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BURNOUT WARNING

Professors Struggle With Demands to Tend to Students' Mental Health

By *Kelly Field*

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NICOLAS OGONOSKY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Tara Tedrow has seen her share of students in distress.

They'll approach her after class, in tears, saying they're overwhelmed and need an extension. Or they'll send an e-mail apologizing for missing class because they've got "stuff going on." Some share intimate details of their troubles; others simply allude to "personal issues."

Tedrow, a doctoral teaching assistant at the University of Iowa, community-college adjunct, and former middle- and high-school teacher, tells each of them to put their mental health first. If a student needs extra time on an assignment, or help catching up, she'll generally grant it. And if their problems can't be solved by academic grace alone, she'll refer them to campus counseling — and even walk them there.

"I want to make sure they feel heard and not alone, that we care about them," said Tedrow, pointing to a black band with the word "educator" that is tattooed around her forearm. "I've lost too many kids to suicide."

Her experience isn't uncommon. As colleges confront what's been called a crisis in student mental health, many of them are asking professors to play the part of first responders. They're offering workshops on recognizing and responding to distressed students and publishing guides on promoting well-being in the classroom. They're encouraging faculty to include "wellness statements" on their syllabi, to be flexible about deadlines, and to share with students how they themselves practice self care.

On many campuses, professors are stepping up to the role, introducing "mindfulness minutes" in their classes, doing away with midnight deadlines, and offering no-questions-asked mental-health days.

Yet many are uncomfortable serving as wellness coaches or trying to recognize what counts as a crisis. While three quarters of faculty members in a recent survey by the Healthy Minds Network said they'd had one-on-one phone, video, or email conversations with students in the past 12 months regarding student mental health and wellness, only half were confident that they could recognize a student in emotional distress. One in five respondents said that supporting students had taken a toll on their own mental health.

"They want to support their students, but they don't know how, and they're afraid of doing the wrong thing," said Rebecca Pope-Ruark, who interviewed dozens of faculty members for her book *Unraveling Faculty Burnout*.

She said some of the faculty members she spoke with expressed "a bit of cynicism" about the expectations being placed on them.

"They see their institutions investing in student mental health, but not looking at how faculty and staff need to be supported so they can support students at a level beyond what many of us were trained for," said Pope-Ruark, who directs the office of faculty professional development at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

And some of them are pushing back, gently, against what they say has become yet another uncompensated demand on their time and emotional energy.

Support for Students, Not Professors

From the moment they step onto a college campus, students are bombarded with messages urging them to seek help when they need it. Wellness initiatives bring therapy dogs and massages into the spaces where students live and study, while

posters and table tents remind them of the symptoms of depression and warning signs of suicide.

Supports for faculty and staff tend to be much less visible. While most colleges offer an "Employee Assistance Program" with short-term counseling and referrals to providers, faculty and staff members might hear about the program only once, when they start a job. In the Healthy Minds survey, respondents were more likely to be aware of resources available to students than those available to faculty.

And while institutions often provide employee wellness programs and workshops — sometimes with incentives to participate — the onus is on faculty to seek them out. Professors often say they don't have the time to take part.

Such a disparity isn't surprising, given the custodial role that colleges play in the lives of students, said Barry Schreier, director of the higher-education program at the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health at the University of Iowa. Compared with students, faculty have been seen as "independent adults who have health-care benefits and are encouraged to take care of themselves."

That view is starting to shift, as colleges grapple with rising rates of employee burnout, but "there's still a lot of student-facing things, and nearly nothing for faculty and staff," Schreier said. He recently held a two-day summit for faculty and staff of Iowa colleges on how to create "a culture of caring," while taking care of yourself.

Meanwhile, colleges are seeing a growing number of employee requests for mental-health accommodations. At Ohio State University, for example, chronic health concerns — and mental-health conditions, in particular — now account for a third of all requests, according to Scott Lissner, who has served for more than two decades as the university's Americans With Disabilities Act coordinator and 504-compliance officer.

A typical request seeks a reduction in teaching load or committee commitments; an extension of the tenure clock; or permission to work remotely or teach some courses asynchronously, Lissner said.

Still, many faculty members choose to suffer in silence rather than involve their supervisor in a conversation about their mental health, fearful it might raise doubts about their fitness for tenure.

“The process requires the person to be very vulnerable,” said Katy Washington, chief accessibility officer at Virginia Commonwealth University and president of the Association on Higher Education and Disability. “When you let that part of yourself out, you can’t control where it goes.”

Invisible Labor

In a session titled “Caring for Self while Caring for Others: You’re Hardy and You Know It!” at the Iowa conference this month, Schreier took an electronic poll of participants, asking them to name their primary emotional challenge at work. As the answers came in, a word cloud formed on the screen, with the most common answers appearing in large font: “overwhelmed,” “burnt out,” “frustrated,” and “not enough time.”

