

WISR Counseling Referral Guide

WISR actively seeks a diverse population of students and faculty: racial, religious and ethnic minorities, non-traditional students, first generation college students, LGBTQIA+, and international students who may have unique challenges in adjusting to the demands of a WISR education, or for that matter any academic study. While WISR looks for and interviews students for their capacity to manage the demands of its educational program, there may be situations where counseling can also be helpful to these students as they navigate developmental and adjustment issues on the path to fulfilling their academic goals

As an institution, WISR may have students with trauma history, substance abuse, major mental illness, chronic long-term relational problems and difficulties to take responsibility for oneself. When students have academic challenges, they may be dealing with crisis, needing mental health support, needing psychiatric attention and academic intervention in order to continue at WISR.

At WISR, all staff and faculty, and all programs, may have contact with students with mental health issues. WISR has a shared responsibility to respond to students with care for their personal well-being as well as concern for their academic success. WISR faculty and staff regularly consult with faculty, staff, parents and significant others about students of concern and how to support them. WISR has a personalized academic approach, with frequent one-on-one meetings between students and faculty. Thus, our approach to mentoring/advising students, enables staff and faculty to become aware of these issues in the “natural course” of meetings with students. WISR will designate faculty and other appropriately knowledgeable professionals to train other faculty in WISR, in how to manage students with challenging needs.

The information contained in this document explains when professional counseling might be beneficial to an individual and how to make a referral for mental health support. The concept of professional confidentiality and information about other types of referral and consultation services are also discussed.

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What Is the Role of The Faculty and Staff In Assisting Students Who Have Mental Health Issues?

Students often experience significant changes in their lives during the course of their education. Such changes, at times, become stressful enough to pose serious threats to the academic progress which students hope to make. The stress of academic, social, family, work, and/or financial concerns are often inter-related and may result in a student turning to WISR faculty or staff for help. In fact, anyone who is perceived as knowledgeable, caring, and trustworthy may be a potential resource in times of trouble. See “Signs of a Student in Distress” in the appendix.

A faculty or staff member's willingness to lend special assistance to students undoubtedly is influenced by the personal style and philosophy of the individual. Situational factors, such as frequency and type of contact, program design, and roles also have a substantial effect on the type of interactions which occur between the faculty/staff and students. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence based on WISR's history of personalized mentoring, advising and coaching with students that faculty and staff members are often in a position to identify students who are having trouble. Timely expressions of interest and concern may be a critical factor in helping students solve problems that are interfering with academic survival and success.

Is Consultation Available?

Designated WISR faculty and staff and/or other appropriately knowledgeable professionals are available for consultation for students, staff, professionals, and faculty. These consultations often focus on a concern for an individual, behavioral problems which occur in programs and seminars/classes, or other issues that may have important psychological dimensions. WISR faculty and staff will attempt to respond to requests for consultation as soon as schedules permit. WISR faculty and staff are required to limit their consultation to their scope of practice and scope of competency, and with attention to avoid inappropriate dual relationships. For example, consulting with a student regarding psychological issues and also performing as the student's faculty may be an inappropriate dual relationship. They will refer to appropriate professional resources for issues that outside their scope of practice and scope of competency. When seeking consultation, individuals should tell WISR faculty or staff if they think the situation is an emergency requiring immediate attention. If WISR faculty or staff find in emergency situations where there is potential of imminent harm or injury, they are required to direct individuals to seek immediate professional assistance, including but not limited to an emergency room, hospitalization, law enforcement, and/or child or adult protective services.

When Might Professional Counseling Be Beneficial?

The reasons that individuals seek help from psychotherapists are as varied as people themselves. An individual's motives for seeking counseling might range from wishing to solve a particular problem to desiring to enhance his/her own personal development. In any case, the following indicators might be useful in making a decision about recommending a student consider counseling or therapy. To prevent possible over-interpretation of a single or an isolated behavior, it is probably advisable to look for clusters of signs which appear at approximately the same time.

