

The WCSU Red Folder Initiative: A Training Manual for University Personnel

1.0 Introduction: Our Commitment to Student Wellbeing

Welcome to the Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) Red Folder Initiative. This manual is an essential tool for all university personnel, designed to empower you with the knowledge and confidence to support our students effectively. Its strategic importance cannot be overstated; by equipping our community with clear protocols for identifying and assisting students in distress, we collectively foster a proactive, safe, and supportive campus environment where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

The Red Folder Initiative is a nationally recognized program that provides a straightforward framework for helping students who may be struggling. It is built upon a simple yet powerful three-step model: **Recognize, Respond, and Refer**. This model provides a clear and actionable protocol that enables any staff member, regardless of their role, to intervene appropriately when they notice a student in distress.

This guide will walk you through each step of this critical process, from identifying the subtle signs of a student in need to connecting them with the comprehensive network of professional support available at WCSU. We will begin by exploring the first, crucial step: recognizing the indicators of student distress.

2.0 Step 1: RECOGNIZE the Signs of Student Distress

As faculty and staff members, your frequent contact with students places you in a unique position. You are often the first to notice when a student's behavior changes or when "something seems off." This makes you our community's first responders in identifying potential issues. Early recognition is the cornerstone of effective intervention, allowing us to provide support before a student's challenges escalate into a crisis. The following indicators can help you identify a student who may be struggling.

2.1 Academic Indicators

- **Sudden Decline in Work Quality and Grades:** A noticeable drop in performance can signal that a student is overwhelmed by personal issues that are consuming the cognitive and emotional resources necessary for academic success.
- **Frequently Missed Classes and Assignments:** Chronic absenteeism or a pattern of missed deadlines is often a primary symptom of underlying distress. This behavior may indicate that a student is struggling with motivation due to depression, is avoiding social interaction due to anxiety, or is facing significant external challenges.

- **Bizarre or Concerning Content in Assignments:** Academic work dominated by themes of hopelessness, rage, or violence can be a direct expression of significant internal turmoil. This content should be seen as a potential cry for help or a warning sign of risk to self or others.
- **Repeated Classroom Disruptions:** This behavior is often not malicious but can indicate a student's inability to self-regulate due to overwhelming anxiety, frustration with the material, or external stressors that are depleting their coping mechanisms.
- **Seeking Personal Counseling Instead of Academic Help:** When a student repeatedly uses office hours or advising sessions to discuss personal problems rather than coursework, it is a clear indicator they are seeking a supportive connection and need a different kind of professional support.

2.2 Emotional Indicators

- **Uncontrollable Crying or Panic Symptoms:** Visible and intense emotional displays, such as crying spells or physical signs of a panic attack, are clear signals that a student is in acute distress and their emotional state has become unmanageable.
- **Self-Disclosure of Personal Distress:** A student directly sharing information about family conflict, financial hardship, depression, grief, or thoughts of suicide is an explicit request for help that must always be taken seriously and acted upon.
- **Verbal Abuse:** Outbursts of verbal aggression can be a manifestation of underlying frustration, anger, or a diminished capacity to cope with stress. This behavior can indicate that a student feels a profound loss of control.
- **Expressions of Concern by Other Students:** When peers take the initiative to report their concerns about a fellow student, it is a significant indicator that the observed behaviors are severe enough to alarm those who know them best.

2.3 Physical Indicators

- **Noticeable Changes in Physical Appearance:** A sudden and marked decline in personal hygiene, grooming, or a significant, unexplained weight loss or gain can be external signs of internal struggles, such as depression, an eating disorder, or other serious health issues.
- **Excessive Sleepiness or Falling Asleep in Class:** While common among students, persistent fatigue or falling asleep in various settings can be a symptom of depression, overwhelming stress, poor nutrition, or substance use that is impacting their well-being.
- **Visibly Under the Influence of Alcohol or Drugs:** Appearing on campus while intoxicated or under the influence is a significant red flag for substance abuse issues, which can severely impair judgment and mask other underlying mental health challenges.
- **Seeming Disoriented or Confused:** A student who appears confused, disconnected from reality, or unable to follow conversations may be experiencing a serious mental health episode, a medical issue, or a reaction to trauma that requires immediate attention.