Concerns about faculty mental health aren’t new, and they aren’t limited to the United States. Academe has always been something of a pressure cooker, with faculty facing heavy workloads, a “publish or perish” imperative, and chronic job insecurity among the many who are untenured. A research review conducted more than two decades ago found that academics in the U.S., Australia, and the United Kingdom consistently reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental-health issues.

“The nature of faculty work is that we’re never done,” said Sarah Ketchen Lipson, the principal investigator of the Healthy Minds survey and an associate professor in the Boston University School of Public Health.

Surveys have shown that the pandemic led to an increase in the number of faculty members who feel burnt out and are considering leaving their jobs.

“Burnout is real,” said Stephanie Downs, who oversees employee well-being programs at Iowa State University, during a session at the conference. “We’re surviving, we’re not thriving.”

Downs said she expects levels of faculty stress and burnout to remain elevated or even rise over the next few years, as the dust settles on the pandemic.

“We spent two to three years in a complete disruption,” Downs said, in an interview. “What we knew before doesn’t apply anymore. We’re pioneering a new frontier when it comes to work.”

On top of job-related changes, faculty are dealing with disengaged classes, political attacks on academic freedom and tenure, and the constant threat of budget cuts — all while tending to the psychological needs of their similarly stressed students.

And the burden of supporting the growing number of anxious and depressed students on college campuses isn’t distributed evenly. Female faculty, transgendered faculty, and faculty of color are more likely than their counterparts to report having had a one-on-one conversation with a student about their mental health in the past year, the Healthy Minds study found.

“We’re seeing some of the same inequalities we’ve worried about for a long time in terms of service roles,” said Lipson. Like mentoring and diversity, equity, and inclusion work, counseling students is largely invisible labor that goes unrewarded in hiring and promotion decisions.

“I know faculty who have spent dozens of hours supporting a student through a mental-health crisis and there’s nowhere that’s recognized,” Lipson said. “It’s just

taking time away from the things you are assessed on."

Student Expectations

It's not just college leaders who expect faculty members to help alleviate students' stress. The students themselves expect it, too.

In a recent survey by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse, nearly half of students said faculty should be highly involved in helping students who are struggling with their mental health. An additional third said they should be at least moderately involved.

Zoe Ragouzeos, executive director of counseling and wellness services at New York University, thinks students have become more comfortable confiding in their professors as the stigma surrounding mental illness has subsided.

She said professors have an incentive to get involved, given the negative impact that mental-health challenges can have on classroom dynamics.

At the same time, "faculty are not mental-health professionals, so they should be trained on how to refer a student, so this doesn't become an additional burden for them to carry," said Ragouzeos, who is also president of the Mary Christie Institute, a behavioral-health think tank.

In fact, many campuses are offering workshops for faculty and staff on how to handle students who come to them in distress. But the training isn't reaching everyone, and some faculty members question whether it's fair — or even appropriate — to ask them to counsel their students on a regular basis.

"It's admirable when people can be vulnerable," said Kay Keegan, an adjunct instructor in English at the University of Memphis, who sees several distressed students each semester. "But the drawback is that you're crossing a professional boundary, or at least a more traditional student-instructor boundary."

Keegan worries that students are losing sight of "emotional professionalism," and said helping her students through frequent crises has contributed to her own feelings of stress and anxiety.

"I care about these students, and I want them to do well, but it's not my job to take care of them," she said. "As much as I want to listen to what they're sharing because I value the trust they have in me, at times it feels like a unilateral arrangement."

Federal privacy laws restrict what faculty members can divulge to their friends and families about stressful conversations with students. And adjuncts like Keegan often don't make enough money to afford therapy. To cope with the stress, she runs and tries to get enough sleep.

"I can't air out what's going on because of my pay grade," Keegan said.

Setting Boundaries

Samantha Brown, an assistant professor of psychology at Coe College, in Iowa, is better trained than most faculty members to respond to student distress: she has a Ph.D. in counseling psychology. When students share their struggles, she listens and validates, then offers them grace.

"It's not my role to judge what's a good excuse or not," she said. "Just trusting and believing them is what I can offer." Still, the stories get to her sometimes. "So many of us get into this work because we care deeply about students," said Brown. "To hear about their distress, and hear it up close, it's impossible not to be impacted."

As professors take on a larger role supporting students' mental health, it will be critical to help them process these emotions, and reflect on how conversations with students went, said Ragouzeos, of NYU.

“Faculty need to be trained but there also needs to be support for them after,” she said.

Colleges should also find ways to reward the emotional labor that comes with ministering to a student in crisis, Lipson said.

Of course, confronting faculty burnout on a broader scale will take more than training and post-intervention support. To really reduce faculty stress, colleges will need to make bigger cultural and structural changes, said Pope-Ruark, the author of *Unraveling Faculty Burnout*.

“We need to be looking at workload distribution,” she said. “The whole mentality of doing more with less is going to continue to push faculty over the edge.”

In the meantime, faculty members like Keegan are finding their own ways of setting boundaries. She’s started to tell students, at the start of the semester, that she’s grateful for their trust, but that her job title is “instructor,” not “therapist, emotional-support animal, or their mom,” she said.

