

## **Viewpoint: The importance of managing stress for students and the community**

*By Michael Berndt, president of Dakota County Technical College & Inver Hills Community College*

As we approach the end of fall semester, many of our students at Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College are holding their breaths. They can see the end ahead, but they still have tests, research papers, practical skills demonstrations, and final projects. They have their heads down and noses to the grindstone.

The end of term, especially for students new to college, can be stressful. The positive stress of challenging ourselves, also called *eustress*, is important to students' physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. They learn coping strategies, hone their knowledge and skills, and discover how far they can extend their own capabilities. When added to the stresses of living, especially living in a pandemic, the stress can be overwhelming.

To support our students, colleges and universities have been increasing services, especially in the area of mental health. At Inver Hills, for example, we partner with North Star Therapy Animals to provide therapy dogs during finals week. This year, the visits will be virtual. Support services like these are more effective when aligned with the support of family and friends. If you know someone currently going to school, please take time to check in with them. My own kids are in college, and I know how important it is for them to have someone listen to their frustrations, even if working through those frustrations is part of their learning process.

I also know that we need to manage our own stress. Like workers in many service industries, our faculty and staff are trying to provide higher levels of support through virtual platforms or by following strict on-campus health protocols. The conditions are wearing. Just as we ask our college students to develop good habits and make choices each day that advance them to their long-term goals, we, as community members, need to set the example. For me, that means staying vigilant about wearing a mask, washing my hands regularly, and maintaining social distancing—every day. It also means taking a disciplined approach to my own self-care. Lately, I've been tweeting out self-care tips because it pushes me to do something around self-care each day.

Even as students seek to end the fall terms, we have been encouraging them to continue their programs of study. When they emerge from the pandemic, we want them ready for what's next in their lives—whether going into the workforce or continuing their educations. You may know students who struggled this term, who stepped out or stopped out. Many students come to local community and technical colleges to get back on track, and we are adept at helping those students when they are ready. We also have programs like MN Reconnect that provide academic and financial support to adults who, at any point in their lives, want to return to complete their degree.

The pandemic reminds us that life doesn't play out as we might expect, but we have some agency in how we manage the stress of each day and in how we craft our own life stories.