Learning and Teaching Practices that Support Student Mental Health and Well-being

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Be well

Contents

Project Team

- Nancy Turner, Director, Teaching and Learning Enhancement, Office of the Vice Provost Teaching, Learning and Studxent Experience

- Murray Drew, Professor, Department of Animal Science, College of Agriculture and Bioresources

- Peter Hedley, Director, Student Affairs and Services, Office of the Vice Provost Teaching, Learning and Student Experience

- Rose Roberts, Educational Development Specialist, Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning

Project Support

Maryellen Gibson, Student Wellness Centre

Advisory Committee

TLARC Wellness Strategy working group

1. Introduction

This Teaching, Learning and Academic Resources Committee (TLARC) of University Council project examined learning and teaching practices that enable or constrain student mental health and well-being. The approach taken here is a deliberate shift from positioning mental health issues as an individual problem to one that focuses on the environment and the barriers and enablers to mental well-being that reside within it, including the practices, systems, structures and learning environments of higher education (Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Lister et al., 2021). The sources considered in this project were:

1. **learning and teaching practices that support student mental health and well-being from the literature, Canadian HE, and USask,**

2. **University of Saskatchewan (USask) undergraduate student perceptions,**

3. **key leader and service provider perspectives on issues and opportunities in teaching and learning practices that support student mental health and well-being,**

4. **aggregated pandemic related survey and focus group data related to the themes of teaching and learning practices and mental health, where the approach to data generation allowed for ethical use.**

The key deliverable of this work is this integrated report that makes the case for learning and teaching practices that support student mental well-being, laying out the need for change, potential foci for that change and examples where change has been successfully undertaken, addressing the questions of why, what and how. As the student population involved in this project was primarily undergraduates, results should be interpreted as focused on teaching and learning practices at that level, noting that many of the conclusions would also be relevant for taught graduate programming. This project does not address thesis or dissertation based graduate education. Key recommendations for next and longer-term steps at the USask are outlined.

2. The impact of the Pandemic on the timing and content of this report

This project was initiated in 2019 with data generation and analysis completed by February 2020. In March 2020 the project was paused due to the pandemic. As such, the main perspectives and findings outlined in this report are reflective of a pre-pandemic USask context. On resumption of the project in September 2021 it was decided to proceed in a way that would honor the voices and input of students, faculty, staff and academic leaders before the pandemic whilst acknowledging that our reality has shifted. To achieve both, the project team has left the findings of the report largely untouched, but has added in a pandemic lens, highlighted with a magnifying glass throughout the document, to each section where it was seen to be relevant. The pandemic perspectives were derived from pandemic connected projects that generated data on USask student experiences and perspectives (e.g., Student Pulse survey December 2020) and USask faculty and staff perspectives (e.g., Post Pandemic Shift Commission). The source of data is referenced in each pandemic lens insert. We are grateful to colleagues who allowed us to draw on this work to strengthen the report. We hope our approach acknowledges that pre-pandemic issues related to teaching and learning practices and student mental health remain relevant and arguably more pressing for us to address whilst weaving in what we have heard and learned throughout the pandemic to strengthen the findings. We have also added in references to literature published over the past 20 months and activity related to mental health, where appropriate.

3. Scope

It is important to note that this project is focused on teaching and learning practices for student mental wellbeing, not about mental wellbeing. With that said, improving teaching and learning practices to support student wellbeing cannot exist in a vacuum. Timely access to mental health services, including counselling and medical professionals is essential. Providing education about mental wellbeing and providing students with access to activities and practices that promote mental wellbeing are required. The entire university community must be aware of the issues surrounding mental wellbeing and the elimination of stigma in all its forms and actively engage in promoting community wellbeing. This must include considering and supporting faculty and staff well-being to enable creation of an environment conducive to mental wellbeing for our students. Mental well-being must not only be supported at the individual level, but also woven into the systems, policies and practices of universities at all levels. As such, we can consider several elements necessary to support mental well-being in higher education as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 | SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION
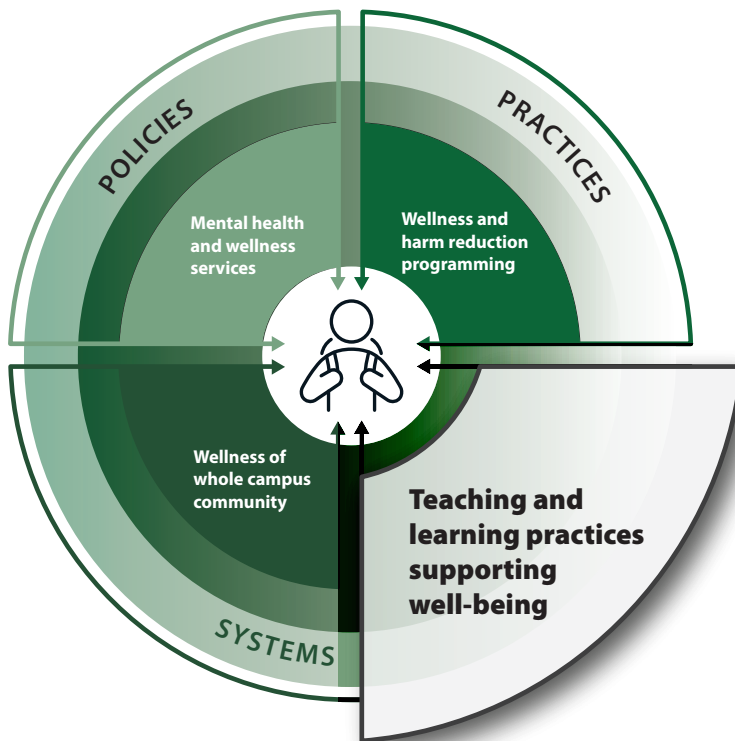
The Okanagan Charter, adopted by the USask in 2017, calls on post-secondary schools to embed health into all aspects of campus culture. The USask is making strides in this regard with an institutional Wellness Strategy and components of our University Plan 2025 and Learning, Teaching and Student Experience plan inclusive of these issues. We, along with the higher education sector, have much work to do. This report is focused on one component of this work, teaching and learning practices to support student mental well-being (quadrant 4, figure 1). This element of an overall plan has significant potential to proactively influence student mental health and well-being by getting upstream from the symptoms and focusing on the potential causes of student distress and anxiety in our teaching and learning environments. This focus on teaching and learning practices has not been as central to efforts to support the mental health and wellbeing of students in North American higher education to date.

