

# Mental Health on the Syllabus

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Colleges and universities generally try to make information about mental health services accessible to students. But at Northwestern University, students may start seeing such information in a surprising place: syllabi.

Wanting the campus to be “accessible and welcoming to all students,” Northwestern’s Faculty Senate last week passed a resolution encouraging “all faculty to include language in their syllabi similar to the following: ‘If you find yourself struggling with your mental or physical health this quarter, please feel free to approach me. I try to be flexible and accommodating.’” The statement ends with phone numbers for health and student services.

Many professors nationally complain that their syllabi are ignored by students and have become too long as faculty members have felt pressured to include information banning plagiarism or other violations of academic integrity, or mentioning, in some cases, [trigger warnings](#). But the Northwestern resolution appears to have encountered relatively little criticism, in part because it's voluntary.

Laurie Zoloth, Charles McCormick Deering Professor of Teaching Excellence in religious studies and bioethics and medical humanities and Faculty Senate president, said she was “quite proud that the Senate went forward with our work on trying to make Northwestern more accessible to everyone.” While some senators “were cautious about being told what to put on their syllabus,” she added, “it was made clear that it was a recommended set of ideas and that it essentially puts us in compliance with [Americans With Disabilities Act] recommendations about accessibility to our classrooms and to our students.”

Zoloth said, “We need to go beyond ramps and elevators to creating an academic climate that allows students with physical or mental health issues to come to professors with concerns, including the need for accommodations, and ways to contact our very strong and professional support services.”

The resolution was introduced by the senate’s Student Affairs Committee, which works with students on various issues of interest. As on many campuses, mental health is a key area of concern among students and professors at Northwestern. The recent vote took place several days after an undergraduate died by suicide on campus (though the resolution was pending prior to her death).

The proposal “was in direct response to leaders of the [Associated Student Government], who informed us that this topic was of paramount importance to them,” said Robert G. Hasty, a senior lecturer of conducting and ensembles and a member of the Student Affairs Committee. “There is a perception among undergrads that professors can appear unapproachable, especially about personal topics such as mental health that may affect their performance in class.”

When members of the faculty committee asked how they might help, Hasty said, students “simply were hoping that we could make faculty be more aware of this perception and communicate their support to students,” with syllabi being one possible way.

Karen Springen, a lecturer in journalism and another member of the committee, stressed that the resolution is entirely optional, and it’s not meant to suggest that professors are stand-ins for counselors or psychologists. Rather, she said, it’s to let students know that professors may be accommodating to changes in students’ schedules due to something such as a death in the family, and to point them toward health professionals, should they need them for any reason.

“We’re trying to come across as open and approachable, and to refer them to people who are true experts,” she said.

The resolution passed the Senate 26 to 5. A university spokesperson referred questions to the Faculty Senate president.

Over all, Zoloth said, “We wanted to make sure that students knew that issues about physical and mental health wouldn’t be stigmatized in our classes. Obviously this was less than a week after one of our students had unfortunately committed suicide in one of our dorms, so we’re very, very alert to trying to find ways to make the campus safer and more accessible.”

Regarding the death of sophomore Jordan Hankins, Patricia Telles-Irvin, vice president for student affairs, said in a statement that Northwestern “remains dedicated to serving our community during this difficult time. We continue our outreach and support for students who were close to Jordan or were impacted by her death.”