“It’s a bit jokey, and the students laugh,” she said, “but they grasp that the relationship will be, for the most part, academic.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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Kelly Field joined *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2004 and covered federal higher-education policy. She continues to write for *The Chronicle* on

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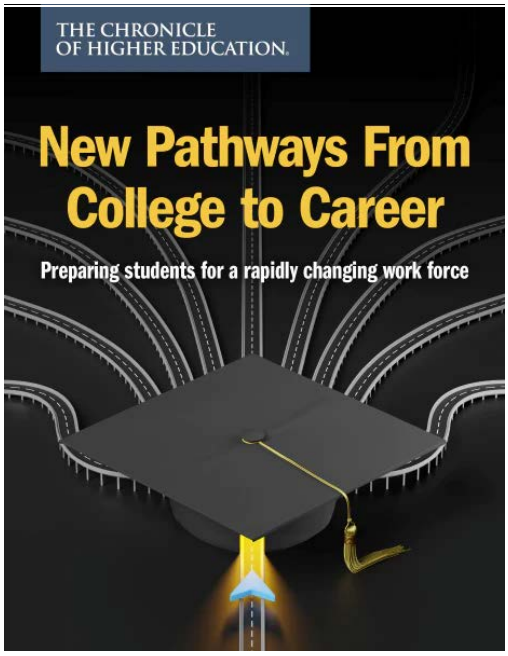

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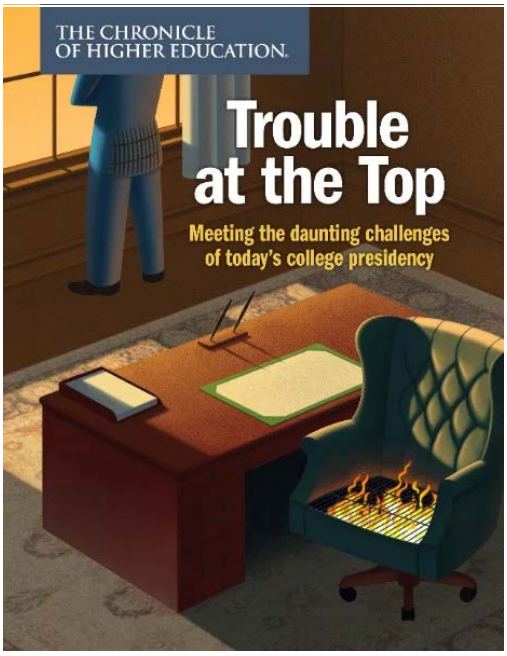

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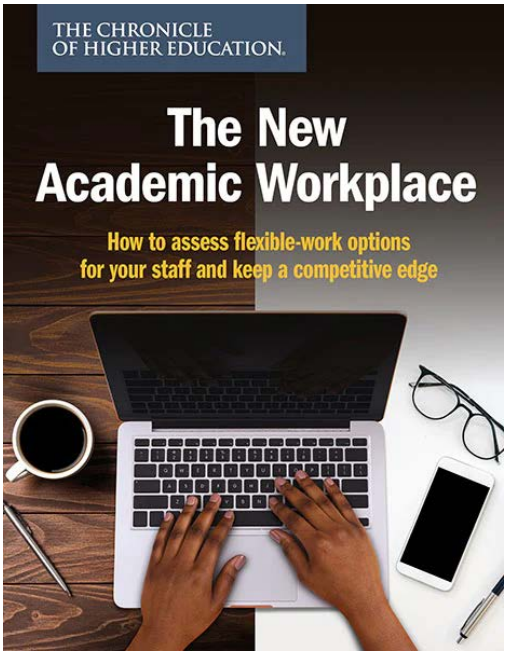

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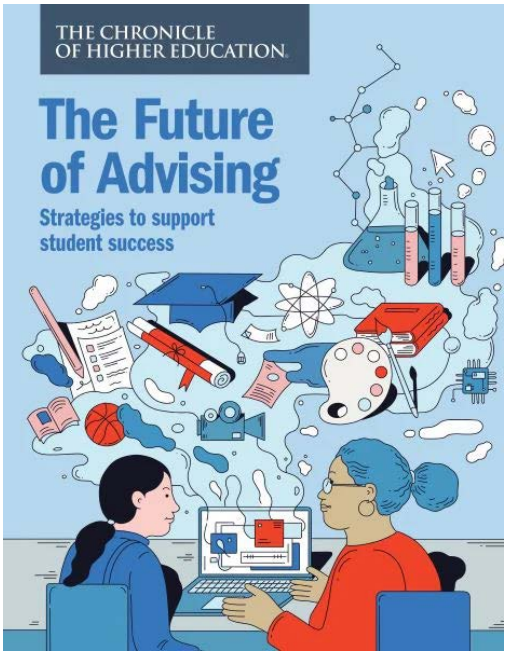

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