

Creating Caring Classrooms

Strategic Plan Theme: Student Success

Funding Level: Below \$1 million

Facility Needs: No new facilities will be needed

Submitting Unit: Undergraduate Education

Collaborating colleges/departments/units involved with this proposal.

APUE, Career Services Network, Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Counseling and Psychiatric Services, CUED, Employee Assistance Program, Faculty and Academic Staff Development, Graduate School, MSU Police Department, Office for International Students and Scholars, Office of Student Success and Accountability, Prevention Outreach and Education, Trauma Services Training Network, University Physician

What is the proposal's big theme or idea?

The Land Grant Identity asks that MSU “make useful advanced education available to a broad public” (Strategic Plan website) and provides the foundation for the strategic plan’s objectives. To meet these objectives, MSU must address the changing nature of the learning environments. As such, this proposal addresses needs raised by the constituent offices to support instructors’ and teaching assistants’ ability to refer, manage, and report behavioral, health, and safety issues in academic environments.

This proposal builds upon many disparate efforts at MSU, including the Keep Teaching and iTeach websites’ evolution; committee work such as the Trauma Services and Training Network (TSTN), University Well-Being Coalition(UWBC), and campus mental health committee (JED); discussions related to better coordinating critical incident response, student health services, and the threat assessment (BIT/BTAT) processes; discussions related to COVID conduct and support and creation of “The Spartan Way” statement; efforts related to the RVSM strategic plan and the commitment to being a trauma-informed university; efforts to create inclusive classrooms in IDI, integrative studies, and various instructional spaces; and Kognito implementation for MSU students and employees.

As such, this team proposes a campus-wide effort to create caring classrooms (i.e., classrooms, labs, and field experiences). Enhanced academic environments support instructor well-being and satisfaction, DEI climate, trauma-informed teaching, student learning, and student success. At a minimum, this effort requires the development and maintenance of a centralized array of educator development resources to support caring classrooms. Ultimately, the effort could result in creating a dedicated unit, staff position, and/or effort to improve support and institutional navigation for instructors and/or students.

In this scenario, an office of Care Support could also help the campus navigate critical incidents (i.e., death; traumatic campus, national, and global events; etc.). Schools with similar efforts:

Northwestern: <https://www.northwestern.edu/studentaffairs/sass/index.html> Penn State: <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/studentcare> Vanderbilt: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/carecoordination/> University of Michigan: <https://care.engin.umich.edu/> University of Oregon: <https://dos.uoregon.edu/help> University of Texas at Austin: <https://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

What is the proposal's goal?

The short-term goals for this effort include:

- Increasing resources for instructors related to facilitating caring learning environments and increasing educators' comfort addressing safety, disruptive conduct, mental health, disrespectful behavior, RVSM, and DEI issues in those environments;
- Aligning with related discussions about changing undergraduate learning assistants, reducing academic probation rates, and improving the EASE reporting system;
- Coordinating linkages between MSU's current conduct, health, and instructional support systems to enhance collaboration and efficiency and address gaps in service;
- Relieving pressure on clinical units such as EAP and CAPS by providing appropriate support for instructors and allowing the clinical staff to focus on clinical work;
- Institutionalizing the use, application, and assessment of Kognito on campus; and
- Enhancing the climate of the academic classroom environment to enhance instructor and student success and wellbeing.

Underpinning these bulleted goals, the working group would consider appropriate proactive messaging for student and faculty about positive membership in the MSU community, including the language, timing, and modality of this information. It would also serve as a space to review contemporary pedagogies and tactics for supporting with new generations of students.

A longer-term goal involves creating a dedicated office, individual, or committee to oversee and maintain the work outlined above. This goal could include re-establishing a campus mental health committee to continue the work started by the JED Mental Health Committee.

This proposal's goals align with MSU's Land Grant Mission and several strategic plan objectives: First, Student Success Objective 5: Provide a positive climate and holistic support throughout the student experience, understanding that providing high-quality out-of-classroom experiences and care are essential to student success. Second, DEI Objective 4: Provide a world-class academic environment that integrates DEI in teaching, research, and service, and third, Sustainable Health Objective 1: Meet the physical and mental health needs of our students, faculty, and staff. This proposal also supports the RVSM Strategic Plan Initiative 2: Building Trauma-Informed Culture.

