

# Mental Health Syllabus Statement Proposal

December 10, 2019

Mental health and mental illness are undoubtedly growing concerns for young adults and adolescents. The suicide rates amongst these populations have seen steadfast growth in recent decades. As society shifts its focus towards a more rigorous work ethic, students find that their mental health is becoming less of a priority.

The American College Health Association National College Health Assessment II (ACHAN-CHA II) provides astonishing data regarding the mental health climate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

- 85.1% of students “felt overwhelmed by everything they had to do,” which is equivalent to 42,550 students (assuming a student body of 50,000)
- 43.8% of students (21,900 students) felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function,” within the past 12 months
- 13.9% of students at this university alone were **seriously considering suicide within the past 12 months**

To provide context, Foellinger Auditorium can host a maximum of 1,361 people. The number of students at this University alone that *seriously considered suicide* in the past year is equal to 5.1 times the capacity of Foellinger Auditorium (6,950 students).

To address these alarming statistics, we want to raise awareness of mental health concerns and mental health resources available to students. A way of working towards a solution is **to require the inclusion of a mental health statement on every professor/TA’s syllabus**. This statement will include:

1. Acknowledgment of the problem of mental health concerns, to show the university’s awareness of such issues

2. Direct information about the variety of confidential counseling, psychiatric, and suicide prevention resources available for students

With the addition of this statement, more students will hopefully seek out the necessary resources in an improved mental health climate on campus.

We are proposing the inclusion of the following statement: Overall mental wellness is an important component of academic success.

*Significant stress, mood changes, excessive worry, substance/alcohol misuse or interferences in eating or sleep can have an impact on academic performance, social development, and emotional wellbeing. The University of Illinois offers a variety of confidential services including individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, psychiatric services, and specialized screenings which are covered through the Student Health Fee. If you or someone you know experiences any of the above mental health concerns above, it is strongly encouraged to contact or visit any of the University's resources provided below. Getting help is a smart and courageous thing to do – for yourself and for those who care about you.*

- *Counseling Center (217) 333-3704*
- *McKinley Health Center (217) 333-2700*
- *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255*
- *Rosecrance Crisis Line (217) 359-4141 (available 24/7, 365 days a year)*
- *If you are in immediate danger, call 911*

Currently, there is no policy in place to require the inclusion of a statement about mental health resources on the syllabi of professors. As you may be familiar with, statements about Academic Integrity and Disability Resources are a common section of a syllabus. We believe that the administrative staff of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign should have a general and significant interest in the implementation of a policy, such as this, that will likely improve the mental health climate.

It is understood that the information on a syllabus is reserved for academic concerns. Mental health is undoubtedly an academic concern. Poor mental health has extensively proven to predict detriments to academic success. Facilitating the process by which students are connected with mental health resources will assist students in confronting their concerns which, in turn, allows a greater opportunity and likelihood of academic success. A classic paper by the National Center for Biotechnology Information revealed that perceived stigma, embarrassment, poor mental health literacy, and a preference for self-reliance were the most significant barriers to help-seeking amongst young people. It can easily be seen

that a statement distributed to all students which addresses each of these barriers would have a positive impact on the mental health climate at the University.

Referencing the NCBI once again, 75% of mental illnesses onset by the mid-20s. It is crucial that mental illnesses are addressed as soon as possible. The logic can be seen through the example of a degenerative disease such as cancer. Often, early symptoms of cancer can appear to be harmless. People give the disease the opportunity to develop in their body when they ignore their symptoms. However, cancer is much easier to treat in its early stages. The applicable rule here is that the earlier the detection, the better. Similarly, it is essential to treat mental illnesses as early as possible. With many people (75%) experiencing negative mental health symptoms during the college years (18-24), it is pivotal for colleges and Universities to be well-equipped and prepared to help students treat their mental health concerns so that academic and professional success is not compromised.

We hope that by including this statement on syllabi, awareness of the importance of seeking help for mental health issues spreads across campus. By increasing awareness, we can improve students' attitudes towards mental health issues and increase the number of students who seek resources for themselves. There is evidence that suggests that education and increased awareness for mental health issues in the school environment has positive effects. For example, a study by Pinfold et al. (2004) found that a high school mental health workshop program designed to destigmatize and increase awareness for mental health issues led to positive changes in attitude and social distance.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of U.S. Universities that have adopted the mandate or strong recommendation of a mental health syllabus statement.

Ohio State University*
Penn State*
Smith College
University of Wisconsin-Madison*
Northwestern University*
State University of New York-Geneseo
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cornell University
Lewis Clark State College
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities*
Carnegie Mellon University
Purdue University*

\*Indicates Big 10 Schools

Once the policy is in place, it is important to quantify the impact that it has made on the campus. **One year** after the implementation of the syllabus statement, a survey would be sent out asking questions such as:

- “Did you receive help from at least one of the listed mental health services above?”
- “Did you receive these services as a result of being referred via the syllabus?”
- “Did this statement help inform you of the available mental health campus resources?” and
- “Did you recommend others look at the statement for help with their mental health concerns?”

The responses should tell us how well the statement increased awareness for mental health concerns and how it assisted people in obtaining mental health resources. There will also be an optional free response section for which students can suggest improvements to the policy if it did not meet its intended goal.

We thank you for your time and consideration in regards to our proposed policy. We hope that through this process we can shed some light on and open up the conversation about mental health and mental illness on college campuses. It is our aim for every student at the University of Illinois to be informed and educated about the various mental health services available to them. Afterall, ignorance should never be the reason that someone does not get connected to mental health resources.