

**West Chester University Faculty Senate Student Welfare Committee:
Student Emotions and Student Success
April 2009**

This year, the Student Welfare Committee focused attention on issues of student emotions and student success. Observations of how issues of student emotions and behavior influence student success on our own campus drove our initial investigations into these issues two years ago. News of far more serious events on other campuses, such as the Virginia Tech mass shooting, called national attention to the importance of addressing these issues not only in terms of furthering student success but also for the sake of preventing extreme tragedies. Initial research on trends in student mental health and behavior on college campuses across the country, and beginning collaborations with individuals and organizations addressing these issues on our campus, including the Threat Assessment Team, led to more in-depth work this year.

Our research supports the need for a comprehensive approach to issues of student emotions and behavior that involves multiple disciplines and includes levels of intervention such as: Awareness (increasing awareness about issues of student emotions and behavior, decreasing the stigma related to mental health diagnoses, and providing education about how to identify a student who may be struggling, and connect them with appropriate resources); Prevention (promoting practices that enhance student mental health and well being and decrease the chances of problems, including social networking, successful management of college challenges, and stress reduction activities); Support Network (building a support network, involving existing student organizations and activities, to help students deal with typical college challenges); Screening (identifying students at high risk for emotional and behavior problems, and actively reaching out to these students to offer mental health services); Threat Assessment (assessing issues of student behavior and emotions that pose a threat to self or others and implementing plans for dealing with these issues, including appropriate ways for students who pose a threat to receive treatment, as indicated, take leaves from campus, if necessary, and return to campus, if possible, while ensuring the well being of the campus community); Restriction (restricting access to potentially dangerous materials and activities); Crisis Response (developing resources for responding to campus crises related to student behavior and emotions, including having mental health professionals on call 24/7, and having plans for immediate response to crises that may affect the campus community, as well as plans for post-crisis response); and Treatment (providing accessible, effective, and efficient treatment for mental health problems, possibly including brief therapy on campus as a matter of routine practice, and referrals for longer term and/or more intensive therapy on or off campus, as warranted).

Our research also highlights the prevalence of serious issues of student emotions and behavior on our campus. The WCU Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSD) reports small but noticeable increases over the past decade in the numbers of students they are serving who qualify for services based on a psychiatric diagnosis. At this point, approximately 7% of the 600 students served qualified on this basis. The OSSD reports that problems with student success and retention are high for this group. Moreover, the OSSD estimates a far higher percentage of students who need services but are unidentified. Findings from the Transition to College Project, by Drs. Johnson, Gans, and Kerr, of the Psych Dept. support this idea. Initial analyses of their data on WCU students suggest that approximately 10-15% of students on our campus may have levels of anxiety that are clinically significant, or suggest a need for treatment. Approximately 15-50% may have clinically significant levels of depression. And, around 10% of students may have thoughts and behaviors regarded as indicative of psychosis. These statistics speak to the need for attention to issues of student emotions and behavior on our campus.

Our committee has communicated with a variety of organizations on campus that address these issues from various angles, including the Threat Assessment Team, Health and Wellness Center, Counseling Center, OSSD, Ad Hoc Mental Health Awareness Committee, Partners in Prevention, Active Minds, Psychology Club, and SGA. Our communications suggest several areas in which we might add to existing efforts to address issues of student emotions. One area regards awareness. With this in mind, we have developed a proposal for a program to raise awareness about issues of student emotions and behavior, and train faculty, staff, and students to promote a positive campus climate with regard to these issues and help students in need connect with appropriate resources. At present, we are conducting further research to inform the content and organization of this program, exploring possible partnerships with existing groups like Partners in Prevention (PIP), investigating the costs associated with such a program, and exploring funding options. The next page shows a draft sketch of our proposed program.

Submitted by Eleanor (Ellie) Brown, Chair, p. 1

West Chester University Campus Allies Regarding Emotions of Students (WCU CARES)

This represents a draft sketch of WCU CARES; an idea generated through the WCU Faculty Senate Student Welfare Committee based on over a year of research and conversations about how we might add to existing efforts to promote student emotional well being on campus.

Like all human beings, college students have emotions! Many of these emotions are those that add texture to day-to-day life on campus: excitement about a new experience; surprise about running into an old acquaintance; satisfaction about a completed assignment; or a feeling of empathy about the experience of a homeless family encountered during service learning. Another set of emotions may pose mild or severe challenges for student success. Things like sadness about leaving home or going through a difficult breakup, and anxiety about tests or new social situations, may be bumps in the road to success that students overcome, leaving them with greater confidence, or may be problematic hurdles that interfere with student success. Some students bring to campus emotions or behaviors that meet the criteria for psychiatric diagnosis and others meet for the first time with such emotions and behaviors while on campus. Some of these students receive the type of help that allows them to cope effectively and find success and others struggle alone or with insufficient help and find themselves failing to meet their goals in academic or extracurricular pursuits. In a small number of cases, students' emotions and behaviors pose serious threats to their own safety or the safety of the campus community.

WCU CARES aims to promote student success by supporting emotional well being. In light of a changing landscape of student emotional issues on college and university campuses, and growing awareness of the impact of these issues on student success and campus climate and safety, there is a need for a wider network of individuals on the West Chester University Campus who understand issues related to student emotions and are prepared to address these issues in various contexts: WCU CARES helps to meet this need. WCU CARES includes faculty, staff, students, and other members of the WCU Campus Community who share a common interest in supporting the emotional well being of students. Membership in WCU CARES is open to members of the Campus Community who participate in a training program designed to provide education about and tools for addressing issues of student emotions. Membership in WCU CARES does not signify the ability to provide therapeutic or counseling services, but does signify receipt of training regarding the types of emotional issues students may deal with, the signs that students might be facing these issues, and appropriate responses to such signs, including how to have conversations that help students to connect with professional support when needed.

Initial training for WCU CARES involves an in-person session that provides information about the present landscape of issues related to student emotions on college and university campuses such as ours; language for talking about issues of student emotions; tips for creating a campus climate that supports students' emotional well being; and tools for handling issues of student emotions, including identifying students who might need additional support and connecting them with appropriate resources. Members of WCU CARES may identify themselves by a sticker placed on an office or residence hall room door and/or a pin displayed on a garment or bag. Such a sticker does not indicate the ability to provide therapeutic or counseling services, but does signify receipt of training regarding student emotions that includes information about available resources for students who need additional support. Members may stay active through individual and group interactions with students around these issues, as well as through further trainings and programs designed to promote the emotional well being of West Chester University students.

At this stage, WCU CARES represents only a draft proposal for a possible program. We are still developing ideas for adding to existing efforts to promote student emotional well being on campus. Questions or suggestions may be directed to the Faculty Senate Student Welfare Committee, through Committee Chair, Ellie Brown, at ebrown@wcupa.edu or 610-436-3153.