking to students.
- Use inclusive language, such as saying "partner/partners" instead of "boyfriend/girlfriend."
- Make sure forms for students are inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations.

DISABILITIES

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

- Above all, stay calm. Students with disabilities are people; they are not solely defined by their disabilities.
- Interact with the student as a person first.
- Don't assume the needs of students with disabilities – every student with a disability is unique and has individual preferences and needs. Don't make decisions for students about participating in any activity.
- When interacting with a student with a disability, speak directly to them rather than to a companion, interpreter, friends, or anyone else with them.
- Focus on what the person is communicating to you rather than on their disability.
- Just because a student has a disability, don't assume they need help. Offer students assistance with sensitivity and respect, but do not continue to offer if declined. If the offer is accepted listen carefully for instructions from the student.
- Use "People First" Language – refer to the student first, then to their disability, when it is relevant and appropriate. Say "student with a disability" rather than "disabled student."
- Don't portray students with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, or special. This implies that it is unusual for students with disabilities to have talents or skills.
- Avoid using the term "normal" to describe students who don't have disabilities. It is better to say "students without disabilities" or "typical" if there is a need to make comparisons.
- If you aren't sure about something, ASK! A student with a disability is often the best resource on their disability and their needs.
- Avoid using the following terms when referring to students with a disability:
 - The handicapped or the disabled
 - Wheelchair bound, lame or physically impaired
 - Down's person, epileptic, or spastic
 - Dwarf or midget
 - Learning disabled student, slow, or brain damaged
 - Hearing impaired or deaf and dumb
 - Visually handicapped
 - Mute, dumb, or speech impaired

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CARE RESOURCES

ON CAMPUS

Office of Inclusion & Belonging

pi.tt/oib

Get in Touch: pi.tt/oibcontactus

Office of International Services

ois.pitt.edu

ois@pitt.edu

412-624-7120

Disability Resource Services

drs.pitt.edu

drsrecep@pitt.edu

412-648-7890

Prevention @ Pitt

diversity.pitt.edu

pittprevention@pitt.edu

412-648-7860

Student Success Hub

pi.tt/studentsuccesshub

studentsuccess@pitt.edu

412-624-4222

Office of Veteran Services

veterans.pitt.edu

veterans@pitt.edu

CROSS CULTURAL RESOURCES Trainings

The Faculty/Staff Development Program (FSDP) has several training sessions on cross-cultural communication, intercultural competence, and understanding international student's experience. In addition, the Office of International Services (OIS) does on demand sessions on a variety of topics.

Online Resources

The OIS Outreach website (ois.pitt.edu/outreach) includes several resources for Cross-Cultural Trainings, such as: cultural presentations, a reading list, a video library, and a section just for fun of staff recommendations.



University
Counseling Center
Student Affairs

University Counseling Center

Nordenberg Hall
Wellness Center 2nd Floor
119 University Place
412-648-7930
counseling.pitt.edu



University Center for
Teaching and Learning

Center For Teaching & Learning

824 Alumni Hall
4227 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
412-624-3335
teaching.pitt.edu