The Overlooked Foundation

A training programme for faculty and student-facing staff on understanding student distress at its root

The problem

Institutions have invested seriously in student mental health: counselling services, peer support, wellbeing initiatives, faculty training. The investment is real and so is the care behind it. Student distress has not receded in response.

Most programmes designed to help teaching staff support students share the assumption that what staff need is more tools: better listening techniques, clearer referral protocols, frameworks for difficult conversations. None of these are bad. But they are seeds dropped on unprepared ground. Someone who does not yet understand what they are looking at when a student shuts down, lashes out, or disappears into over-performance will reach for those tools from the same place they always have, and wonder again why nothing quite changes.

The premise

What is missing is not technique. It is understanding — specifically, of what is happening underneath a student's visible behaviour: what drives it, what it protects, where it comes from. When a teacher develops that quality of sight, their response changes without effort, because you cannot unsee what you have genuinely understood. The shift is immediate, it is durable, and students feel it.

This requires no therapeutic role and no clinical training. It changes how staff see, and changed sight changes everything downstream: the quality of attention brought to a struggling student, the patience available in a hard moment, the capacity to stay present without either rescuing or withdrawing.

Structure

Five sessions of three hours, delivered across a term. Groups of 12–20. Content is introduced progressively, with time between sessions for participants to notice how it shows up in their own practice.

Each session moves between conceptual grounding, reflection on situations participants recognise from their own work, and attention to their own responses, because the instrument of accompaniment is the person themselves. Participants also practise concrete regulation techniques in the room. The pace is deliberate. Participation in experiential elements is always voluntary.

Session	Focus
1. What runs the show	Participants encounter their own physiological responses before concepts are introduced. From there, a map: how the autonomic nervous system operates beneath awareness, the states it moves between, and what each makes possible or impossible for learning and attention. Why a student who appears disengaged or defiant is occupying a state rather than making a choice.
2. The signal and the source	How the nervous system is shaped by early experience, specifically by the tension between the need for connection and the need to stay true to one's own experience. What appears years later as avoidance, defiance, withdrawal or compulsive over-performance is the residue of adaptations that were once necessary. Understanding this requires knowing nothing about a particular student's history. It changes how staff read what is in front of them.

Session	Focus
3. Tending your own ground	What emotions are and what they are for: not obstacles to clear thinking but carriers of information reasoning cannot reach on its own. Participants learn to distinguish what they feel from what they perceive, and identify the regulation strategies they already use. Evidence-based somatic practices are introduced and experienced directly.
4. Presence as the intervention	What it actually means to be present with someone who is struggling. A particular quality of listening that trusts the student's own capacity to find their way — demanding rather than passive, and dependent on the teacher's own state. The session closes with a case showing what happens when a teacher gets out of the way and offers the one thing a struggling student most needs: to be genuinely seen.
5. Integration and the edge of your role	Participants return experientially to each preceding session and surface what they want to carry forward. The second half addresses the hardest terrain the teaching role faces: a student in acute distress. A real case is worked from three angles: what the student may be experiencing, what the situation stirs in the teacher, and where the limits of the role lie.

What participants leave with

- A working understanding of why students behave as they do under strain, usable in the next difficult conversation rather than in principle.
- The ability to notice what is happening in a student before moving to fix it: **attention before regulation**.
- Regulation practices for their own state, practised in the room rather than described.
- A clearer sense of where the teaching role ends, and what to do at that edge.

What it asks of the institution

- Fifteen hours of participant time across a term, in five blocks.
- A room that allows for movement and small-group work.
- A named contact who understands the specific pressures this cohort is under. The programme is adapted to those; it is not delivered from a template.

A complete offer, and a starting point

The programme is self-contained and directly applicable from the first session, with no prior training required. It is also a foundation. The territory it opens — understanding behaviour under stress, developing regulated presence, accompanying others with clarity — goes considerably deeper, and further levels are available for institutions that want to continue.

About the facilitator

Maria Galli, PhD, has spent two decades on a single question: what is actually driving people when they cannot see what is driving them.

She came at it first as an experimentalist. Her research on conditioning and nonconscious associative learning — how associations formed outside awareness shape what people perceive, judge and do — appeared in the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, where her 2011 lead article received the C.W. Park Award, given to the best paper published in the journal that year. Two decades inside those literatures gave her a rigorous understanding of the mechanisms underlying how people respond, react and relate.

It also showed her where the laboratory stops. Knowing why a pattern forms does not tell you how one shifts. She went on to complete the 350-hour Compassionate Inquiry® Professional Online Training

developed by Dr Gabor Maté and Sat Dharam Kaur, and ten weeks of specialist training in recognising and responding to acute emotional distress.

She is Academic Collaborator in the Marketing Department at Esade Business and Law School (Universitat Ramon Llull), where she teaches **The Action Gap**, an undergraduate elective on why students who know exactly what to do still do not do it. Her current research is on psychological safety in the classroom: what makes a student willing to speak when they only half understand something, and to keep going after an early setback. That work, with Raquel H. Ribeiro, is published in *Research in Learning Technology* (open access).

What she brings is the combination: the experimental literature on what operates beneath awareness, and a practised way of working with it in the room.

Next step

A twenty-minute conversation about your context and what your staff are actually facing.

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Notes on sources

Session 1 draws on Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory, a well-known and much-debated account of autonomic states; it is used here as a working map, not as settled science.

Session 3 introduces somatic regulation practices whose evidence bases differ. Slow-breathing and paced-respiration techniques have the most consistent experimental support for reducing physiological arousal. Others rest more on clinical experience. Participants are told which is which.

On the negativity bias referenced in Sessions 1 and 2: Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs (2001), Bad is stronger than good, *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323–370.

On psychological safety. The conditions under which a student will speak up when they only half understand something, and keep going after a poor result, are the subject of my own current research. Ribeiro, R. H., & Galli, M. (2026). Feedback, engagement, and integrative learning: a trace-based case study in a synchronous course. *Research in Learning Technology*, vol. 34 (3987), open access. It is a descriptive study of a single cohort and it does not test this programme. It maps what those conditions looked like in a single classroom.