

Recommendation for Reducing Structural Racism

*From the Anti-Racism Action Committee to Chair Michael Oskin
Department Earth and Planetary Sciences, University of California, Davis
September 29, 2020*

Support positive mental health in the EPS community: Syllabi addition

Proposed change: The proposed change is to create a document listing all mental health resources available to students at UC Davis that will be adopted by the department and included in all EPS syllabi. This change is one step in a series to increase the mental well-being and sense of belonging for Black students, Indigenous students, and students of color within EPS.

Purpose:

Race-based stereotypes, biases, and microaggressions communicate to Black college students that they do not belong in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields. One effect is that Black college students are more likely to experience depression or other mental health crises and are 20% less likely to finish a four-year degree than their White counterparts. Thus, promoting a growth mindset and positive mental health of students in EPS courses is an anti-racist action.

By standardizing equity-minded syllabi for courses throughout the department, we can increase a sense of belonging, support a growth mindset[†], and promote positive mental health^{††} for students in EPS courses.

An ARAC member (Bethany Chidester) will compile a list of mental-health resources with input from the Student Services Advisor (Mandy Rousseau) and others that includes a statement of the EPS department's commitment to the well-being of its students. The ARAC recommends that this document be included in all syllabi for EPS courses and also have a dedicated page on the department website. The list of resources will be updated yearly by the Student Services Advisor.

[†]Growth mindset is defined as a belief that a person's talents are not fixed and can be improved through hard work. This approach is a predictor for success and comes from the research of Carol Dweck at Stanford University.

<https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>

††From the World Health Organization, positive mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

Timeline:

A draft document will be prepared in fall quarter, and it will be circulated to faculty, academic federation members, postdocs and graduate students for comment. The document will be ready for use in Winter Quarter 2021 courses.

Audience:

This change is focused on the mental well-being of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) undergraduate and graduate students in EPS courses. The goal is to normalize positive mental health care, which can benefit all EPS community members regardless of race or ethnicity.

Faculty and other instructors of record will be responsible for taking the recommended action.

Background:

Race-based stereotypes, biases, and microaggressions communicate to Black college students that they do not belong in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields. Most of the research into the success of Black college students points to students’ resiliency, or ability to succeed despite the toxic environment (McGee and Bentley, 2017). However, the focus on resilience fails to acknowledge the effects such an environment can have on a student’s well-being. The constant need to prove oneself results in “battle fatigue” and trauma on top of the typical stress of obtaining a college education (McGee and Bentley, 2017). The effect is that Black college students are more likely to experience depression or other mental health crises and are 20% less likely to finish a four-year degree than their White counterparts (Lynch and Engle, 2010; Boyraz et al., 2016). Despite this, Black college students are less likely to seek mental health treatment than White college students (Alang, 2019; Masuda, 2012; Mushonga, 2020).

A recent survey found that the most common reasons for not seeking mental treatment amongst the Black community are: cost, stigma, minimization (i.e. do not think treatment is necessary), low-perceived effectiveness, and accessibility barriers (Alang, 2019). Stigma and minimization are barriers particularly prevalent among the most highly-educated people surveyed. Within the college setting, the issues of cost and accessibility are largely taken care of by the availability of free resources on campus for all students who know where to access them. For Black college students, the strongest barriers were determined to be mental-health stigma and

“self-concealment”, or the tendency to withhold personal or embarrassing information (Masuda et al., 2012).

As a department, we have committed to promoting diversity within Earth and Planetary Sciences, and that means supporting the well-being of underrepresented students. We are able to inform our students of the mental health resources available to them and address barriers to help-seeking behaviors such as stigma. We can do this by normalizing help-seeking behaviors and promoting a growth mindset. The university has a wealth of mental health resources available (for example, see the [Resources for racial trauma](#) page), but many students may not know they exist or feel stigmatized when seeking help. The strategy recommended here is to include a document in every syllabus used in EPS courses with supportive statements (e.g. “your well-being matters” and “positive mental health is one of the strongest predictors of success in college”) and a list of resources for mental health care and support available to students on campus and in the broader community. By providing this information at the outset of every quarter, we will send a message that mental health is a priority for EPS and will hopefully create a supportive environment for students to thrive.

Models:

There is some flexibility in how this will be implemented. The ARAC will provide a document that can be uploaded to Canvas and included with the syllabus. For the sake of brevity, the instructor may choose instead to include a paragraph in the syllabus about the importance of positive mental health along with a link to the EPS department webpage that houses the list of resources. The ARAC strongly encourages the instructor to verbally mention these resources and their commitment to the students’ mental health.

Examples:

Documents for the syllabus will be modeled after the “Equity-Minded Inquiry Series - Syllabus Review” from the Center for Urban Education. There are also several examples of these resources pages that have been built by other UCD faculty. The UCD Counseling Center is currently drafting a mental well-being statement specifically for use in syllabi that can be included with the list of resources.

Center for Urban Development Racial Equity Tools - <https://www.cue-tools.usc.edu/>

Examples from UCD faculty - <https://ebeler.faculty.ucdavis.edu/resources/>

Evaluation:

ARAC will monitor visits to the EPS mental health resources webpage. Additionally, ARAC is planning to implement several surveys to determine why students leave EPS fields, why they stay in EPS fields, and what anti-racist strategies are working. The effectiveness of this change

will be included in one or several surveys. Specifically, we will ask whether the mental health resource page was useful and made the student feel supported. We will also ask which approach is most effective: including all of the resources with the syllabus on Canvas or including only a statement about the importance of mental health and a link to the EPS resource page. Finally, we will ask whether the instructor mentioned the mental health resources in class and whether that increased the feeling of support. After these surveys have been completed, ARAC will revisit the requirement that all course syllabi include a document with all mental health resources.

Affordances and Limitations:

The mental health resources document and statements will be compiled by an ARAC member (Bethany Chidester) and the SSA (Mandy Rousseau), so this change will require minimal work on the part of instructors.

Inclusion of information on mental health in syllabi is also expected to raise more general awareness of these issues among EPS community members.

References

Alang, S. M. (2019). Mental health care among blacks in America: Confronting racism and constructing solutions. *Health Services Research*. **54**, 346-355. doi: 10.1111/1475-6773.13115.

Boyratz, G. et al. (2016). Depressive symptomatology and college persistence among African American college students. *Journal of General Psychology*. **143**, 144-160. DOI: 10.1080/00221309.2016.1163251.

Lynch, M., & Engle, J. (2010). Big gaps, small gaps: Some colleges and universities do better than others in graduating African American students. *The Education Trust*. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED511866.pdf>

Masuda, A., Anderson, P. L. and Edmonds, J. (2012). Help-seeking attitudes, mental health stigma, and self-concealment among African American college students. *Journal of Black Studies*. **43**, 773-786. DOI: 10.1177/0021934712445806.

McGee, E. O., and Bentley, L. (2017). The troubled success of Black women in STEM. *Cognition and Instruction*. **35**, 265-289. DOI: 10.1080/07370008.2017.1355211.

Mushonga, D. R. (2020). The Glass Is Half Full: The Need to Promote Positive Mental Health in Black College Students, *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, DOI: 10.1080/87568225.2020.1727804.