



Creating Healthy Learning Environments

A Guide to Integrating Well-being in the Classroom

Berkeley
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



UNIVERSITY HEALTH SERVICES

Foreword

In our roles as Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division and Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Students, we have been involved in multiple conversations with the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health (CACSMH) on the influence that Berkeley's academic culture can have on the well being of students, faculty, and staff. Some of these conversations are now resulting in actionable goals that aim to create a healthier institutional and academic culture, thus preventing problems rather than just addressing them downstream.

This *Creating Healthy Learning Environments* toolkit offers practical ways we can begin to institutionalize well-being practices into the academic environment. Focus areas include the approach and style of the faculty member, course planning, and in-class learning. As strategies in the toolkit continue to be implemented, we envision a climate in which students feel less overwhelmed and overworked, and have a stronger sense of care and inclusion in our academic settings.

The mission of CACSMH is to address student mental health support through creating change at the individual, group, and policy levels. In that spirit, we urge our faculty and graduate student instructor colleagues to adopt these practices and support future policies that make the Berkeley academic culture health-supporting. Student mental health within the learning environment is the collective responsibility of our institution's leaders, faculty, and staff and we each have a role in removing the barriers and advancing solutions that will sustain these endeavors. We thank you in advance for your ongoing, and future, involvement.



Lisa García Bedolla
Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and the Dean of the Graduate Division



Sunny Lee
Associate Vice Chancellor and the Dean of Students



Positive well-being is a key predictor for learning and student success.

Studies indicate that mental health and well-being are connected to a student's ability to learn (Eisenberg and Speer, 2013; Keyes et al., 2012; Martin, 2010). Positive mental health and well-being enhances a student's ability to learn, with evidence showing that different teaching practices also affect student learning outcomes in different ways.

At UC Berkeley, we believe that a healthy academic environment and campus culture are essential for the success of our students, staff and faculty. We strive to promote academic excellence while also acknowledging the importance of creating an educational experience that values the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of individuals and acknowledging the different needs of our diverse campus. Different groups of students have different needs based on their lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and historical struggles. This provides an even greater opportunity to experiment with core academic components and change the way we do our work, creating a healthier and more inclusive academic community. The goal of "Integrating Well-being in the Classroom" is to provide you with some best practices to foster an environment that leads not only to academic success, but to healthy cultural norms, student retention, and effective learning outcomes. These suggestions were created from a multitude of resources that can be found at the end of this document.


With the momentum of the UC systemwide Healthy Campus Network initiatives, colleagues at other UC campuses are collaborating on these types of guidelines and through research have identified pragmatic steps towards a healthier learning environment. UC Berkeley acknowledges and appreciates the work of UC Irvine, UC Riverside, and the UC Mental Health Task Force for leading the way.

Integrating Well-Being in the Classroom

The successful integration and application of well-being concepts into classroom environments begins upstream and should be scalable for early adaptation, broad impact and sustainability within an academic community. These actions can be incorporated in the course planning, considered in the daily activities of the course and relate to your own style and approach - for this reason, full integration of these best practices will vary. Below you will find a summary of healthy classroom practices categorized into three levels, based on the following considerations, and are shown in the diagram (pg. 2) to be inversely related depending on the ease of implementation and its level of impact.

Investing in Implementation for Impact




The lower the difficulty of implementation is, the smaller the impact.


The higher the difficulty of implementation is, the greater the impact.

Ease of Implementation

Investment of time towards full integration

Resources required (i.e. funding, chair approval, outreach and advocacy)

Level of Impact

Effective at creating and sustaining a healthy learning environment

Systemic and Cultural Change: impacting social and academic norms, behaviors, and institutional practices.

LEVEL 1



Course Planning: Be Conscious of Deadlines, Workload, & Timing of Feedback.

Being conscious of assignment deadlines, your expectations, and timely feedback in the classroom is one way to ensure that your students do not get overwhelmed and to support a more [equitable and inclusive environment](#). Students come from different cultural backgrounds, living situations, and have their own personal challenges. Allow for students to discover their challenges early on and work to improve throughout the course. (Wiggins, 2012) For example, you could consider doing one or more of the following:

- Ensure the workload is manageable and discourage all-nighters (i.e., don't make assignments due at 8 am) Acknowledge factors such as world events and personal circumstances.
- Consider the timing of exams and assignments. Be aware of major religious holidays, campus holidays, and spring break with regard to exams and due dates. Spacing out assignments and your flexibility with timing can create a more relaxed environment for all learners.
- Provide timely and specific feedback and outline ways that students can improve.

During Class: Encourage Breaks, Standing, Stretching, & Reflection.

Providing an opportunity for movement, mindfulness, or an activity break during class can have a positive impact on students. (Ferrer, Michelle E., Laughlin, David D. 2017). For example, you could consider doing one or more of the following:

- Take a 2-4 minute break. Allow students to stretch and move their bodies. Do a movement activity or allow time to get some water. Taking a small break will help replenish you and your students as you enter into the next topic of discussion.
- Welcome and provide opportunities for students to stand in long lectures or seminars. Incorporate brief meditation or self-reflection activities into classes lasting more than an hour.

**Note: Take care not set any physical expectations that would cause students with differing abilities to be unable to participate or be forced to self-disclose.*

Course Planning and During Class: Share Resources & Wellness Information with Students.

Sharing student resources in your syllabus, or during the beginning of class, helps ensure that students feel supported and have options when in distress. Knowing resources for faculty can also be helpful as you move through the academic year.

