

## **Lessons Learned: Mental Health Initiatives for Engineering Faculty Impacts on Faculty Well-being**

### **Ms. Shawna Dory, Penn State University**

Shawna Dory is a PhD candidate in the Education Policy Studies Department at Pennsylvania State University. She has a bachelor of arts degree in Sociology from Geneva College, and earned a master's of education degree in Counselor Education, Student Affairs from Clemson University. Along with her role as a PhD candidate, she is also a research assistant in the Leonhard Center for Enhancement of Engineering Education at Penn State. Her research interests include gender equity and women student persistence in engineering education, and first-generation student persistence in engineering education. Shawna has also done work related to sexual misconduct and Title IX implementation in higher education.

### **Dr. Sarah E Zappe, Penn State University**

Dr. Sarah Zappe is Director of the Leonhard Center for the Enhancement of Engineering Education and Assistant Dean of Teaching and Learning at Penn State. She holds a doctoral degree in educational psychology emphasizing applied measurement.

### **Dr. Stephanie Cutler, Penn State University**

Dr. Stephanie Cutler has degrees in Mechanical Engineering, Industrial and Systems Engineering, and a PhD in Engineering Education from Virginia Tech. She is an Associate Research Professor and the Director of Assessment and Instructional Support in the Leonhard Center at Penn State.

## **Lessons Learned: Mental Health Initiatives for Engineering Faculty**

This “Lessons Learned” paper seeks to share insights gained over the last year at an engineering-focused faculty development teaching and learning center (TLC) for the College of Engineering (COE) at a large, historically White, R-1 institution located in the Eastern United States. Specifically, the TLC sought to go beyond the traditional role of a TLC of increasing skills related to teaching practices of faculty, and intentionally focused on also increasing skills and resources available related to faculty and student mental health and well-being. The TLC pursued mental health skill-building of faculty to better align with the concept of holistic faculty development and to help fight faculty burnout, which has increased since the pandemic [1]. According to Hubbard et al., “a holistic approach to providing support to faculty would include an integrated approach to individual and organizational needs, including services to promote physical, mental, emotional, and professional health” (p. 39) [2].

Holistic faculty development is an important issue for universities due to the need for mental health support for both students and faculty members. Students have an increased need for mental health resources post-COVID 19 pandemic, and most university counseling centers are not able to support all the need [3]. Faculty are often on the front-line when encountering students who are experiencing anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. In addition, they are not typically trained on how to best interact with students experiencing mental health issues. Plus, with increasing tasks falling to faculty members, faculty at many universities are also experiencing mental health challenges [4]. Research shows that student success and wellbeing is influenced by faculty members, whose ability to promote high-impact learning is also influenced by their own health and wellbeing [5]. A 2022 study found to reduce faculty burnout and increase faculty wellbeing, a five-fold approach can be adopted by institutions, including optimizing faculty and staff support, establishing a faculty development and mentoring program, permitting flexibility in work schedules, improving productivity of meetings, and managing communication tools [6]. To help give faculty members skills to support students with mental health challenges and to help them increase their own mental well-being and fight burnout, the TLC took on several new programs related to holistic faculty development, focusing on mental health.

The projects included a summer book club related to teaching and student mental health; mental health first aid training for faculty; and free licenses for the Calm app, an app used for increasing mental well-being. The programs were offered to all faculty, upper-level administrators, and advising staff. In addition, the mental health first aid training and use of the Calm app were made available to all COE staff. Because additional Calm licenses were available, the TLC advertised that a limited number of courses could utilize the licenses for students in their courses. Table 1 shows a timeline of the program offerings, and how often the programs were offered. Participation was fully voluntary, and no stipend or compensation was

used to encourage participation. Participants could participate in as many of the offerings as they desired. Table 2 provides information regarding the numbers of participants who engaged with each initiative.

**Table 1: Program timelines**

Event	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
<b>Book Club</b>	<b>1 meeting</b>	<b>1 meeting</b>	<b>1 meeting</b>					
<b>Calm App</b>				<b>Registration Open / Individual Use</b>				
<b>Mental Health First Aid</b>								<b>2 offerings</b>

**Table 2: Participant Breakdown by Initiative**

Participant Type	Book Club	Calm App	Mental Health First Aid
Faculty Participants	31	62	28*
Staff Participants	4	40	18
# of Dept./Units represented	10	N/A**	16

\*Including 6 Administrators (Deans or Department Heads)

\*\*Not currently available. To protect the confidentiality of users, no demographics beyond faculty/staff/student.

### **Book Club**

For the book club, the TLC used a book related to mental health and teaching called *Mind over Monsters: Supporting Youth Mental Health with Compassionate Challenge*, written by Sarah Rose Cavanagh, senior associate director for teaching and learning at the Center for Faculty Excellence and associate professor of practice in psychology at Simmons University. The book club program was divided into three sessions to discuss different sections of the book: (1) Crisis, Compassion, Challenge, (2) Bodies and Beliefs, and (3) Behaviors [7]. A total of 35-faculty members participated in the summer book club. A copy of the book was provided to each participant, costing approximately \$800 total. In the book club evaluation survey, faculty reported overwhelmingly positive feedback, and expressed their willingness and enthusiasm to adopt new practices learned from the book club discussions with their students and in the classroom [8]. Some of the lessons learned through facilitation and the faculty evaluation feedback are that the book club provided an opportunity for faculty to explore and learn about the mental health crisis affecting young adults and ways to help them; realize connections between students' mental health and different aspects of their work, especially linking to the classroom; and connected engineering educators with mental health resources as well as a faculty development learning community [8]. In sum, the feedback reported was supportive of the book club and beneficial to faculty learning and development.