4. Sources

As noted above, this project examined teaching and learning practices that may constrain or enable student mental well-being. In doing so, data were generated and gathered from several sources including University of Saskatchewan students, faculty, academic leaders and from the academic and grey literature. The method of data generation or gathering for each area is outlined in the sections that follow.

4.1 | Strand 1: Literature and good practice

Published literature and relevant projects from other institutions and national contexts were gathered and reviewed in addition to examples of good practice from other higher education institutions and USask instructors. Examples from USask instructors were identified through the project team, staff at the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning, and interviews with senior college leaders. Those identified were interviewed to create brief synopses of their practice. A total of 20 instructors participated in this strand of the project. This information has informed the structure of this report. Four examples were selected as exemplars and brief case studies were written by these faculty members to highlight good practice in teaching and learning (highlighted in the text boxes outlined in green on pages 14-23).

4.2 | Strand 2: Student perspectives

Given the nature of this strand of work, USask research ethics board approval was sought and received prior to initiation of data collection. These data were collected in a series of focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews with undergraduate students. The questions used to guide the focus groups and interviews can be found in the appendix. Participants were recruited from peer health mentors, library peer mentors and campus student leaders. These groups were identified as undergraduate students who, through their work as mentors and leaders, would have both personal perspectives and experiences to share, as well a broader perspective regarding challenges and opportunities faced by students from across the institution, they had opportunity to work with in their mentor/leader roles. All identified members of these groups were invited to take part. Ultimately, 15 students were recruited to participate through this convenience sampling approach. The group included diversity regarding area of study (Arts and Science, Health Sciences, Kinesiology, Agriculture, Engineering, Computer Science) and year of study (second to fifth year). Furthermore, international students, Indigenous students, student parents, and those who had studied abroad took part in the focus groups and interviews. As such, the student participants brought diverse and varied perspectives, not presented here as representative of USask student views, but as essential voices to consider in relation to student mental health and well-being.

The transcribed data was analyzed using narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The verbatim narratives were placed into an initial set of themes (workload, professor-student interactions, classroom environment, institutional environment/policies and financial), recurring terms/phrases were narrowed down to one version and a seamless composite narrative was created, as if one individual was speaking from their experience. Narratives that had the potential of being identifiable to one person were removed from the composite narrative. These narratives informed the structure of this report with key sections extracted and used throughout (highlighted in the light orange text boxes) to provide student voice in each section.

Aggregate data from two pandemic student pulse surveys undertaken in November 2020 (n=3286) and March 2021 (n=2127) were also used to create the pandemic lens sections seen throughout the report. Quantitative results presented here have been pulled from the original pulse survey outcomes. Qualitative comments from two of the open-ended questions in the November 2020 pulse survey (Which of the following issues (if any) have been a challenge for you in adapting to remote learning? 'Other', and What is one additional thing USask could do to help you feel part of a caring community?) were also analyzed using narrative analysis (Roberts, 2009). In total, 3330 comments were analyzed using the questions from the initial focus groups and interviews with students. The comments were then moved under the same themes as the previous analysis: Workload, Assessment, Student-Teacher Interactions, Classroom Environment,

Institutional Environment/Polices, and Financial. With two additional categories added: Mental Health and Remote Learning. These analyses were draw together with the literature and good practice data as the basis for sections 6, 7 and 8 in this report.

Additionally, student responses on the core open-ended questions[1] for departments using the Student Learning Experience Questionnaire in Fall 2019 (n=16542 comments) and Fall 2020 (n=15916 comments) were analyzed to compare relative frequency of words or phrases related to mental health, workload, belonging, relevance, feedback, assessment, engagement, and learning environment. As well, Fall 2020 responses for one pandemic specific question[2] (n=6932 comments) was also assessed for frequency of keywords related to assessment, engagement, and learning environment.

These pandemic data sources were used to create the pandemic lens sections seen throughout the report.

4.3 | Strand 3: Key leadership and service provider perspectives

Discussions were undertaken with several Associate Deans Academic and staff members who provide direct student support (e.g., academic advisors, student wellness staff, librarians, Student Learning Services staff) regarding the challenges they currently face or are aware of in relation to learning and teaching practice that influences student mental well-being. A total of 17 individuals participated in the initial work for this strand of the project. The key themes from these discussions informed the structure of this report and were used to identify individuals for strand 2 as noted above.

In addition, summary reports from phase one (survey of university community, n=379), phase two (3 faculty engagement groups, n=26) and phase three (university community workshop on teaching and learning) of the Post Pandemic Shift Commission project as well as the commission's final report were used to create the pandemic lens sections seen throughout the report. These data were generated between and February and June 2021.

SUMMARY

This TLARC project examined learning and teaching practices that enable or constrain student mental health and well-being

- **The project team considered data from the literature, examples of good practice from other institutions and the USask, and USask student, academic leader and service provider perspectives**
- **This report outlines the need for change in teaching and learning practices to enable student mental health and well-being, potential foci for that change and examples where change has been successfully undertaken, addressing the questions of why, what and how**

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1 Please comment on any opportunities you had to develop and demonstrate subject specific skills in this course; Please comment on the overall quality of the instruction in this course; Please comment on the overall quality of your learning experience in this course.

