# *Supporting Computer Science Student Mental Health*

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## Brief Summary of Topic

Long hours, lacking a sense of belonging, and fear of failure are just some of the stressors that affect Computer Science students and professionals alike, leading to burnout, anxiety, and depression. Although this issue is not unique to the field of computing, there is significant need for awareness and support around student mental health in the CS education community. However, while many CS educators recognize the importance of supporting their students’ mental health, many feel ill-equipped to do so, are unsure if their approaches are helpful to students, and seek a community of educators with whom they can share ideas.

Of particular concern is the mental health of students in underrepresented and marginalized groups within Computer Science, particularly women, first-generation/low-income students, and members of the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, as they struggle to cope with the unprecedented events of the past two years, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the worldwide protests against systemic racial injustice, and the run-up to and fallout from the US Presidential election while participating in challenging academic courses. Given that Liberal Arts Colleges seek to serve such students, this issue is particularly relevant to our community.

Participants in this session will have an opportunity to discuss the mental health issues that affect CS students, share resources that are available to students and educators, and describe their efforts to create and foster a culture of understanding and support for student mental health within their communities. Attendees will participate in a discussion around experiences of helping individual students overcome their mental health-related struggles, and best practices for supporting all students’ mental health.

## Description of Session Structure

The session will be structured as follows:

* **15 minutes:** The organizer will make introductory remarks describing the context of this topic, prior work into investigating it, and the goals of this session. Participants will have the opportunity to introduce themselves.
* **30 minutes:** The group as a whole will discuss their observations of the current mental health-related challenges faced by CS students, including: what effects have recent global events had on student mental health? what are the specific challenges faced by members of marginalized and underrepresented groups? what aspects of CS as a field of study (and the way that it is taught) are affecting student mental health? As part of this discussion, we will also identify 3-4 potential solution areas, e.g. creating inclusive spaces, advocating for the use of mental health resources, modifying pedagogical approaches, modifying assessments, etc.
* **45 minutes:** Based on the potential solution areas identified in the previous segment, participants will break out into theme-based small groups to further explore a specific solution, with an eye toward how the solution would better support student mental health, and what the tradeoffs and challenges would be in implementing the solution. Groups will document their ideas and observations so that they can be shared with the other participants after the break.
* **30 minutes:** Break
* **45 minutes:** During this time, we will reconvene the larger group, and a member of each small group will present their group’s findings to the rest of the participants. This will allow for further discussion of the potential solutions and also their challenges and concerns.
* **15 minutes:** The session will wrap up with each small group revising their ideas and observations document based on feedback from the other participants, and creating an electronic document that can be shared after the session.

## Space or Resource Considerations

The space should permit for a single discussion among all participants, as well as space for 3-4 small group discussions.

The small group discussion spaces should have a physical space for writing and sharing notes and ideas, though a shared electronic document would likely suffice, assuming at least one small group participant has a laptop.

In the final part of the session, each small group will need to create an electronic document to be shared after the session, so at least one person will need a laptop.

## Ideal Audience for Session

This session is appropriate for any CS instructors or administrators who are interested in understanding how to support their students’ mental health, and for students who want to provide feedback on their experiences in this area and who want to participate in fostering supportive environments among their classmates.

## Intended Outcomes or Products

The outcome of this session will be a “best practices” document that identifies particular mental health-related challenges faced by CS students, ways of addressing those challenges, suggested implementations of those solutions, and tradeoffs or concerns to be considered.