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Cultivating the Mental Wellness of Faculty, Staff, and Chairs

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As reports of shootings, suicide, hazing, and sexual violence have focused much needed public and institutional attention on mental health issues on college campuses, the conversation about how to address mental wellbeing in higher education has primarily emphasized students. A recently published cross-institutional survey of 267 faculty found that mental health issues are also commonly found among the professoriate, with depression being the most commonly reported diagnosis (48% of respondents,) followed by anxiety (38%), bipolar disorder (8.2%), and ADD/ADHD (4.5%; Price, Salzer, O'Shea, and Kerschbaum, 2017). Seventy percent of these faculty who struggle with mental-health issues reported no or only limited awareness of the accommodations available to them on campus and only 13% used these resources. Only a quarter of these faculty felt comfortable confiding in their department chair about their mental-health diagnosis and just 21% of those who did confide in their chair felt very supported by their immediate supervisor.

Although disclosure of mental illness has increased over the years, stigma, stereotype threat, and discrimination remain significant impediments to people who need psychological and social support from their workplace community (Mannarini & Rossi, 2018). Department chairs, as leaders within the institution, are in a position to counteract this stigma by cultivating a department culture that is not only open to and supportive of mental-health issues and concerns, and their disclosure, but is also proactively engaged in promoting and sustaining the mental wellbeing of faculty and staff, including the department chair.

This presentation engages participants in a facilitated discussion about best practices that promote mental health in a department and support the disclosure and accommodation of mental health issues and concerns. The facilitators of this discussion are both department chairs with expertise and experience in mental health and wellbeing, one as a licensed professional counselor and the other as a former university ombuds. The presenters will take a very interactive approach to this topic and will provide participants with several scenarios in which different challenges relating to the mental wellbeing of faculty, staff, and department chairs, including stigma and other impediments to disclosure, will be discussed and worked through collaboratively with an eye to best practices.

References

- Mannarini, S., & Rossi, A. (2018). Assessing mental illness stigma: A complex issue. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*.
- Price, M., Salazar, M. S., O'Shea, A., & Kerschbaum, S. L. (2017). Disclosure of mental disability by college and university faculty: The negotiation of accommodations, supports, and barriers. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 37*.