2 Please comment on those online/remote teaching strategies that were particularly supportive of your learning during the COVID 19 pandemic.
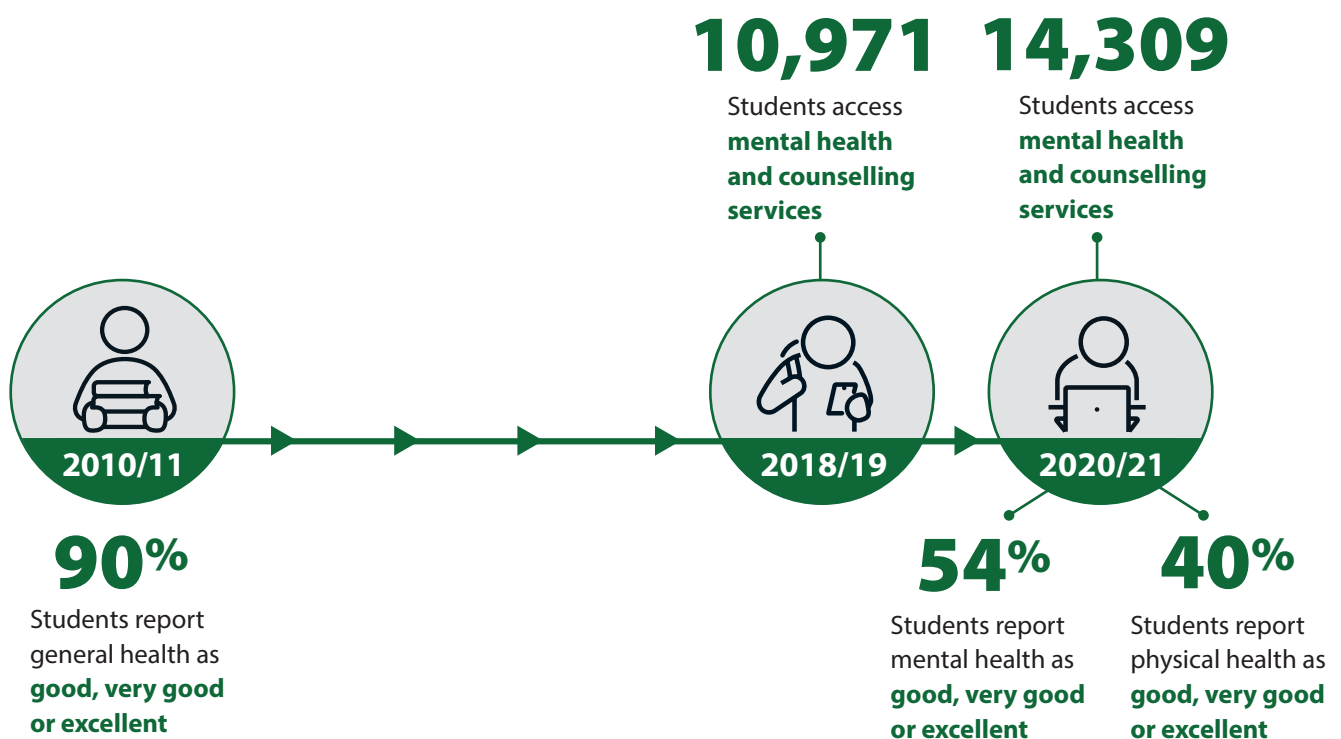
5. Where are we now?

Like if you can talk to someone or find somebody who's good at taking breaks and doing things for themselves, they're few and far between which is...not good. That's exactly what university is promoting, and I don't think that's good for anyone if you're missing out in your studying or you're missing out in your sleep or you're missing out on your friends. This is a generation we're creating. They can't - nobody I think, nobody can take a break."

5.1 | Broad higher education and societal context

Gaining a post-secondary education can be exciting and transformative, but in 2022, amid an ongoing global pandemic, it is also arguably more challenging than ever before. At USask, students' self-reported mental and physical health has declined over the past decade (USask National College Health Assessment, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2019, USask Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey, 2021). Ninety percent of USask students in 2011 reported their general health as good, very good or excellent while only 54% reported the same for their mental health and 40% for their physical health in 2021 (USask Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey, 2021). In 2019, the factors reported by the most students as impacting academic performance were stress (42.4%), anxiety (36.1%), sleep difficulties (30.4%) and depression (25.4%) with the number of students reporting these as impactful having increased by as much as 14% since 2011 (USask National College Health Assessment, 2011, 2019). In the 2019 USask National College Health Assessment survey 70% of students reported feeling overwhelming anxiety within the last 12 months. We see students' struggles reflected in the dramatically increasing need for and usage of mental health and accessibility services on campus. University of Saskatchewan students accessing campus mental health and counselling services rose from 10,971 students in the 2018-19 academic year to 14,309 in the 2020-21 academic year.

10,971
Students access **mental health and counselling services**

14,309
Students access **mental health and counselling services**

2010/11

2018/19

2020/21

90%
Students report general health as **good, very good or excellent**

54%
Students report mental health as **good, very good or excellent**

40%
Students report physical health as **good, very good or excellent**

The reasons for this increase in mental health service use in this short time period are undoubtably multi-faceted and complex. On the positive side, shifts in societal attitudes towards mental health continue to reduce the stigma around mental health issues enabling more people, especially young people, to benefit from receiving the care, treatment and support they need. Additionally, educational institutions continue to invest in supports for the mental health and wellness of the student population enabling a more diverse student population to attend university. Undoubtedly, in the 2020/2021 academic year, the mental health of many students was also impacted negatively by the pandemic.

In addition, social isolation and loneliness are increasingly major contributing factors to poor mental health (Richardson et al., 2017). In the 2019 National College Health Assessment survey, 68% of USASK student respondents reported feeling very lonely within the last 12 months. Issues of loneliness and isolation have been exacerbated during the pandemic, particularly for Canadians aged 18-34 (Findlay & Arim, 2020).

Broader societal factors, including uncertainty in the future of our economy and job opportunities alongside uncertainty related to the health of our planet have added to a sense of instability and risk that contributes to increasing pressure to not just succeed but exceed others in life, including in academic study. This is coupled by increased financial pressures experienced by students to pay for a university education. In a study by Eisenberg et. al. (2007), students with financial problems were at higher risk for mental health problems (depression, anxiety). Financial concerns and major disruption to employment plans for were both exacerbated for postsecondary students by the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Students are also experiencing increased expectations to excel in education. This has led to a significant increase in perfectionism in university students since 1989 (Curran & Hill, 2019). Students place unreasonable expectations on themselves and if they do not meet them, they are overly self-critical. If they fall short of their academic goals, they end up feeling like they are failures leading to increased susceptibility to depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Curran & Hill, 2019). Additionally, the intrinsic (social and family relatedness, autonomy, personal growth, volunteering) and extrinsic (high marks, job, money) motivations of students have changed significantly compared to their parents (Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge & Donnelly, 2016). High extrinsic motivation combined with low intrinsic motivation is associated with decreased mental wellbeing and low self-esteem (Schmuck, 2001).