2.4 Risk-Related Indicators

- **Unprovoked Anger or Hostility:** Expressions of rage or hostility that are disproportionate to the situation can indicate poor impulse control and an internal struggle that may elevate the potential risk for aggressive behavior.
- **Implying or Making a Direct Threat to Self or Others:** Any statement, whether direct, indirect, written, or verbal, about harming oneself or another person must be treated as an immediate and serious concern requiring an urgent response.
- **Themes of Violence or Hopelessness in Assignments:** Written or creative work that is fixated on themes of **death, extreme hopelessness, helplessness, isolation, rage, violence, self-injury** serves as a critical warning sign of severe distress and potential risk.
- **Communicating Threats:** The use of email, text messages, or social media to convey threats of any kind is an unambiguous indicator of potential danger that requires immediate intervention.

Recognizing these signs is the first and most critical step. Once you have identified a potential concern, it is vital to know how to proceed with a thoughtful and effective response.

3.0 Step 2: RESPOND Effectively and Compassionately

Once you have recognized that a student may be in distress, your response is the bridge to getting them the help they need. The strategic goals of an effective response are threefold: to ensure the immediate safety of everyone involved, to de-escalate the situation if necessary, and to build enough trust with the student to facilitate a successful connection with appropriate campus resources. The following strategies will guide you in this delicate but crucial process.

3.1 Safety First

Your primary responsibility in any situation is to ensure safety. If a student's behavior presents an imminent danger to themselves, to you, or to others, your immediate action is not to counsel but to contact professional responders. Do not hesitate; call **WCSU Police at (203) 837-9300** or 911 immediately.

3.2 Be Proactive

If you notice that something seems off with a student, it is best to engage them early. Trust your intuition. Waiting for the problem to become more obvious can allow the situation to worsen. A simple, private inquiry like, "I've noticed you've missed a few classes lately, and I wanted to check in and see if everything is okay," can open the door for a student to share their struggles.

3.3 Stay Calm

When interacting with a distressed student, your own demeanor is critical. Take a few deep breaths to center yourself before you engage. Speak in a calm, clear voice and maintain a relaxed but attentive posture. A calm presence can help de-escalate a tense situation and make the student feel safe enough to communicate openly.

3.4 Ask Direct Questions

While it may feel uncomfortable, avoiding difficult topics is not helpful. If a student's words or behaviors concern you, it is important to ask direct questions. Inquiring clearly, "Are you thinking about suicide?" or "Are you thinking about hurting someone?" does not plant ideas but instead provides a critical opportunity for the student to be honest about their state of mind. This directness is essential for assessing the level of immediate risk.

3.5 Practice Active Listening

Give the student your undivided attention. Put away distractions, make eye contact, and listen without judgment. To ensure you understand and to show the student they are being heard, try restating or summarizing their key points. Phrases like, "It sounds like you're feeling completely overwhelmed by your coursework and family issues," can validate their experience and build the trust needed for the next step.

3.6 Seek Consultation

Remember, you are not expected to be a professional counselor or mental health expert. Your role is to be a supportive and responsible member of the WCSU community who can connect students with those experts. Consulting with the resources listed in this manual, such as the Student Care Team or Counseling Services, is not a sign of failure but a mark of an effective and responsible response.

A successful response creates an opening for the final, and most important, step in the process: referring the student to the specialized support they need.

4.0 Step 3: REFER to Appropriate Campus Resources

The referral is the vital step that connects a student in distress with the professional support systems designed to help them navigate their challenges. Making an effective referral means directing the student to the right resource based on the severity and nature of their situation. WCSU has established a clear triage framework to help you determine the most appropriate course of action.

4.1 The Triage Framework: Assessing Severity

Use the following table to assess the level of urgency and identify the required action. This framework helps distinguish between situations requiring immediate emergency response and those that can be addressed through our campus support teams.

Severity Level	Behavioral Indicators	Required Action
HIGH (RED)	The student's behavior is imminently dangerous to themselves or others. The student needs immediate assistance.	Call 911 or WCSU Police (203) 837-9300
MEDIUM (YELLOW)	The student shows clear signs of distress, but you are unsure of the seriousness. The interaction left you feeling uneasy and very concerned.	Refer for further assessment.
LOW (GREEN)	You are not concerned for the student's immediate safety, but they are having significant academic and/or personal issues and could use more support.	Refer to the Student Care Team .

For **MEDIUM (YELLOW)** situations, a referral for further assessment typically involves contacting the Student Care Team or Counseling Services to determine the next steps.

This framework provides a clear path for your immediate actions. To make the most effective referral, it is helpful to understand the specific roles of WCSU's coordinated support services.

5.0 WCSU's Coordinated Support Network: Who to Contact and Why

Western Connecticut State University has developed a multi-disciplinary network of services that work collaboratively to support student well-being and success. Understanding the specific function of each office is crucial. A precise referral not only connects a student to the right support faster but also prevents them from being re-traumatized by having to retell their story multiple times to different departments.