Define the significance, or impact of your big idea.

Based on feedback from signatory offices, instructional support requests have increased significantly over the last few years in relationship with managing safety, discussion, and outbursts in MSU classrooms. Certain demographic groups—often based on age, gender, race, and nationality—have reported differential treatment based on their identity. For example, Asian faculty encountered hostility in relationship to COVID. Some students challenge or disrespect instructors, perhaps related to greater social polarization related to politics and social justice.

Various factors offer potential explanations for this situation. First, events such as #MeToo, recent elections, COVID, and Black Lives Matter movement have increased social change and created divisive rhetoric and social polarization (e.g., consider dialogue about critical race theory nationally). Second, the 2018 National College Health Assessment found that 86% of MSU students surveyed reported feeling overwhelmed at least once in past year with nearly half reporting this within two weeks of being surveyed. Third, trends in K12 education, social media, and technology suggest students entering college require new types of support. Students have not only experienced great trauma recently, but they have lost 18+ months of face-to-face interactions and developmental growth in social settings.

Just as some instructors are targeted based on identity, students can as well. All students have experienced recent trauma, yet some demographics have been historically excluded from access to trauma-related resources and/or experience factors that exacerbate the that trauma's effects. Individuals with mental and physical health concern—including those who have been hospitalized, first generation students, international students, racial and ethnic minorities, and those who are under-resourced and overburdened with familial, social, and other responsibilities may face additional challenges and require differential support.

Inherent to MSU's historic approach has been an over-reliance and over-referral to its already overwhelmed mental health and conduct units to address a wide-range of student concerns. The risk in this tactic is two-fold: First, students may receive the message that “they are the problem” and “they must get help” when an alternative and non-clinical resource would adequately address the problem if assistance was available. Second, the stigma surrounding mental health services creates a significant barrier to access, particularly for

groups such as BIPOC and international students. When the institution relies upon a referral to CAPS as a primary solution to address a student's concern, students who opt not to go are often left without the help they need. Additionally, HIPAA constrains CAPS' ability to readily coordinate and share information with other offices.

Who will be impacted?

This idea directly affects instructional faculty, academic staff, and undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants by providing diverse resources and educator development opportunities to support positive, caring classroom environments and increase instructors' confidence and ability to address issues that arise.

Indirectly, MSU students will benefit from safer, more inclusive learning environments that will result from instructors having increased support and educator development. Also, this effort will relieve pressure from clinical units, such as EAP and CAPS, by providing alternative forms of assistance for instructors, and it would support educator development units, such as POE and FASD, but augmenting their work.

If MSU is successful in creating more caring learning environments, then it could achieve its strategic goals related to student and employee success and wellness, as well as become known as a positive, supportive place to work and learn—furthering recruitment and retention of top talent.

What does sustainability for your proposal look like?

MSU has numerous existing resources for instructors and teaching assistants; however, these resources are scattered across many offices and websites—often associated with mental health or conduct. To create caring classrooms, MSU needs (1) a centralized repository of existing training opportunities and resources; (2) clear, transparent processes for making referrals and obtaining support; (3) additional educator development opportunities—especially opportunities for active, experiential learning; (4) coordinated efforts to normalize responses to critical incidents at the classroom- and campus-level; and (5) dedicated resources—human and financial—to sustain these efforts.

Done well, enhancing the care and climate of MSU classrooms will enhance the campus community and serve as a potential recruiting point for future employees and students. Measures of success for this effort would include: (A) instructors report increased comfort with and knowledge of making referrals and addressing issues within academic environments; (B) students and instructors refer to MSU as a caring, supportive environment in which to learn and work; and (C) constituent offices would see shifts in usage—away from formal clinical and disciplinary units and toward more in-personal, student support-orientated interventions. In the long-term, MSU could also experience improved student and faculty retention and lowered instances of serious disciplinary and health concerns.

To sustain this idea, MSU needs—at a minimum—to do the following: (1) dedicate financial resources toward creating, maintaining, implementing, and assessing resources and interventions; and (2) designate human resources whose job or job-responsibilities relate to leading this work.