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1 Overview
This proposal outlines the rationale for including a short insert in each undergraduate course syllabus to provide information and resources to support student mental health and wellbeing. The idea of this syllabus insert was developed through the work of the UBC Mental Health Network and Student Development and Services given the distinct relationship between student health and academic success. This document highlights the need for active information transfer to students through a medium which makes the connection between health and academics – the course syllabus.

This proposal falls within the goal of the institution to increase mental health awareness and self-management skills in students as highlighted in the UBC Student Mental Health & Well-being Strategy. It has been endorsed by the AMS Education Committee, UBC Vancouver Student Senate Caucus, and the UBC Mental Health Network.

2 Background
University is a time of great change and transition in the lives of students. Not only are they adjusting to a new academic environment with substantial changes in expectations, guidance and assessment, but they are also in a transition period from adolescence to adulthood. Research has shown that 75% of all lifetime mental health disorders onset during the age range of 18-24. A significant amount of research has been done in the area of mental health and academic success among students in post-secondary institutions. Trockel et al showed a negative correlation between GPA and both depression and anxiety. Hysenbegasi et al (2005) showed a negative correlation between GPA and untreated depression. Andrews & Wilding (2004) indicated that depression has an impact on exam scores.

Research conducted by Eisenberg et al studied the impacts of symptoms of mental health disorders on student academic success at a large competitive public institution in the US with a focus on depression, anxiety disorders and eating disorders. Academic success was measured through the variables of GPA, whether a student dropped out before graduation and credit hours. Measures of mental health included widely accepted screens specific to the age range of college students, such as the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 for depression.

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1 “UBC Student Mental Health & Well-being Strategy” [http://vpstudents.ubc.ca/files/2012/05/Student-Mental-Health-Plan-Brochure.pdf](http://vpstudents.ubc.ca/files/2012/05/Student-Mental-Health-Plan-Brochure.pdf)
The results of this study showed that depression, anxiety and eating disorders have a strong impact on academic outcomes. All symptoms of all 3 disorders were predictors of a lower GPA, and depression was also correlated with a higher probability of dropping out.8

For a UBC context on these three most common disorders among the student age group, results of the 2009 National College Health Assessment administered at UBC showed:9

- 9.4% of female students and 4.5% of male indicated that they had been diagnosed or treated for an anxiety disorder in the last 12 months.
- 9.9% of female students and 4.9% of male students indicated that they had been diagnosed or treated for depression in the last 12 months.
- 20% of undergraduate student participants indicated that issues with their personal appearance had been traumatic or very difficult to handle.
- The percentage of respondents that indicated the following issues affected their academic performance in the last 12 months were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>UBC Undergrads</th>
<th>Reference Group10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep difficulties</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Use</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold or flu</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These studies show that mental health has an impact on academic success but in addition to this, there is evidence that the academic environment also has an impact on student mental health. UBC NCHA data showed that 54% of undergraduate students cited academics as being an issue that they considered traumatic or difficult to handle in the last 12 months, compared to 43% in the US based reference group.11 In April 2012, the Office of the AMS Vice President Academic and University Affairs conducted a Student Academic Experience Survey addressing questions pertaining to student health and wellness.12 The key results of these questions showed that 81% of students cited that their course workload causes them stress or anxiety on a regular basis. 49% of students cited that their exam timetable causes them stress or anxiety on a regular basis. 48% of students, with higher numbers in first and second year, cited that course planning causes them stress or anxiety on a regular basis.

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8 Ibid
10 Reference group definition: publically funded research intensive institutions, 20k+ students NCHA participants fall 2009
In the most recent AMS Academic Experience Survey, 32% of student respondents indicated that during their time at UBC, they had been in a situation where mental health or health issues jeopardized their successful competition of their course or degree related work. Of those students, only 46% were aware of university policies intended to provide support to students in such situations.

Overall, a clear relationship can be seen between academic and student mental health. Each equally affect the other and therefore the institution needs to help students make the link to enable them to understand how their health impacts their academic success and how to seek out resources when their academics and impacting their health negatively.

3 Rationale – Why the Syllabus

3.1 The Syllabus as a Learning and Development Tool

Parkes and Hayes cite that the syllabus serves three main purposes as a contract, permanent record and learning tool. As a contract, the syllabus sets out the expectations of both the instructor and students during the course. The elements of the syllabus that can be categorized as contractual components include polices on grading, examinations, examinations, academic dishonesty and academic accommodations. The second purpose outlined is that of a permanent record as a mechanism for accountability and documentation. Parkes and Hayes suggests that as a measure for accountability, the contents of the syllabus which outline expectations of students and how outcomes and performance are assessed, can serve as a basis to help evaluate instructors and programs. Secondly, the syllabus can also serve as a record of the contents of a course which can be used for transfer between institutions or programs.

