Executive Summary
Faculty and Instructor Committee of the Provost's Council on Student Mental Health (PCSMHFI) and
Provost's Advisory Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Technology (PACTLT), UMN

The Faculty and Instructor Committee of the Provost's Council on Student Mental Health (PCSMHFI) focuses on mental health as it relates to academic instructional organization and settings as well as academic department and instructor roles. Committee members review current policies to assess impacts on student mental health; propose policy changes in collaboration with the Provost, FCC, and other governing bodies. Although many instructors are concerned about the mental health of their students, several say they are not aware of how their interactions with students may influence students' stress levels.

The PCSMHFI and the Provost's Advisory Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Technology (PACTLT) subcommittee on Serving Students with Mental Health Concerns collaborated to develop a UMN student survey to gather data regarding how UMN students experience course-related stress. The intent of the survey was to help faculty and other instructors become aware of student perceptions and suggest ways to reduce this stress. The survey included the following questions plus several demographic questions:

Q2 - If you have had courses at the UMN in which you were able to maintain your wellbeing or productive levels of stress, describe the teaching practices or policies that made them less stressful.

Q3 - If you have had courses at the UMN that were excessively stressful, describe the teaching practices or course policies that made them excessively stressful for you. If you have not taken a stressful course, please write N/A.

Q4 - Are there teaching and learning practices that would support your wellbeing and reduce excessive stress that you would like to see implemented in more of your courses?

Q5 - On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, 5 being moderate but manageable, and 10 being extreme, how much stress do you perceive in all aspects of your life?

Q6 - On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, 5 being moderate but manageable, and 10 being extreme, to what degree does course-related stress impact your total stress levels?

Q7 - On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest degree, to what degree are you managing your stress?

Q8 - What do you do to manage your stress or anxiety?

Q9 - In particular, are there any specific things that you do to manage course-related stress?

In April-May, 2019, the PCSMHFI and PACTLT Committee members invited various faculty, instructors, departments and colleges throughout the UMN community to encourage their students to complete this brief online survey with ensured anonymity and confidentiality. By mid-May, approximately 650 students throughout the UMN system completed the survey. The table below summarizes the percentages of respondents who reported the characteristics listed; the last column includes any identities or factors that students thought may be relevant to their experiences in their courses.

Undergrad	83	1st year of program	31	Twin Cities	73	1st generation	19
Graduate	10	2nd year of program	34	Rochester	14	Physical, mental, learning disability	18
Professional	4.5	3rd year of program	18	Morris	6	LGBTQ	10
Non-degree	0.47	4th year of program	13	Duluth	5.9	URM (under-represented, racial/ethnic minority)	9
PSEO	0.32			Crookston	0	International	6
						Returning/veteran	5

Importantly, respondents described teaching practices or policies that helped them less stressed and able to maintain their wellbeing and productive levels of stress. The responses fall into seven main themes: 1) clarity/clear communication; 2) instructor characteristics; 3) course workload; 4) flexibility; 5) effective teaching and learning strategies; 6) exam preparation; 7) grading policies

Clarity
Respondents emphasize the importance of clearly described (verbally and in writing) expectations for assignments, homework, and especially all assessments/exams, from the beginning of the semester. They also frequently mentioned having clear deadlines, a clear syllabus, including a specific calendar of class activities, and course materials with detailed instructions and grading rubrics. Respondents also suggest that a detailed description of the grading system, frequent reminders about deadlines, and ongoing verbal or written communication with the instructor helped reduce unnecessary course-related stress.

Instructor Characteristics
UMN Students repeatedly mentioned several instructor characteristics that helped maintain their student well-being and reduce course-related stress. Primarily this included instructors who are approachable, and demonstrate an openness to discuss course content or personal student issues impacting their course performance. Likewise, students appreciated instructors who were open to and accepted student feedback such as early or mid-term feedback.

Students frequently shared examples of caring, empathetic instructors who checked in with students, were willing to talk with them, and cared that they succeed in the course. They were knowledgeable about and responsive to mental health concerns. Many instructors provided extra help and created an overall supportive climate throughout the course. Students mentioned instructors who effectively both taught course content and demonstrated effective teaching and learning strategies (also described further in the Instructional Practices section).