While these challenges are not impacting only university students, research does indicate that mental health difficulties are widespread in university student populations (Baik et al., 2017), particularly high levels of stress, anxiety and depression (American College Health Association, 2019) which have been exacerbated during the pandemic (Prowse et al., 2021). At USask, the total number of students registering for protected category related supports or accommodations with Access and Equity Services increased threefold between 2011/12 and 2020/21, with 75% of students registering with an invisible disability/mental health condition. Young university students may be experiencing higher levels of psychological distress than same aged peers in the general community (Stallman, 2010). There is also evidence that reported distress in students in later years of study is higher than that reported by first years, indicating that there is a decline in wellbeing in first year that persists throughout one's degree (Stallman, 2010). It is noteworthy that, in the 2019 National College Health Assessment survey, nearly two thirds of USask students reported academics as being traumatic or very difficult to handle within the last 12 months, with this proportion having increased by 10% since 2011.

PANDEMIC LENS

Negative descriptors such as *stress*, *anxiety*, *overwhelm*, *lonely*, and *unmotivated* were twice as likely to appear in student SLEQ comments in Fall 2020 as compared to Fall 2019.

SUMMARY

There has been a 30% increase in use of mental health services in just two years at USask. The reasons for this are influenced by societal shifts that include:

- a positive shift in societal attitudes toward mental health and a resultant ability for individuals to access mental health services
- improved access to and services within higher education for those with existing mental health concerns
- increased complexity, social isolation, and uncertainty exacerbated by the pandemic
- increased pressure to succeed, and a focus on extrinsic motivators
- Research suggests that mental health difficulties are widespread in university students with some studies noting a higher level of psychological distress than age-matched peers and increasing distress as higher education study progresses.

5.2 | Teaching and learning practices

With this broader context in mind, the focus of this report is on teaching and learning practices that enable mental well-being. Teaching and learning practices as considered here include:

- **the outcomes we intend our students to achieve (learning goals)**
- **what is taught or not taught (content)**
- **how it is taught (instructional activities, learning activities)**
- **how it is assessed (practice, feedback, goal setting, reflection, and grading)**

These practices create learning environments that influence student opportunity for personal and academic success. Each of these have been shown to have an impact on student mental health and well-being (see Baik et al., 2017 for a comprehensive overview).

In the best of contexts, teaching practices set out and guide students regarding what is important to know and do (in the context of a discipline or a profession) and provide activities so students can practice, get feedback, and eventually know and do the things deemed to be important in that program of study. At its core, teaching and learning practice plays out between a student and an instructor. With this noted, it is important to acknowledge that teaching practices selected and enacted by an instructor are influenced by the contexts of the academic program, department and institution in which those practices occur. Teaching does not take place in a vacuum; outcomes, content, learning activities and assessment are shaped by culture, policies and systems. This, and the necessary actions for program teams, departments and institutions to enable teaching practices that support student mental health and well-being, will be considered in section 8.

In considering teaching and learning practices that support mental well-being, it is important to acknowledge that not all university students experience mental health issues or psychological distress. Variation in the ways in which students experience university study and teaching and learning practices can be due to differences in the individual student's circumstances as well as their environment.

Baik and colleagues (2017) highlight these student circumstances as stressors and resources. Stressors are the aspects of a student's circumstance that can negatively impact their learning such as inadequate preparation for study at university, financial pressure, or isolation. Resources are the aspects of a student's circumstance that can support effective
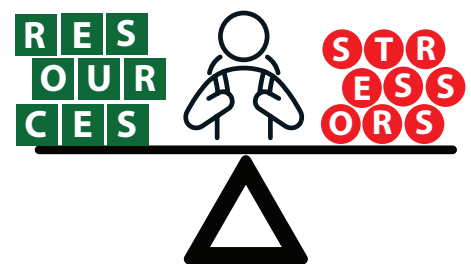
learning such as an understanding of higher education study (because, for example, one's parents studied in higher education), strong social networks and supports, and a belief that one can learn any subject through focused effort (Dweck, 2000). These are just a few examples of the stressors and resources that interact with the environment to support or undermine student well-being. The institutional environment can add to, amplify or mitigate the stressors and foster or drain an individual's resources (Baik et al., 2017).

So, what happens when the student, with their varied stressors and resources, meets the teaching and learning environment of the instructor, program, department, and institution? Drawing together the literature and the data generated from this project, the ways that this interaction might negatively influence student mental health and well-being, are outlined. This is followed by an examination of teaching and learning practices that can positively affect these outcomes. Finally, the ideal end state is discussed in relation to creation of learning environments that enable positive student mental health.

6. Teaching and learning practices that add or amplify stressors and drain resources

In this section teaching and learning practices that add to and/or amplify student stressors and drain student resources are explored in relation to areas known to impact student mental health.
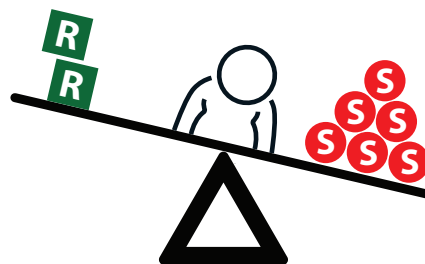
6.1 | What do I need to know and do?

Understand that we're human too, I feel like some profs don't understand that I have four other classes that I'm taking and I can't be studying for this class every single day for how many hours a day. I need you to teach me and to make this time productive so that I don't have to go and re-learn something for myself. That's reasonable to ask or if you're asking for all these assignments, they're not all going to be fantastic when you increase the number of them. I don't think the course load needs to be as heavy as it is. I get that you want us to be a master of everything or whatever but that's not reasonable. There's just so many other little things that are attached, that it just amplifies the stress and definitely decreases your mental health."

The above narrative speaks to students finding themselves overwhelmed by all there is to know and do with a sense that the expectations are either unclear or unreasonable. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature that identify the following practices as having been shown to add to or amplify student stressors and drain their resources:

- **Overcrowding the course**, leaving students overwhelmed and/or not feeling able to adequately achieve what is being asked
- **Not making the connection between learning experiences clear or explicit**, making opaque to students the relationships between concepts or why certain knowledge or tasks are required
- **Assuming students have knowledge or skills that they do not have**, resulting in students being lost or struggling to catch up
- **Not clarifying expectations**, what 'good' looks like, or guiding students in how they might achieve it, leaving opaque to students the standards being expected, where to invest their time in learning, or how they might develop their knowledge and skills so as to demonstrate them

Intentional curriculum design can enable student wellbeing (Slavin et al., 2014a; Tang & Ferguson, 2014).

