



Guidance for Faculty in Identifying and Engaging with Students Who May Be in Distress

SUNY System requested that campuses move courses to an online format or an alternative delivery modality for the remainder of the spring semester 2020 in response to growing public health concerns about COVID-19. This is an especially challenging time for our students, abruptly removed from their regular routines, social network, and college community. Faculty are well positioned to help students feel connected to their coursework, degree program, and institution. During challenging times, faculty provide a critical lifeline and are often the first to notice when a student is struggling. As such, it is important that we protect and monitor not only the physical health but the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our students.

The purpose of this document is to provide faculty with guidance in the identification and engagement of students who may be struggling with academic, social, or emotional needs in this new virtual learning environment. It includes information on how to identify student behaviors online that may indicate emotional or mental distress and outlines safe engagement strategies for faculty to support students seeking assistance or crisis management.

First, SUNY System just rolled out online QPR suicide prevention training to all faculty and staff who routinely communicate with students. QPR stands for Question, Persuade, and Refer — the 3 simple steps anyone can learn to help save a life from suicide. QPR is a 1-hour, evidence-based training program. SUNY System strongly recommends all faculty complete this training. You may access it here: <http://www.qprtraining.com/setup.php>

Next, because we are no longer coming into regular face-to-face contact with students during class time, it is important to understand virtual signs of distress that are both similar to those that may be exhibited during in-person interactions but also those that are unique to virtual interaction. These include:

- Withdrawal from classes or class activities (e.g., discussion boards, online “office hours”)
- Major declines in quality of coursework or consistently turning things in late without adequate explanation
- Major changes in appearance—a formerly well-dressed student appears unkempt or unwashed
- Demonstrating or discussing little interest in things that used to provide pleasure—exercise, movies, etc.
- Talking openly about substance misuse with other students or faculty in online posts or forums
- Showing rage or anger, particularly related to minor challenges or frustrations
- Talking about feeling hopeless or feeling like there’s no purpose
- Sharing song lyrics, social media, or other media related to suicide or self-injury
- Talking about being a burden or a liability
- Talking explicitly about suicide or suicide methods



Finally, we want to ensure that you are informed about what to do if you identify signs of distress among your students. The following are some approaches you may use when engaging with a student who may be in distress or crisis:

- Seek a chance to be face to face – Zoom, FaceTime, or another app. If not a video chat, the phone is better than email or text. Give yourself a chance to hear and see how the student is acting and responding.
- Start with connection. Ask how the student is doing in life outside of the classroom. Is the student exercising? Working? Spending time with family?
- Be specific in your concerns and use positive language. Recognize the excellence in prior efforts if a student has been struggling.
- Student counseling and health centers are still providing care; make sure the student knows about resources specific to the campus that can help.
- If a student is visibly upset or sounds upset, ask if they are okay. Ask how you can help. Be specific in your suggestions.
- **If a student appears to be in crisis**
 - Ask directly if they have thought of suicide or self-harm. QPR training <http://www.qprtraining.com/setup.php> teaches us to ask the question safely and appropriately. Give the student space to answer the question honestly.
- **If the student answers yes**, direct them to emergency mental health resources. This may include counseling centers who have walk-in/dial-in hours or the local emergency room. Be specific and ask the student if you can help them schedule an appointment.
 - **Provide free emotional and crisis support information to students.** Because suicidal thoughts come and go, it is critically important that students have crisis hotlines on hand if a suicidal crisis were to arise.
 - **Crisis Text Line**, a 24/7 texting service that students can use for anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse, relationship problems, domestic violence, and bullying. They simply **text Got5U to 741741** to connect with a trained counselor.
 - **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.
 - **NYS Emotional Support Line, 1-844-863-9314**, provides free and confidential support, helping callers experiencing increased anxiety due to the coronavirus emergency.
- Follow up. Give the student a concrete date that you will touch base with them. Send them a calendar invite.
- Send email or other correspondence in the meantime. Let them know that you are thinking of them.

Thank you for all that you do to create a competent, caring campus community. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we maintain this sense of community, albeit virtually. If you have questions, please contact the Director of Student Wellness for the SUNY System, Dr. Leah Wentworth, at leah.wentworth@suny.edu