5.1 The Student Care Team

The Student Care Team is a multi-disciplinary leadership group composed of representatives from nearly every student service provider on campus. Its purpose is to foster essential information sharing and collaboration. The team monitors, assesses, and intervenes to remove barriers to student success and well-being, making it the central hub for students experiencing significant academic or personal issues that are not immediately life-threatening.

5.2 The Threat Assessment Team

The Threat Assessment Team is responsible for providing a coordinated and rapid response to students whose actions may be early warning signs of violent behavior or an intent to harm someone. Comprising representatives from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Counseling Services, and the WCSU Police, this team implements strategies to assist the student while mitigating risk and keeping the entire WCSU community safe.

5.3 Judicial Affairs

The Office of Judicial Affairs is responsible for enforcing the Student Code of Conduct. It manages disciplinary procedures designed to ensure the fair and impartial consideration of alleged violations. Referrals to this office are appropriate when a student's behavior violates university policy as outlined in the Student Handbook.

5.4 The Center for Empowerment and Education (CEE)

The CEE is a critical and **confidential** resource for any individual on or off campus who has experienced interpersonal violence, including dating abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking, or human trafficking. CEE staff are **not** mandated to report disclosures to the Title IX office or other campus departments, offering a safe space for support. However, they are mandated reporters in cases of child abuse/neglect or if there are threats of harm to self or others.

5.5 Title IX Coordinator

The Title IX Coordinator is responsible for coordinating the university's compliance with federal and state discrimination and sexual harassment laws. This office is the appropriate point of contact for formal reports and inquiries related to Title IX policies and procedures.

5.6 WCSU Police Department

The WCSU Police Department is a fully empowered law enforcement agency responsible for enforcing criminal statutes on university property. They work collaboratively with state prosecutors and the court system to ensure campus safety. They are the primary responders for any situation involving immediate threats, criminal activity, or emergency services.

5.7 AccessAbility Services

This office ensures that students with documented disabilities have equal access to all university programs and activities. Referrals are appropriate for students who may need academic accommodations, assistive technology, or other support services to navigate physical or learning challenges.

5.8 University Advisement Center

The Advisement Center is the primary resource for academic guidance, including course selection, major exploration, and tracking progress toward graduation. If a student's distress appears rooted in academic anxiety or uncertainty about their educational path, a referral here can provide clarity and support.

5.9 Housing and Residence Life

This department supports students living in on-campus residence halls. Referrals are appropriate for issues related to roommate conflicts, challenges with community living, or concerns about a student's behavior within their living environment. They are key partners in identifying students who may be struggling in their personal space.

5.10 Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

This office works to foster an inclusive and welcoming campus climate for all students. It is a vital resource for students who may be experiencing distress related to their identity, facing discrimination, or feeling marginalized. They provide support, advocacy, and educational programming for the entire community.

For situations that are urgent or life-threatening, the following guide provides all critical contacts in one place.

6.0 Emergency Protocols & Quick-Reference Guide

This section consolidates all critical contact information for easy access during an urgent or emergency situation. In moments of crisis, having this information readily available is paramount.

6.1 Immediate Threat Protocol

For any situation where a student's safety or the safety of others is at immediate risk, there is only one correct protocol:

If a student's conduct is clearly dangerous or threatening, including self-harm or harm to others, call 911 or the WCSU Police at (203) 837-9300.

6.2 Critical Contact Directory

For all other situations requiring urgent or specialized support, use the following directory.

Service / Hotline	Contact Number
WCSU Police (24/7)	(203) 837-9300
Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (24/7)	Call or text 988
CT Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Hotline (24/7)	(203) 731-5204
AccessAbility Services	(203) 837-8225
Counseling Services	(203) 837-8690
Health Services	(203) 837-8594
Housing and Residence Life	(203) 837-8531
Judicial Affairs	(203) 837-8770
Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	(203) 837-8444
Student Affairs	(203) 837-9700
University Advisement Center	(203) 837-8397

7.0 Conclusion: Fostering a Campus-Wide Culture of Care

The Red Folder Initiative is more than a set of protocols; it represents a shared commitment by every member of the Western Connecticut State University community to the well-being of our students. The health, safety, and success of our students are responsibilities we all hold, and this framework provides the tools to uphold that commitment effectively. By learning to **Recognize** the signs of distress, **Respond** with compassion and confidence, and **Refer** students to the proper resources, you play a vital and active role in weaving a stronger, more resilient safety net for our entire campus. Thank you for your dedication to fostering a true culture of care at WCSU.