PANDEMIC LENS

"*I'm in my 3rd year and took two 1st year courses because I need electives and even those classes have a huge amount of extra work to be expected, ... I've never had so many assignments in all my years of university. Some classes had a minimum of three assignments per week that each took, on average, several hours to complete.*" *Pulse Survey 2020*

6.2 | Do I belong?

"*In first year I was like "am I even good for university? Do I even, can I even do this?" and then it got better as classes got smaller. Professors have the opportunity to use different teaching styles with different cohorts of students in smaller classroom environments.*"

This narrative speaks to students feeling they do not belong in university and are not capable of succeeding. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following practices that have been shown to add to or amplify student stressors and drain their resources:

- **Not facilitating students' connection to or ability to 'see themselves' In the learning or environment**, leaving students disconnected from the environment and the courses taught
- **Creating an environment that is impersonal**, where students feel anonymous, amplifying student isolation
- **Creating a learning environment that is lonely**, where student struggle to connect and collaborate

As noted above, in the 2019 National College Health Assessment survey, nearly 70% of USASK student respondents reported feeling very lonely at some point in the school year. Studies also report that a sense of belonging and connectedness to peers, instructors and the institution is essential to mental wellbeing and the rates of depression, anxiety and stress significantly increase when students feel isolated (Baik et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014).

In the Winter 2021 student pulse survey, nearly 2/3 of respondents reported that a greater ability to interact with the professor (67%) and a greater ability to interact with other students (62%) would improve their experience with online learning.

In the Post Pandemic Shift Commission conversation starter survey in February 2021 the most frequently raised theme related to mental health supports was creation of a sense of belonging and community

6.3 | Why does this matter to me?

Higher learning or just academics in general is about learning to take tests. We're not learning to learn the material, but to remember it for the final. You're just actually learning to answer these questions for now and then to relearn it in a month and a half for your final and then also learn the new material and then dump that onto a page and then move on to the next class. Cramming it to try to pass but not learning how to apply that so it's wasting time honestly."

This narrative speaks to students feeling disconnected from their learning experience, lacking clarity on the intent of the tasks they are undertaking. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following practices that have been shown to add to or amplify student stressors and drain student resources:

- **Not facilitating or providing opportunity for students to connect the course to their interests**, future, and/or broader goals, leaving students unmotivated, feeling their learning lacks relevance or will help them achieve goals important to them
- **Creating an environment where the focus is primarily on achievement of external rewards**, decreasing student's motivation from internal drivers (e.g., joy, personal meaning or importance) and capacity to be self-directed and act to achieve their goals (autonomy)

Research suggests that supporting students to find meaning and positivity in the activities they undertake in our courses and programs will reduce unnecessary stressors in the learning environment and promote student wellbeing (Slavin et al., 2014b; Tang & Ferguson, 2014).

Grades are a major concern, as they can determine what scholarships/graduate programs are available to me. I'd say roughly 90% of class mates I talked to about the last midterm didn't finish it, me being one of them and I don't even get test anxiety. I feel it adds unnecessary stress. The option to partake in assignments for extra credit may help to boost marks for students who lost marks from unmet deadlines."

6.4 | Can I succeed?

> *It's like so much of the rest of my life depends on what happens on a class by class basis, like one mark, one evaluation, one course. It feels like it has a really, really large stamp on my future and I think that's promoted a lot through the way we discuss our academics with the emphasis on averages getting into professional colleges, obtaining scholarships, having a kind of academic recognition on campus, or admission into honors program that are required for graduate study."*

This narrative speaks to students feeling a great pressure to succeed in every learning experience for fear of having one negative outcome impact their future irrevocably. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following practices that have been shown to add to or amplify student stressors and drain student resources:

- **Not clarifying the 'rules of the game'**, leaving students unclear regarding what actions will lead them to academic success
- **Being silent about issues of position, power and privilege in the learning environment**, thus missing the opportunity to create an inclusive, open and safe context for students.
- **Creating learning experiences that are rigid and inflexible**, undermining student autonomy
- **Not allowing students opportunity to practice, get feedback, and reflect** on the experience to enable learning.

A student's ability to develop competence will be diminished if constructive and timely feedback is not provided to students or if errors or gaps in knowledge or skill are pointed out without explanation as to how a student might improve (Baik et al., 2017). Additionally, meaningful and appropriate choice within learning experiences can provide students opportunity to draw on their strengths whilst learning (Baik et al., 2017).

PANDEMIC LENS

> *I don't think the instructors realize what the reality is like for a student. Several of my peers withdrew. I was not anticipating such rigid and huge demands. I don't feel we have been given the necessary tools to carry out the expectations laid out in a pandemic environment."* *Pulse Survey 2020*

SUMMARY

Student mental well-being is influenced by the interplay of their individual stressors, available resources, and the environment or context in which their learning takes place (Baik et al., 2017). An institutional learning environment can undermine a student's capacity to develop competence, a sense of belonging, a view that their learning has relevance, and a belief they can succeed. As an institution, we have committed to providing resources to support mental well-being. We need to additionally consider the learning environments we create with our students and examine how our teaching and learning practices can create environments that enable good mental health and well-being.

7. Teaching and learning practices that mitigate stressors and foster resources

In this section teaching and learning practices that mitigate student stressors and foster student resources are explored in relation to areas known to impact student mental health.

7.1 | Design

> *I'm at the tail end of my degree and I just have electives left and it's like "did I really need to do a whole term just of electives?" I've done so many electives already and I get being a well-rounded student and everything but at the end of the day if just feels like it's a bit of a cash grab."*

This narrative speaks to students feeling unclear about why they have been required to take or do something and how it is relevant to their end goals. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following design practices that have been shown to mitigate student stressors and foster student resources:

- **Streamlining content** – boiling down a course curriculum to what is essential for students to know and do
- **Purposefully organizing and sequencing learning experiences** to build knowledge and skills within and across learning experiences (modules/courses/programs), where possible, allowing time for practice and feedback
- **Aligning learning outcomes** (what a student will be able to do once finished), **instructional activities** (the activities that will allow the student to learn and eventually achieve the outcomes) **and assessment** (ways in which students can practice, get feedback, and eventually demonstrate achievement of the outcomes)
- **Making explicit what is expected and why it matters** as part of process of learning
- **Designing for optimal student challenge** (not too hard, not too easy, just right…)
- **Considering workload and assignment timing**, wherever possible, across courses to minimize overloaded periods for assignments and examinations.

