Preserving Sound Mental Health During College:

Why Colleges Should Invest More in Mental Health Services

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Abstract

Mental health issues have been increasing in colleges, universities, and other institutions of learning for years now. Studies have shown a direct correlation between student mental health and academic success, with the latter contributing to institutional success. Because mental health issues disproportionately affect young adults compared to other groups, this article highlights the need for ample on-campus resources to address the increasing prevalence of these issues. More effort and funding to increase student awareness and improve the utilization of available services will provide positive outcomes for both students and schools. This paper addresses common barriers to achieving these goals and offers suggestions for implementation and improvement.

Keywords: college mental health, student mental health, mental illness, retention

Why Colleges Should Invest More in Mental Health Services

College is usually an exciting milestone in a young adult's life. Years of planning and preparation come to fruition as students take their first step onto campus. However, what is meant to be a springboard for students into a brighter future, may inadvertently dim their prospects by omission. While pressure is a natural result of increased responsibility, the prolonged and sometimes excessive stressors of college may take a mental toll. Unfortunately, the collective mental health of college students has been degrading for years. It is estimated that at least one-fifth of all college students deal with a mental health issue at some point during enrollment. The data also indicate that students who meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem have increased by nearly 50% in just over the last ten years. Not only that, but a Healthy Minds survey found that almost 15 percent of college students said they have seriously considered suicide, the highest rate in the survey's history (The Healthy Minds Study, 2023). Other studies corroborate data that mental illness in college students is increasing, and this was the case even before the pandemic made things worse. Without adequate on-campus resources to address these growing mental health issues, students will suffer, and they won't be the only ones.

Student experiences and performance shape institutional reputation; both are likely to be poor if the student's mental health is poor. This is because physical, social, and intellectual health are inextricably intertwined with mental health. A recent article published in the American Journal of Health Studies showed their "findings indicate the tendency for students with poorer mental health to perform worse in school, both in a given semester and over time" (Hebert et. al, 2020). There are also proven connections between mental health and college retention rates. Not only are college students with poor mental health likely to perform worse academically, but they are also more likely to drop out entirely (Lipson et. al., 2019). It has become clear that colleges

that do not invest in their students' mental health, do not invest in their institutional health. Colleges must do more to normalize the conversation around mental health, make students aware of on-campus mental health services, and adapt services to meet demand and communication needs.

Normalizing the conversation around mental health

Some might argue that mental health resources are readily available in the public sphere and therefore unnecessary on campus. They might ask why any college should bear financial responsibility for the mental well-being of their students. Ironically, this very argument demonstrates a normalization gap in the conversation around mental health. By suggesting a limit to the scope of influence, it is implied there is a one-size-fits-all solution. However, just as many variables contribute to the onset or continuance of mental illness, many variables contribute to the improvement and maintenance of mental well-being. Not all students have an awareness of what mental health issues look like. Many students have adopted public stigma about mental illness, even if they aren't conscious of it. Other students may have self-stigma related to seeking help for mental illness. In fact, certain gender and ethnic groups within the general at-risk college population are even more likely to carry stigmas than their peers, which hinder getting help (Davis et. al., 2023). There are also plenty of students who do not have healthy family support or robust social support systems. By promoting mental health awareness and providing on-campus resources, colleges add another layer to the overlapping education and protection society is striving to give those who have or who could develop mental illness.

So how is a college to begin the process of reducing stigma and normalizing the conversation around mental health? A recently published article highlights measures the

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus took which increased utilization of mental health services by more than 100% over six years. Based on research that indicated face-to-face contact is most effective in reducing stigma, Davis et.al. (2023) wrote that they facilitated several anti-stigma panels composed of students who shared their experiences with mental health issues:

> These panels model a campus culture where mental health is and should be openly discussed at all levels. We believe that providing avenues for storytelling such as these speak to the universality of emotional and mental health struggles. All panelists have acknowledged that seeking help, whether through therapy, medications, work mentors, or friends and family, has been instrumental to their well-being – a message these panels promote. (p. 656)

The panels received widespread positive feedback. If utilizing the student body for mental health outreach produces such positive effects, imagine how those effects might be multiplied if campuses involved faculty and staff. Faculty who model candor and confidence by sharing their mental health experiences, in appropriate ways and settings, serve to encourage struggling students. Indeed, Coleman (2022) suggests defining an open culture in every class:

> "The syllabus is the first opportunity instructors have to demonstrate their openness and commitment to students' mental health. Although many universities now require instructors to include language on matters of accessibility, disability, and related topics, instructors should seriously consider adding additional language on mental health" (p. 172).

The syllabus is also optimal for providing contact information for the mental health resources on campus. Normalizing the conversation around mental health can be done in these and many other

ways, but equally important is ensuring students know where on campus they can go if they need help.