1. Stated Need for Help

The desire for assistance in dealing with a problem may be stated directly or indirectly. For this reason, it is important not only to attend to the content of what a student may say but to understand the intentions and feelings underlying their message. Listening involves hearing

the way things are being said, noticing the tone used, and observing the expressions and gestures employed. In fact, having someone listen attentively to an expression of a problematic feeling or thought is often a cathartic experience for the speaker which, in and of itself, can result in that individual feeling somewhat better.

2. Danger to Self or Others

When an individual speaks about or alludes to details of how, when, or where they may be contemplating suicide, immediate referral is necessary. Regardless of the circumstances or context, any reference to committing suicide should be considered serious. To conclude that a student's suicidal talk is simply a bid for attention is extremely risky, and a judgment about the seriousness and possible lethality of the suicidal thought or gesture should not be made without consultation with a professional mental health worker. Faculty and staff are advised to seek professional consultation or intervention, or other support (including possibly contacting family or other persons close to the individual) if they consider the person at risk for self-harm. In the case of an actual suicide attempt, faculty or staff immediately call police and ambulance (911).

Similarly, students who make threats against others, engage in stalking behavior, and/or engage in harassing, bullying, or aggressive behavior toward others, should be identified to police (911) and WISR administration as designated by the executive director.

3. Changes in Mood or Behavior

Actions that are inconsistent with an individual's usual behavior may be an indicator of psychological distress. Withdrawal from usual social interaction, chronic absenteeism, unwillingness to communicate, excessive crying or anger, irritability, sleep or appetite disturbance, ongoing fatigue, inability to concentrate, excessive worry, and nausea may be signs of depression or anxiety. These symptoms will often interfere with daily functioning.

4. Eating Concerns

Compulsive overeating, chronic dieting, significant weight loss or gain, purging (excessive exercising, self-induced vomiting, laxative abuse), and distorted beliefs about one's body size and shape are signs of an eating disorder, and warrant a recommendation to consider professional assistance.

5. Trauma

Any traumatic experiences, i.e. physical, sexual, emotional abuse, serious auto accidents, natural disasters, etc. that a person has experienced or witnessed, often create intense fear and reliving of the trauma and a numbing or detachment along with other anxiety and depressive symptoms.

6. Changes in Personal Relationships

Personal problems often result when an individual experiences a traumatic change in a personal relationship. The death of a family member or close friend, difficulties in marriage or family relationships, divorce, changes in family responsibilities, and difficulties in other significant relationships can all result in increased stress that affects day-to-day functioning.

7. Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Indications of excessive drinking, drug abuse, or drug dependence are often indicative of psychological problems. In the case of a drug overdose or severe drug reaction, call 911.

8. Cutting/Self Injury

Students may cut/burn or injure themselves in some other way to manage intense feelings. These students are usually not trying to commit suicide but rather find self-injury relieves difficult feelings, helps to communicate their pain, or helps them to feel in control of earlier traumatic experiences that may be unconscious.

9. Learning Problems

Many students find the demands of college-level academic work to be greater than they anticipated. While it is expected that all students will go through some adjustment period in this regard, those who demonstrate a consistent discrepancy between their performance and their potential may be in need of assistance. Poor study habits, incapacitating test anxiety, undiagnosed learning disabilities or repeated absences from class are all issues which might benefit from counseling services.

10. Retention Issues

Counseling services may be effective in combating student attrition. Students who are considering dropping out of school, contemplating a transfer to another institution of higher education, or worrying about possible academic failure may find counseling to be a useful resource during their decision-making.

When to Recommend/Refer?