"A carefully planned curriculum with clear learning goals, sequenced learning activities, and assessment tasks that inform both learning and subsequent teaching are the basis of student competence." (Baik et al., 2017, p. 19).

PANDEMIC LENS

At the end of the Fall 2020 remote teaching and learning term, students reported they appreciated when content and activities were streamlined and focused on essential learning outcomes for the course. There was a perception of increased workload and students appreciated courses where instructors reduced content and/or adjusted assessments.

Aligning outcomes and instructional approaches for difficult content

*LYNN WEBER,
DEPARTMENT OF VETERINARY
BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES*

I teach VBMS 224, an introduction to veterinary physiology. It contains many complex concepts that are difficult to master. An example of how I approach this is the concept of difference/similarity between iso-osmotic versus isotonic solutions, and how that relates to different cells in the body is an essential and difficult concept for first-year veterinary students. Often students mistakenly think they already know this material, but in reality, they generally have an insufficient understanding. I use these approaches to teach and assess this concept:

First, I explain why the subject material is important. For iso-osmotic versus isotonic, it must be clear from the outset that the one lecture and one lab they do on this material has direct implications for movement of body water when an animal is severely dehydrated. In other words, we relate these seemingly boring, picky chemical concepts and their difference to pathological conditions and clinical treatments that they will use as a DVM.

I try to streamline content to focus on what is essential. I use hands-on lab activities and in-lab small group discussions to reinforce the basic concepts. The hands-on activity needs an obvious visual change to reinforce the concept, so we use animal blood diluted with different solutions, leading to visible changes after hemolysis to reinforce the essentials of the concept.

Lastly, I align these concepts with other elements of the curriculum. For example, iso-osmotic versus isotonic relates closely to elements taught in biochemistry as well as renal physiology. Sequencing is critical to ensure this basic concept is solidly grasped by the DVM students first, then the biochemistry and renal physiology taught in a suitable sequence following this. The other courses/sections where this concept is needed do not attempt to re-teach these concepts, avoiding overlap and saving time in the curriculum.

7.2 | Instruct

"Discussion groups have really helped me, just going through different scenarios and articles and stuff like that and our prof is really good at directing the conversation when he could tell things are getting maybe off track, he kind of redirects it. And we had a lot of guest speakers, it gets boring to sometimes read those books but those practical stories are more interesting."

This narrative speaks to instructional strategies that support students learning. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following instructional practices have been shown to mitigate student stressors and foster student resources:

- **Engage in active and engaging instruction**, that is aligned with outcomes and assessments and focuses on students doing and thinking
- **Instruct in ways that enable students to connect to each other and the instructor**
- **Design learning activities that bring out diverse perspectives and experiences** and allows students to contribute their experiences, cultures, and views in the learning environment.
- **Provide opportunities for students to practice, get feedback, and reflect**, allowing students to learn through and from experience.

"Such experiences enhance a student's sense of belonging, as well as experiences of autonomy and competence. Close relationships with other students or an academic will also sustain a student who feels out of place or that they are not a natural 'fit' within their course or institution." (Baik et al., 2017, p. 18).

> *I love the interactive classes because that's where I learn, like I don't learn from writing. I need someone to teach me through it. I saw this classroom where everyone was just sitting in a circle and the prof sat there too, like all in a circle, all interacting with one another and that's how they were being taught and for me that's the best way for me to learn."*

PANDEMIC LENS

At the end of the Fall 2020 remote teaching and learning term, students reported appreciating activities where a sense of connection with their instructor was created. Highlights for students included introductory videos where faculty told the class a bit about themselves and set out the ways in which they strove to support students.

Additionally, In response to the question, "please comment on those online/remote teaching strategies that were particularly support of your learning during the COVID-19 pandemic" the most frequently occurring word (noted 631 times in the 6932 comments) was 'discussion'.

Helping students see themselves as global actors with agency in the world

COLLEEN BELL,
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL STUDIES

In Term 1, I taught International Studies 110: Global Issues, a class of 86 mostly first-year students from across the University. One issue that comes up in my teaching is that students are aware, increasingly so, that the world is facing major problems, politically, socially, and environmentally. On the one hand, this awareness attracts them to internationally focused courses. On the other hand, most feel at a loss about what can be done and how to coordinate and implement change on a global scale. One of the ways that my students describe this conundrum, is that the world is very big and they feel very small. This view reflects feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, which I believe affect both engagement in learning and student well-being.

To try and address these issues, and also teach core academic skills and curricula, I implemented a project to expose students to the research cycle of questioning, investigating, and disseminating their findings on one

of three thematic areas: Climate Change, International Terrorism, and Global Refugee Crisis. Students chose and modified their research question, discovered claims, studies, and reasoned arguments about it, publicly presented their discoveries in a video, and reflected on what they now understood about the issue that they did not previously know and what needs to be done. In deliberations with students, I discovered that not only did they learn valuable knowledge, but that they transformed their perspectives on themselves. Previously, they often viewed themselves as onlookers to a stream of global tragedies and impending crises. The project allowed them to see themselves differently, as agents, empowered with ideas about the world and how we might make it better. In my view, this transformation supports student well-being in a tumultuous global environment. My students showed me that as educators we can design learning processes that both empower students in their learning and their well-being simultaneously.