## **Mental Health First Aid Training**

The mental health first aid course was offered through a local non-profit organization focused on increasing positive mental health in their community. The course was developed in Australia in 2001 by Betty Kitchener, a nurse specializing in health education, and Tony Jorm, a mental health literacy professor [9]. The National Council for Behavioral Health operates Mental Health First Aid USA in partnership with the Missouri Department of Mental Health [9]. According to the non-profit website, the course is designed for adults who “want to learn how to help a person who may be experiencing a mental-health-related crisis or challenge. Topics covered include (but are not limited to) anxiety, depression, psychosis, and addiction” [9]. The course also shares available resources and how to help someone in need [9]. The training was eight hours long and was facilitated by trained staff members from the local non-profit, costing approximately \$1800 per training. The training included knowledge assessments that were implemented by the organization. To accommodate different schedules for interested faculty, the TLC offered the full course twice, on two separate days, free of charge to faculty members. These were held during finals week and in the week before the December break. The course was well attended, with 48 participants over the two offerings. Participants included faculty, staff, and also several senior administrators in the College.

To evaluate the program, the TLC sent out a survey evaluation to the training participants to gather more information about how the course was received, how helpful it was to participants, etc. The evaluation responses consisted of 21 total responses (just under 50% response rate), from 10 faculty members, 7 staff members, and 3 administrators. The results were overwhelmingly positive. 100% of respondents found the training extremely useful (61.9%) or somewhat useful (38.1%). Additionally, 100% of respondents reported they will use this training in their interactions with students, 95.3% agreed they would use the training in their interactions with colleagues, and 81% of respondents agreed they would use the training in their personal lives. One faculty member also added that they will use the training to “help others to think about the importance of mental health.” Respondents noted that they have observed many mental health issues with their students, including anxiety, depression, and disordered eating. All respondents (100%) stated they were very likely (85.7%) or somewhat likely (14.3%) to recommend the training to someone else. When asked about the effectiveness and what else they would like to share, many faculty shared that they appreciated the timing of the training being at the end of the semester. Faculty also commented that they appreciated the discussion with fellow faculty members and the tools and resources they gained. Another faculty member shared they wished it was geared more towards an academic audience.

## **Calm App**

According to their website, the Calm app is a mental health app that “puts the tools to feel better in your back pocket, with personalized content to manage stress and anxiety, get better sleep, and feel more present in your life” [10]. The TLC negotiated with Calm directly to purchase the license costing approximately \$3000. Calm was made available to staff, faculty and a limited number of students, free of charge. A total of 147 accounts were created (62 staff members, 42 faculty members, 40 undergraduate students, and 3 graduate students) for the Calm app through the TLC. Though all faculty were given the opportunity to offer the Calm app to their students, only one faculty member offered the Calm app to her students. The TLC is working to capture data from participants using the Calm app relating to how often they use the app, and how much (if at all) they believe the app increased their well-being. We do not have any data yet from participant surveys about the Calm app, but some app-generated data is available. In addition, student feedback is available from the faculty member who offered the Calm app to her students. The faculty member who offered the app to her students found that it was “very well-received by her students.” Student quotes highlighted the importance of learning mindfulness through the app, and connecting mindfulness learned from the app to concepts in the course, including innovation and creative thinking. One student said, “mindfulness will boost and stimulate creative thinking, and the concepts learned in this course will enable me to transform creativity into practical innovation.”

## **Conclusion**

As can be seen through these three examples, the center’s initiative to align with a holistic faculty development approach was very well-received by faculty, staff, administrators, and students who participated in the offerings. All feedback received in evaluations from participants of the projects was positive and highlighted community-building, being better-equipped to interact with students facing mental health challenges, and even taking skills learned into their personal lives. Some lessons learned from each of the programs are listed below:

- The topic of mental health for both students and faculty is a topic of high interest in the College of Engineering. Creating a space for these discussions will be important for the center to continue offering. The TLC is considering whether to offer future mental health first aid trainings in the future and other similar programs.
- The TLC made the decision to include staff in its offerings, which is atypical for most teaching and learning centers. The rationale was that staff contribute to the climate and culture of the College and can also be at the front line in situations involving mental health issues. While the center has always welcomed anyone interested in program topics, it has not been deliberate about inviting staff to participate until this initiative. The lesson learned in this case is that inclusion of staff for certain topics is appropriate and welcome.

- While faculty and staff members showed high engagement with these mental health initiatives, only one faculty member used the opportunity to offer the Calm app to her students. We hypothesize that engineering faculty may not have known how to use the Calm app with their students. A lesson learned is that perhaps offering to consult with faculty on how to utilize the app with students and providing more concrete suggestions may have increased the number of faculty who took advantage of the offering.
- Another unique element of this initiative was the partnership with the local organization who offered the mental health first aid training. This is the first time that the TLC partnered with a local organization. Another lesson learned from this experience was to look locally, beyond the university, to find resources relevant to faculty. We were extremely impressed with the quality of the training and the presenters and would not hesitate to work with them again for other relevant programming.

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