Aside from the signs or symptoms that may suggest the need for counseling, there are other guidelines which may help the faculty or staff member define the limits of their involvement with a particular student's problem. A recommendation/referral is usually indicated in the following situations:

1. A student presents a problem or requests information which is outside faculty or staff's range of knowledge or may require intervention that are beyond the scope of what is appropriate for their professional role. For example, a student who is experiencing substance abuse issues would be recommended to seek assistance from a substance abuse professional or a psychotherapist experienced with substance abuse issues. Faculty or staff may not be knowledgeable about substance abuse, thus a recommendation to consider seeking an appropriately skilled and experienced professional may be appropriate. In addition, while a faculty member may be a licensed psychotherapist and possibly knowledgeable about substance abuse issues, his/her role at WISR would be as faculty- not as a substance abuse counselor, and thus a recommendation to consider seeking an appropriately skilled and experienced professional may be appropriate
2. Faculty or staff feel that personality differences which cannot be resolved between themselves and the student will interfere with their helping the student.
3. The problem is personal, and faculty or staff know the student on other than a professional basis (friend, neighbor, relative, etc.).
4. A student is reluctant to discuss a problem with faculty or staff for some reason.

5. Faculty or staff do not believe their contact with the student has been effective.

How to Recommend/Refer?

When faculty or staff have determined that a student might benefit from professional counseling, it is usually best to speak directly to the student in a straightforward fashion that will show their concern for their welfare. It is not advisable to attempt to deceive or trick the student into seeking counseling. Make it clear that this recommendation represents faculty or staff's best judgment based on their observations of the student's behavior. Be specific regarding the behaviors that have raised concerns and avoid making generalizations about the individual.

Except in emergencies, the option must be left open for the student to accept or refuse counseling. If the student is skeptical or reluctant for whatever reason, faculty or staff will simply express acceptance of those feelings so that their relationship with the student is not jeopardized. Give the student an opportunity to consider other alternatives by suggesting that they might need some time to think it over. If the student emphatically says "no," then respect that decision, and again leave the situation open for possible reconsideration at a later time.

If the student agrees to follow through on a recommendation to consider counseling, the student may decide to draw upon their own resources, including a personal health care plan or may request WISR for referrals for counseling. Finally, WISR faculty or staff should follow up with the student at a later date to show continued interest even if they did not accept the attempted referral.

In emergency situations involving students who are unwilling or unable to seek help on their own and there is imminent potential for harm to themselves or others, faculty or staff members may call 911.

*NOTE: WISR faculty and staff are reminded that a referral to a student that they seek particular services may be interpreted as a requirement of the WISR educational program, AND furthermore it may be interpreted that WISR may thus be required to either provide such services or pay for such services. Therefore, WISR faculty and staff are reminded to make recommendations that a student should consider seeking particular services, rather refer such a student to seek particular services. In this policy and document "refer" shall be interpreted as "recommend for consideration," and "referral" shall be interpreted as "service recommended for consideration."

What About Confidentiality?

It is important for members of WISR community to understand that the interviews conducted by WISR faculty and staff may be confidential in nature according to legal statutes. Information about those interviews or the content of such interviews cannot be released except upon the student's written request, in circumstances which would result in clear danger to the individual or others, reports of child or elder neglect/abuse, reports of hazing, or as may be required by other laws. WISR adheres very strictly to this policy.

If a faculty or staff member is interested in a student's contact with mental health professionals, information can best be obtained directly from the student. It should be noted that while

professionals are obliged to maintain confidentiality per ethical and legal requirements, students are not bound by the same promises of confidentiality. Thus, students may choose to release or exchange their information with another person. However, when there are circumstances when it is useful to speak directly to another professional, WISR faculty and staff must first get the student signed consent to release information to or exchange ethically and legally confidential information with another person, unless there are legally allowed exceptions to confidentiality.

Are Referrals To Other Sources Of Assistance Possible?