Promoting awareness of mental health services

While there are many barriers to the utilization of on-campus mental health services, lack of awareness should not be one of them. However, a survey commissioned by UnitedHealthcare found that of a group of 506 college students, over 23% stated they had no idea where to find mental health resources on campus (Canady, 2023). Just as public outreach can normalize the conversation around mental health, it can and should be used to advertise the services available to students on campus. Davis et. al. (2023) explain that they begin this process by presenting information at every student orientation that covers services, cost, and confidentiality. Then they sponsor workshops, schedule speeches, coordinate seminars, and host informational booths regularly each year so that they are "known to [their] students from beginning to end of their training by continually presenting [their] services on campus and offering talks/workshops to various programs at various levels of training" (p. 657). In addition, a college might run awareness campaigns using social media, email, text messaging, or direct mail. Harris et. al (2022) recommend that "communication with students should occur through a wide variety of channels to ensure as many individuals as possible receive the message from one of their preferred methods of communication."

Also important to consider is the frequency and style of such messaging. Regular advertising and consistent branding are more likely to produce memorable results. Creating a mental health clinic style guide that adheres to campus guidelines is a way to ensure visual consistency associated with mental health resources that will become easily identifiable. Another

consideration for colleges is to strive to make family members and friends of enrolled students aware of existing resources. Johnson et.al. (2023) found that most students stated they would first approach family and friends if they were having mental health issues:

> Consequently, it is incumbent upon college counselors, MH [mental health] providers, and college administrators to place reliable information and resources in the hands of friends and family members. Counseling programs will need to make structural, and policy changes to reach these audiences and not just focus on reaching those who personally and directly are in in MH distress (p. 82).

Consistently promoting awareness of mental health resources will remove a critical barrier to students seeking help. However, ensuring students benefit from those resources is just as vital.

Adapting services to meet student needs

Imagine a student finally gaining the courage to get help for their mental health, only to discover their campus clinic has no appointments for the next week. Unfortunately, for too many students, scenarios like this are a reality. According to a report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, students had to wait 5-7 days on average during the 2022-2023 academic year just for an initial clinical evaluation (CCMH, 2023, pg. 16). The average wait time for first therapy appointments for students in colleges belonging to the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors was even longer, at 9.2 days (AUCCCD, 2023, pg. 9). In a mental health crisis, the clock is ticking. Early intervention equates to easier recovery; the sooner a student can get help, the better. A study of six student panels about mental health accessibility in college found that all panels reported there were delays in accessing service and that “capacity limitations result in a ‘reactive not proactive’ service approach that requires individuals to

declare, identify, and navigate support during difficult times, leaving many unidentified and unsupported" (Priestley, et. al., 2021, p. 199). These panels were also unanimous in stating that restrictive operating hours also proved a barrier to utilization:

> Panels noted that term-time office-hour availability was ill-aligned to the needs of the student population '*because it's usually later in the evening that students actually require the help, not necessarily during the day'*. Normal working hours were perceived to be especially inaccessible for particular student courses and demographics, namely students with caring responsibilities, students on placement, and postgraduate students outside term-time (Priestley, et. al., 2021, p. 200).

Having online communication methods for both contact and treatment is another area colleges should evaluate. A mental health clinic might consider creating its own, easily navigable website. If that is not an option, they might ensure clinic information and a scheduling link is placed prominently on the campus website. In addition to utilizing the Internet to make it easier for students to make initial contact, the Internet can be a valuable tool for assisting students with treatment. Young adults already turn to various internet websites to seek information about mental health or to engage in online question-and-answer forums. Farrer et. al. (2020) noted that when students were asked if they would use a college-specific online program for well-being if provided, 47% of those surveyed said they would:

> The most frequently reported barriers to help seeking by university students include lack of time, high treatment costs, and concerns about confidentiality and stigma . . .Online mental health interventions are easily accessible, can be utilized in private, are cost-effective, and typically require less time than face-to-face appointments. Hence, they may be highly suited to the university student population (p. 334)

Data from the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus (CU Anschutz) corroborates this assessment. It was found that academic schedules, student clubs, travel rotations, and family or other responsibilities meant some students couldn't commit to regular appointments for treatment, so CU Anschutz implemented flexibility by offering tailored group services for some of the most common types of diagnoses, walk-in and evening appointments, and telehealth appointments (Davis et. al., 2023, p. 657).

Adapting services to meet student needs may be the biggest challenge colleges face. Each campus is unique in its faculty, student body, resources, and constraints, therefore no one solution will apply to every institution. The most important thing to keep in mind is that positive change, however incremental, is still important; no effort to improve mental health awareness or service accessibility for students is wasted.

Unfortunately, mental health issues in college students are only increasing. Though many colleges already offer on-campus mental health services, if they do not invest enough in awareness, those services may be underutilized. Conversely, students may encounter extended wait times and communication challenges when the capacity or content of services fails to meet demand. When colleges prioritize investing in student mental health, they will also see returns in their institutional health. Students with good mental health are less likely to drop out of college and more likely to perform well in classes and on tests. Colleges should consider better advertising of existing resources, expanding, or improving those resources, and adjusting them to meet ever-changing student needs. Doing so will create a positive reinforcing loop that will set the foundation for the enduring success of both students and colleges.

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