Course workload
Respondents described course workload experiences that decreased course-related stress. This included helpful and meaningful assignments that furthered their knowledge and competencies, rather than mere memorization and unhelpful busywork. Students also suggested that options to improve a grade, such as extra credit options, helped their well-being. One of the most frequently mentioned suggestions related to the need for a balanced work distribution throughout the semester, both within and between courses. Students strongly preferred a balanced workload, rather than a piling up of assignments, projects, and assessments at the end of the semester.

Flexibility
Respondents shared numerous experiences of course flexibility that helped maintain their well-being. These experiences included course/instructor flexibility in attendance, homework deadlines, office hours, assessments (e.g., arranging make-up exams/quizzes), course scheduling (e.g., more time for specific topics), and even course delivery formats.

Instructional strategies
Students mentioned a multitude of effective teaching and learning strategies that helped reduce course-related stress. Aligned with universal design for learning principles, students preferred multiple course assessments (e.g., in-class activities, clicker questions, homework/assignments, projects, quizzes, etc.) throughout the semester instead of just one or two exams. Likewise, they liked engagement in class with a variety of interactive classroom activities (discussion, labs, peer teaching, group work during class, use of active learning in class, case studies, applied learning formats in authentic situations), rather than disengaging lectures. Also, students mentioned that aligned course design in which objectives, activities, and assessments are directly connected helped students reduce course-related stress. Instructors who provided constructive, timely feedback to students also helped maintain well-being. Likewise, respondents mentioned that scaffolding of large projects into manageable chunks, use of relevant examples and topics, along with effective use of learning management systems (e.g, Canvas) to post lectures, slides, and other resources, significantly reduced course-related stress.

Exams

Several respondents described a range of exam preparation activities that instructors provided that helped reduce course-related stress. These included study guides, working through the most difficult problems/applications in class, practice exams, and review sessions during class as well as outside of class time. Aligning exam questions with stated learning outcomes and other course activities, and keeping exam length reasonable also received attention.

Grading policies

Finally, several suggestions described by respondents related to grading policies that helped maintain student well-being. Frequently mentioned were the option to drop some grades (e.g., dropping lowest exam or assignment grade or certain number of quiz grades); course points distributed across a variety of exams, assignments, and activities; grade based on competence, so that all can succeed; and curving in a manner that has low scores still resulting in passing grades. Students also supported the current UMN policy to allow them to request to reschedule a final exam if they have three scheduled in the same day.

Most frequent concerns

When asked about course-related stressors, over half of the respondents commented on instructor characteristics. These include the instructor's ability to organize and clearly deliver material, to provide a supportive classroom free of bias and excess competition, and instructor approachability and empathy. About 38% cited concerns about clear communication from instructors, including the expectations for assignments, homework and exam content, timely information about deadlines, and the course grading system. Also, 30% mentioned course workloads, with too much reading and other homework, busywork, and work not distributed reasonably across the semester as the main problems; 30% also cited problematic instructional strategies such as lack of alignment between learning objectives, assignments and exams, ineffective use of learning management systems, poorly managed group projects, and a lack of constructive and timely feedback to students.

Student self-reported stress levels

Data from the quantitative questions (5-7) on the survey are summarized below:

	overall stress	course-related stress	managing stress
all 651 respondents	6.7	7	5.9
122 1st-generation	7.2	7.4	5.7
116 w disabilities	7.6	7.6	5.3
62 LGBTQ	7.5	7.4	5.4
60 URM	7.2	7.2	5.8
41 international	6.5	6.8	6.6

Recommendations

Based on these student survey findings we recommend dissemination of a UMN faculty survey to ascertain current practices and policies that align with the student responses to reduce course-related stress. Second, we propose developing and promoting a variety of UMN faculty development options/opportunities to disseminate effective instructional practices that reduce course-related stress. Third, we will examine specific groups of student respondents [undergraduate students, graduate students, professional students, non-degree seeking students, and pre-college program (PSEO) students] to gather detailed response trends and needs tailored to each surveyed subgroup. Finally, we will further examine and document the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles that align with respondents' suggestions/experiences to prevent undue student stress and increase student well-being.