Sources of assistance for students are not limited to professional counseling, but may include referral to a physician, local health care agencies, sexual assault support programs, social services organizations, governmental and, family members or partners, or a member of the clergy, etc. For this reason, knowledge of persons, offices, and agencies that can be of service to the student is of primary importance. Students become discouraged and frustrated when they feel passed along from place to place or person to person without receiving the assistance needed. If faculty or staff are unsure of the appropriate place to send a student for specific information or help, contact WISR administration or the designated WISR staff or faculty member for potential referrals.

What About Emergencies That Occur During the Weekday or After Typical Office Hours?

WISR does not provide 24-hour, 7 day-a-week emergency coverage throughout the year. Students who require immediate psychological help should seek assistance in the community, or call community helplines. Or if in danger of hurting self or others, call 911.

Other emergency services include:

- National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255
- Crisis Text Line (Bay Area): Text BAY to 741741
- Trevor Project LGBTQ Youth Line: 866-488-7386

Are Counseling Services Available To Faculty And Staff?

While WISR does not provide ongoing counseling services for WISR faculty or staff, the executive director will meet with such individuals to assist in assessing a concern or problem and make a recommendation for appropriate referrals to sources of help.

Appendix: Students in Distress

The learning experiences encountered while pursuing an academic degree can lead to opportunities for discovery and excitement. This is especially the case at WISR, where over the years, WISR students have often expressed the view that their WISR learning experiences were personally transformative. Indeed, WISR aims to help students to engage in considerable self-assessment and critical reflection, and with a view to helping them to build bridges to the next important things they wish to accomplish and lives. At the same time, the personal and intellectual development, and the challenges that students experience during their academic studies, can be stressful. Mature adult learners, especially, may undergo stress balancing many demands, may experience loves and losses, or suffer from substance abuse, sexual assault, family problems, health issues, financial difficulties, and deaths of loved ones.

Students - or anyone for that matter - can experience a crisis if stress exceeds their coping resources. Most crises can be resolved successfully within a few weeks, but some cannot. Although some crises may escalate and place affected individuals in precarious, even dangerous situations other crises can present students with opportunities for significant personal growth, especially when help is provided.

WISR faculty and staff realize, and receive training and collegial support, about how they can assist students in avoiding dangerous situations and refer them to appropriate sources of help. The following information is used to provide some guidance in this process.

What to Look For:

Academic indicators:

- Deterioration in quality of academic work and performance
- Long lapses in completing academic work
- Repeated missed appointments or seminars
- A negative change in the quality and nature of their discussions and dialogue with others at WISR
- Disorganized or erratic performance
- Continual seeking of special accommodations, or repeated excuses for erratic or deteriorating academic performance
- Essays or creative work that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair

Personal/Interpersonal Indicators:

- Tearfulness
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Excessive dependency
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Expressions of concern about the student in the class by their peers
- A hunch or gut-level reaction that something is wrong
- Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or other difficulties
- Exaggerated personality traits (e.g., more withdrawn or more animated than usual)

Physical Indicators:

- Deterioration in physical appearance
- Visible changes in weight
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Excessive fatigue
- Participating in advising sessions or seminars while bleary-eyed, hung over, or smelling of alcohol
- Appearing sick or ill

Safety/Risk Indicators:

- Any written note or verbal statement that has a sense of finality or a suicidal flavor to it
- Statements to the effect that the student is "going away for a long time"
- Severe depression
- Any history of suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Giving away of prized possessions
- Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors

- Any other behavior that seems out of control
- Essays or papers that focus on despair, suicide, or death

What Faculty/Staff Can Do:

The concerned faculty or staff member and/or the student may consult with the WISR executive director or designated WISR faculty or staff. Students in crisis should call 911.

Issues to Consider:

Avoid making sweeping promises of confidentiality, particularly if a student represents a safety risk to him- or herself or others. Students who may be a danger to themselves or others need swift professional intervention, and assurances of absolute confidentiality may get in the way. It is acceptable to stay "in role" as a faculty member. Faculty and staff do not have to take on, nor should they take on, the role of counselor. Faculty and staff need only to watch and refer.