7.3 | Relate

> *I understand memorization and retaining concepts specifically is a really large aspect of learning, but to integrate a concept really fully you have to be able to connect it to other ideas. I would like to see more of an emphasis on making sure that the connections between different units in course material are presented really clearly to students, because that provides a really good line for them to start drawing their own connections and contribute to their own retention and learning over the course."*

This narrative speaks to the importance for students of supporting them making connections between concepts across their learning experience. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following teaching and learning practices have been shown to mitigate student stressors and foster student resources:

- **Create inclusive and respectful environments** - efforts to bring examples drawn from varying perspectives, cultures or worldviews into your content as well as using inclusive language and avoiding generalizations or stereotypes about any group. The principles of universal design for learning can help guide practices in this regard.
- **Connect content and approaches to what is known about students** and what their interests and experiences are by, for example, finding out what you can about your students, their circumstances and their prior learning at the start of a course or program.
- **Demonstrate the connection between course outcomes/expectations and student goals** as part of process of learning and facilitate student's connection to their ambitions (work, addressing societal needs, etc.).

"Providing rationale for curriculum choices and decisions, in terms that demonstrate understanding of students' perspectives and concern for their interests and goals, will help students to endorse those choices and decisions, thereby supporting a sense of autonomy and agency." (Baik et al., 2017, p. 19).

> *I've had professors... saying 'take care of your mental wellbeing' and that kind of thing. I think I'd feel a lot more comfortable going to professors that acknowledge that this is an important aspect of being a student...taking care of your mental wellness."*

PANDEMIC LENS

At the end of the Fall 2020 remote teaching and learning term, students reported a consistent struggle to find information and a fear of missing key content or expectations. Navigating courses with different structures, using different tools, and varying weekly expectations was a significant challenge. Students appreciated faculty posting checklists of tasks required at the start of each week or courses organized in modules (e.g., not just posting files) that used an assignment calendar.

Building relationships with students before they arrive at the University of Saskatchewan

MURRAY DREW,
DEPARTMENT OF ANIMAL
AND POULTRY SCIENCE

I teach ANBI 110: Introduction to Animal Bioscience. The class had 74 students this year, which includes 64 women whose primary interest is becoming a veterinarian. They know they will need excellent grades to be accepted into the WCVM so, they have put themselves under a huge amount of self-imposed stress. It is also the only course they take that is delivered by our department in first year and is our one opportunity to connect with them.

Last year, I tried a strategy to build that connection before they even arrived on campus. I sent an email to the class in mid-August asking for a picture (with an animal) and one interesting thing about themselves. I also asked what I could do to help them be more successful in the course. The response rate this year was 84%, and the emails they sent were very thoughtful. Most students said that

making myself available for help outside of class was very important to them. Some mentioned that they had ADHD or suffered from anxiety and that they hoped I would be understanding if they were having difficulty. Virtually all of them ended their email by thanking me for contacting them and said it helped them feel a little less stressed about starting classes. Once they got to the U of S, I noticed some real differences in the class environment. Student engagement increased dramatically. I estimate that over half the students have answered a question or taken part in a discussion in class. Attendance has never been below 90%, which is significantly higher than in the past. I also feel more engaged with the students, so lectures are more fun for me as well. This took only a small investment of time, but the response was terrific. I will definitely continue to do this.

7.4 | Assess

> *If regurgitation is what I see on my first midterm, then I'm just going to go memorize everything and just train myself to meet that standard of regurgitation and then what am I getting from this class? Nothing because I'm just going to forget about it if I don't actually understand it. So are you trying to create robots or somebody that's actually going to learn and interpret it in their own way and then give their ideas and they get graded based on that."*

> *I get that there is a need to have some kind of assessment on the knowledge that you've built up throughout the year but I don't think it's necessarily an exam. I would love if there were more options...like take home exams, they can be a great way to show what you've learned or final projects. Diversifying the kind of evaluations that you give students so that is not just tests that comprise their final marks."*

These narratives speak to the importance of assessment practice to students. Assessment is also known to be a key mechanism to enable student learning. This USask student narrative supports findings in the literature regarding the following assessment practices have been shown to mitigate student stressors and foster student resources:

- **Undertake low or no stakes assessment with constructive feedback** as part of learning process – this has been shown to reduce anxiety and support student learning
- **Provide flexibility and choice in ways students demonstrate the learning outcomes**, increasing inclusivity
- **Create clarity regarding expectations in assessments**, for example, by providing rubrics and using them in self-assessment and/or peer-assessment
- **Use outcomes-based approaches to assessment**

These practices can expand the value of assessment from just assessment of learning (where students demonstrate their competence through assessment) to include a focus on assessment for learning (where undertaking the assessment supports student's learning).

PANDEMIC LENS

"I think it is unfair that my exams only offer 1 minute per question. If I were writing my exam on campus, in a gym as usual, I would be given 3 full hours to complete my exam, regardless of how many questions... I understand they don't want students to cheat but giving us loads of midterms and assignments isn't really helping us learn either."

Assessment practices were raised frequently in the post-pandemic shift commission work. Many called for an evaluation of exam and assessment procedures and a move to a more inclusive and flexible approach.

"I think it's nice when professors have a lot of different ways to get marks and its not all just midterm and final. The classes that I have enjoyed the most and that have been the least stressful are the ones where there are multiple assignments. It's more accommodating to various learning styles not necessarily just people who can memorize material."

Examining implicit skills
in assessment

SANDY BONNY,
INDIGENOUS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PATHWAYS
(ISAP), COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

I teach an ISAP section of INTS 102: Essential Skills for Studying Science to a small cohort of students interested in accessing STEM degree pathways and professional colleges. Students who opt-in to ISAP are looking for an academically robust, culturally aware, small-class environment early in their undergraduate journey. They bring rich life experiences and a depth of knowledge that is uncommon in first year classrooms, but often have non-standard K-12 preparation and missed opportunities that urban high school students have to build mathematical literacy and academic vocabulary.

I've adapted my approach to assessment at the levels of assignment design, class delivery, and examination practices – aiming to strike a balance that fairly promotes mastery of 'skills for studying science' while positioning my students' cultural and personal strengths as assets for STEM learning.

Rather than asking students to navigate academic resources independently (which privileges western and urban high school graduates) I invite guest experts from our campus community to meet with small groups of students for collaborative discussions of topics that they are researching. The ISAP students' lived experiences often provide a strong starting point for learning in this way;

our visiting experts always enjoy themselves too! How do you Indigenize an undergraduate research experience? You provide the opportunity to Indigenous students to ask the questions they are passionate about with advocates who are passionate about welcoming them into their disciplines through creative and critical inquiry.