- In your syllabus, offer a variety of ways that your students may contact you with questions or concerns. Link students to [*resources](#) that support their well-being, include it on the syllabus or go over it during lecture.
- Familiarize yourself with the student resources, student support services, and co-curricular learning supports on campus.
- Be aware of the signs that a student is in distress (academic indicators like missing class or behavioral, emotional or physical indicators), and take timely and appropriate action. Learn more in the [UC Promoting Student Mental Health Guide](#) and review the [Gold Folder](#).

[*recalibrate.berkeley.edu](http://recalibrate.berkeley.edu) is a centralized, multi-dimensional wellness website with resources, information and tools for the entire campus community – faculty, students and staff.

Approach and Style: Be Welcoming, Enthusiastic & Caring.

Set the tone of the classroom and semester by having a conversation about expectations and respect for diverse opinions and learning styles. Create class guidelines together and build an environment of inclusion and open dialogue, while acknowledging privilege and power.

- Be intentional about setting a welcoming tone.
- Personalize your unique approach and style that fosters a positive and supportive classroom and lets students know you are invested in their success.
- Use [inclusive language](#) and [gender-neutral pronouns](#). Be respectful of your student's gender identity by asking for their pronouns.
- Encourage students to speak to you about any accessibility concerns.

LEVEL 2



Course Planning: Connect Students with the Community.

Getting students connected with their local and individual communities gives them the opportunity to make a difference and can benefit their well-being. Better bridging between curricular and co-curricular parts of the university (e.g., [Berkeley Connect](#), discovery experiences, faculty in each of the residence halls) to help students be their whole selves.

- Bring in subject matter experts that are diverse in experience, background, and identity as guest speakers.
- Connect course concepts to the “real world” and give students the opportunity to do the same.
- Create assignments in which the results can be utilized by a community group or campus initiative.
- Where possible, incorporate community service or service-learning components into your course and lead discussions or activities that help students develop a sense of civic responsibility.
- Offer extra credit for students to attend course-related community events, site visits, trips or other informal learning environments.

During Class: Help Students Connect with Each Other.

Promoting collaborative and positive group experiences has been shown to contribute to student learning and overall college success. Students are able to develop communication and teamwork skills that are increasingly important for the professional world. (Eberly Center, Carnegie Mellon University). Allowing students to connect with peers is crucial in their development in the classroom and a good way for students to make new friends. While being aware of the role that intersectionality plays in group dynamics, you could consider doing one of the following:

- Encourage connection in your classes by having students introduce themselves to one another and work together in teams.
- Start class by asking students to turn to someone next to them and ask any of the following: how they are doing, what they are grateful for, what made them smile today, etc.
- Include teamwork as a component of grading for group projects and work with your teaching assistants to create opportunities for social connection and teamwork in labs and discussion sections.

- Encourage students to participate in study groups and in social activities outside of class. Motivate students to step out of their comfort zones and be open to getting to know new people.
- Provide opportunities during class time and breaks for students to work together and get to know one another.

Approach and Style: Help Students Connect with You.

Making yourself available, and identifying yourself as an ally can help create a productive environment that allows students to feel comfortable and supported, which can be beneficial for improving their ability to learn.

- Share your teaching philosophy with students.
- Make yourself available in different forms: email, zoom, office hours, etc.
- Seek feedback from students throughout the course (this could be done through web survey, Zoom poll, or an anonymous in-class comment card).
- Encourage students to attend office hours (**or be flexible with your availability due to student responsibilities**).
- If you feel comfortable and safe to do so, talk about yourself and your experiences and provide students the opportunity to do the same.

LEVEL 3



Course Planning: Be Flexible and Offer Options.

Providing students with some flexibility and control over their learning experiences, assignments, staggered due dates, and options for grades helps them to feel empowered and supported, contributing to their well-being and success in the classroom.

- Give students options for their grade. For example, perhaps students can choose to count two out of three assignments towards their grade, dropping the lowest score.
- Offer choices in assignments so that students can pick what works best for their learning.
- Provide staggered due dates (e.g. perhaps 3 short papers are due but there are 6 opportunities throughout the semester to submit work, so students can choose the topic and time that works best for them).

Course Planning: Provide Opportunities that Promote Professional and Personal Skills.

Providing students opportunities to engage with the real world by connecting course materials to life skills will help promote their personal and career readiness skills necessary after graduation. (Roulston & McCrindle, 2018)

- Provide opportunities for personal development. Connect students to communities, organizations, and groups that support personal growth and opportunities. Be mindful of the different opportunities that may have a positive or negative impact on students based on location and intersectionality.
- Incorporate mindfulness, journaling, and other forms of personal development into class activities and assignments. Incorporate skill-building activities in class and find ways to build this throughout the course.

Approach and Style: Role Model Healthy Behaviors.

Promoting and supporting the health and well-being of students through role modeling and communication can create a positive learning experience. Give them examples of how you take good care of yourself throughout the semester. Share about what you do when you feel overwhelmed.

- Set deadlines that support healthy work/life integration for yourself and for your students.
- Foster an environment of respect and inclusion by demonstrating the value of diversity and the importance of an inclusive climate for all through verbal and written communication.
- Take breaks between classes to walk, practice mindfulness exercises, or other relaxation techniques.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about the *Creating Healthy Learning Environments* toolkit, please contact the following University Health Services departments:

Health Promotion

Health Promotion advances the health and well-being of UC Berkeley students through a wide range of educational and outreach activities and initiatives.

hpromo@berkeley.edu
(510) 642-7202
uhs.berkeley.edu/hp

Be Well at Work

Be Well at Work Faculty/Staff Health Programs improve employee health and well-being, leading to a more engaged and productive workforce.

wellnessfacstaff@berkeley.edu
(510) 643-4646
uhs.berkeley.edu/wellness