Is college stressing you out? It could be the way your courses are designed

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Stress is stopping students from enrolling in and staying in college.

According to a recent survey of over 12,000 adults in the U.S., 63% of those 18 to 24 who had never attended college said [emotional stress is one of the biggest reasons why](#) they are not currently enrolled.

And among those who do enroll, 41% thought about withdrawing for at least one term, the survey found, and more than half of the time, [emotional stress](#) was the main reason. The figure was even higher—69%—among those pursuing a bachelor's degree.

While there may be some aspects of college that are inherently stressful, there are also steps that college instructors can take to make the experience less stressful than it would otherwise be. I know this because as [director of the Center for Teaching & Advising](#) at Gonzaga University, I teach faculty how to design their courses in ways that use practical, evidence-based strategies to reduce student stress. I believe these strategies have broad application for colleges and universities in general. Here are four practices that I often recommend:

1. Design a friendly syllabus

The language used in a course syllabus affects how approachable and supportive [students](#) perceive their instructor to be. By [offering outside help](#) and using a friendly tone in syllabuses, faculty can positively influence students' decisions to seek assistance.

Conversely, using [punitive language](#), such as threatening penalties for not completing certain tasks, may create an impression that an instructor is unapproachable. This could in turn discourage students from seeking help when needed.

I encourage instructors to review their syllabuses and [modify the tone](#) to be as friendly and supportive as possible.

2. Assign realistic workloads

An [overwhelming workload](#) is a significant cause of stress, as students may feel unable to effectively manage the demands of their coursework. To prevent overwhelming students, instructors could assign a workload aligned with the course credit hours. One rule of thumb is to only assign [two hours of homework](#) for every hour of class. While this guideline is flexible, instructors could consider the potential burden on students if they exceed it. If every instructor assigns more homework than the guideline recommends, it could become a significant challenge for students to keep up with their coursework.

Rice University offers a [workload calculator](#) that faculty can use to estimate the workload in their courses based on the different kinds of work they assign. I recommend that instructors use this resource to evaluate the time their readings and assignments take. If the quantity or complexity of assignments becomes too much for students, instructors can make adjustments to ensure a more manageable load.

3. Communicate clear expectations for how work will be graded

Student anxiety increases when it is unclear [how they will be assessed](#).

A rubric is a [scoring tool](#) that spells out criteria and levels of performance for an assignment. Its purpose is to make clear how student work will be judged. Students have reported that rubrics help them [identify key aspects of an assignment](#). This in turn reduces uncertainty about what qualifies as quality work. Rubrics also allow students to monitor their progress and make changes before they turn in an assignment. Additionally, rubrics are perceived as a way to [make grades more transparent](#) and fair.

Rubrics should be provided well ahead of the assessment deadline so that students can use them to judge their own work. This allows students to ask for clarification about the criteria. Rubrics also provide a way for instructors to efficiently provide feedback. I recommend that instructors require students to use rubrics as part of an assignment to reflect on their understanding of the expectations.

4. Teach effective study skills for tests

Test anxiety is a common stress response for college students. Around 40% of students report experiencing some degree of test anxiety, with [15% indicating levels that are debilitating](link) during assessments. [Research](link) has revealed that test anxiety may stem from students' realization that they haven't learned the course material, rather than their ability to recall information during exams.

I recommend instructors integrate effective study skills into their courses and provide guidance to help students apply these methods. Strategies that have been shown to improve academic performance and reduce anxiety include:

- [Pre-lecture quizzes](link): online quizzes taken before a lecture to help students identify concepts they don't understand. Instructors can also detect patterns in misunderstandings.

- [How-to-learn assignments](link): assignments that teach students effective study strategies.

- [Frequent in-class quizzes with real-time feedback](link): in-class quizzes that are not graded, taken multiple times throughout a course, and provide students with immediate feedback on how well they understand the material. This strategy can help students identify any misconceptions and correct them quickly.

The stress of college may never be eliminated, but it can be alleviated. It just requires a modest amount of effort to design courses in evidence-based ways that make the experience of going to college less stressful than it would otherwise be.

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