On exams, learners with non-traditional high school backgrounds often encounter a gap in 'implied skills', with the effect that they are being 'tested twice': once on course objectives (fair) and once on acculturation to academic norms (questionable!). Building an academic vocabulary is a challenge for many students. To address this, I provide students a one-page case study a week before their first midterm, as well as a list of relevant course vocabulary. On the midterm, a long answer question rewards accurate use of words from the vocabulary list, encouraging the use of disciplinary rather than common language in student's responses. For the second midterm, I present a second case study, and assign the class the task of building a relevant vocabulary list—a strategy I hope they can carry over to other courses. By the final exam, it is rewarding to see their growth in confidence sharing their thoughts in long answer format using the 'tools' of disciplinary language.

SUMMARY

Through evidence informed teaching and learning practices in design, instruction, relating and assessment, we can create learning environments that do not add, but instead mitigate student stressors and foster student resources. These practices benefit all students and are particularly important for those students who may come to us with stressors from outside the learning environment, and limited resources.

The case studies included demonstrate practices within our environment that align with those highlighted and show the commitment of faculty on our campuses to support student mental well-being through teaching and learning practices.

8. Departmental and institutional contexts

As noted earlier in this report, teaching practices selected and enacted by an instructor are influenced by the design of the academic program in which the course being taught sits, the culture of the department the instructor works within and the policies, practices, and systems of the institution in which it all takes place. These levels of teaching and learning practice are represented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICE AND ITS CONTEXT

INSTITUTION

DEPARTMENT

INSTRUCTOR

STUDENT
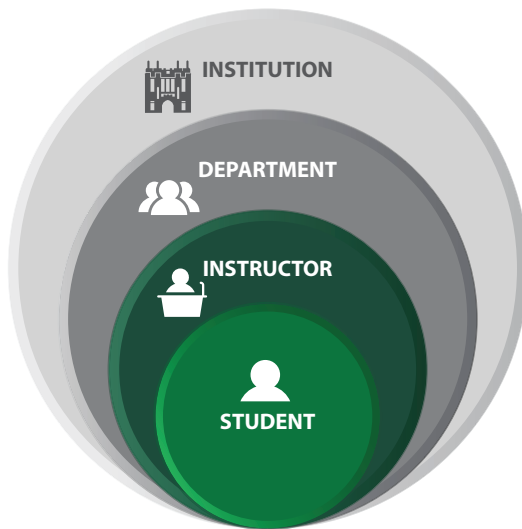
The teaching practices described above are not easily enacted if the environment in which instructors find themselves are not supportive. In fact, if something like an institutional policy counters these practices, faculty may not want or be able to take action that will support student mental health and well-being.

The following actions can be taken at the department and institutional level to remove barriers and enable evidence informed teaching and learning practices that support student mental well-being:

- **Support collaborative program (re)design, to diminish overcrowding in the curriculum and purposefully organize and sequence learning experiences**, through creation of opportunities to assess and reflect on curricular outcomes and enhance programs accordingly
- **Reward teaching and learning practices that support student mental well-being**, through recognition (e.g., awards) and collegial processes
- **Provide or create learning spaces that allow for active and engaging instruction**, such as active learning classrooms
- **Examine policies, ensuring they are enabling of these practices**, for example, policies related to course and program creation and assessment
- **Explicitly acknowledge and value student's prior experiences and knowledge**, particularly different ways of knowing and being as a beneficial foundation for learning
- **Provide systems that enable these practices**, such as a learning management system that enables transparent tracking of student progress, self and peer assessments and timely provision of feedback
- **Provide and encourage development of learning and teaching practices**, through continuing professional development, inquiry into one's teaching practice and conversations about effective teaching practice with peers

9. Conclusion

Student mental well-being is impacted by the learning experiences and environments they encounter at university. Working to implement evidence-informed practices in design, instruction, relating and assessment, we serve to create environments where student will:

- Be clear about what is expected of them,
- Have the opportunity to practice and get feedback,
- Feel connected to the group they are learning with and/or from,
- Believe that what they are learning matters to them and society,
- Feel confident that, if they put in the work, they can succeed.

Students shared the following perceptions of their learning experience and mental health:

- We are creating a generation that can't take a break
- Unrealistic expectations from profs create stress and decreased mental health
- Smaller class size increases one's sense of being good enough for university
- Academic success, at present, is premised on learning to take tests
- There is a heavy emphasis on marks as a determinant of future success
- It is not always clear how courses, particularly electives, connect to ones' degree
- Different teaching and learning strategies help make classes interesting
- Diverse instructional methods meet diverse learners' needs
- Helping students connect concepts and ideas builds their ability to do that on their own
- Desire for teaching to enable students to learn, interpret and retain, not to regurgitate
- Different assessment options (not just final exams!) support learning
- Professors that say taking care of your mental wellness is important are more approachable
- A variety of methods of assessment accommodate various student strengths and learning preferences

We have explored good practice in design, instruction, relating and assessment to support student mental health:

- Streamlining content
- Purposefully organizing and sequencing learning experiences
- Aligning learning outcomes, instructional activity, and assessment
- Making explicit what is expected and why it matters
- Designing for optimal student challenge
- Considering workload and assignment timing
- Engage in active and engaging instruction
- Instruct in ways that enable students to connect to each other and the instructor
- Design learning activities that bring out diverse perspectives and experiences
- Provide opportunities for students to practice, get feedback, and reflect
- Create inclusive and respectful environments
- Connect content and approaches to what is known about students
- Demonstrate connection between course outcomes and student goals
- Undertake low or no stakes assessment with constructive feedback
- Provide flexibility and choice in ways students demonstrate the learning outcomes
- Create clarity regarding expectations in assessments
- Use outcomes-based approaches to assessment

Ultimately these teaching practices will lead to students who,

(1) know and can do,

(2) belong,

(3) care, and

(4) believe they can succeed

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Appendix – Questions used to guide student focus groups and interviews

1. When it comes to how they are taught or assessed (exams, essays, labs, etc.), what are the most common types of issues student have at university?

2. What is the best classroom and course environment for students to learn?

3. What class supports or resources could help students increase their ability to learn?

4. What suggestions would you have for instructors on decreasing mental stress and improving student well-being?

5. What suggestions do you have for the university on decreasing mental stress and improving student well-being?