Lastly, the syllabus serves a learning tool. This component of the syllabus has only begun to evolve over the last decade as instructors begin to recognize that not all students come into their courses with the skills they need to be successful. Parkes and Hayes note that:

"Being an effective learner requires a complex assortment of skills, including time management, the abilities to prioritize and multitask, strategies for studying and learning, the use of technology, social skills, maturity, and responsibility. Not all students possess these abilities, but a syllabus can assist in their development."

This is the category under which a syllabus section on student mental health and wellness fits. This speaks to the already known fact that many students do not make the necessary link between academic and their personal health. This is where the syllabus can play a role in assisting student in developing this connection which can only serve to strengthen their coping abilities.

The syllabus is not intended to be another means of mass communication with students and thus, non-course related messaging contained in the syllabus should be limited to only that which is essential to communicate to students. Given the important link that exists between the rising issues of student mental health on this campus and academics, there is a case to be made that there is a strong need for this insert.

14 Ibid
16 Ibid
3.2 The Guiding Document
A course syllabus serves as the guiding document for the course and is one of the most thoroughly read items by students. The syllabus is the one document that all instructors hand out and review on the first day of the course and students keep in close proximity throughout the term. Including information about student mental health resources in the syllabus provides students with a strong signal from the institution and instructor. A signal that shows that the institution recognizes that they may face challenges and it is a priority for the instructor and institution to ensure students have the tools they need to be successful. By integrating this messaging into a component of the academic sphere, there is the potential for a reduction in stigma surrounding the reality of student mental health on this campus.

3.3 Linking Student Health and Academics
Countless surveys and research studies have shown that there is a link between academic success and student mental health in both directions. A change in either factor has a strong impact on the other. While this is a fact that is widely recognized and understood by faculty and staff, students make this link less often in their own lives. This insert is one clear way to show students that link and help them understand that in order to be successful academically they must also take care of themselves. And, if students are facing large amounts of stress or anxiety as a results of their academics, or any other factors in their lives, there are resources and support mechanisms in the institutions that they can turn to.

3.4 Accessible and Timely Information
Students who are in need are not always going to actively seek out resources, especially when they feel that they are behind academically. When students are most stressed about their academics the one document that will continue to be in their mind is their course syllabus which contains all the important academic information for the course and has a list of all the assignments they need to complete and exams they need to prepare for. What better intervention and information mechanism than mental health information insert in the syllabus to remind students that there are resources out there to help them succeed. Many students will not have a close enough relationship with faculty or staff members to be exposed to help when they need. This is one way for the institution to reach all students with a supportive message when a personal tap on the shoulder or conversation is not feasible.

In short, a syllabus inset is one small thing the institution can do that can make a substantial impact for students in need and go a long way in shifting the culture of how student mental health is perceived on this campus. Making this topic something that is openly discussed and disclosed in the course syllabus will help students understand how they can not only support themselves, but also support their peers. Helping students identify the relationship between health and academics begin to address the issue of student mental health at UBC.
4 Proposed Text of Insert

The proposed text was developed through the work of Dr. Cheryl Washburn, Director of Counselling Services; Dr. Patricia Mirwaldt, Director of Student Health Services; and Janet Teasdale, Senior Director of Student Development and Services. This insert was created with the intention of giving all students the resources and information they need to be able to recognize when they need assistance and understand how to seek it out. This proposal falls within the goal of the institution to increase mental health awareness and self-management skills in students as highlighted in the UBC Student Mental Health & Well-being Strategy.¹⁷

The text of the insert was discussed and developed with input from the joint UBC Mental Health and Wellbeing Steering Committee which consists of faculty, staff and students from across campus.

Reach Out for Success

University students often encounter setbacks from time to time that can impact academic performance. If you encounter difficulties and need assistance it’s important to reach out. Discuss your situation with your instructor or an academic advisor. Learn about how you can plan for success at: www.students.ubc.ca.

For help addressing mental or physical health concerns, including seeing a UBC counselor or doctor visit: www.students.ubc.ca/livewelllearnwell.

If you are unable to meet course expectations due to mental or physical health reasons review your course outline for information on what to do.

¹⁷ http://vpstudents.ubc.ca/files/2012/05/Student-Mental-Health-Plan-Brochure.pdf