Addressing Campus Mental and Behavioral Health

The mental health of college students was already an area of concern before COVID-19, particularly as three-fourths of all lifetime mental illnesses develop by age 24. The pandemic has exacerbated these trends, evidenced in increases in depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder. As lawmakers seek to enact policies to address this critical issue, evidence-based solutions are essential to support students’ overall well-being as they pursue higher education. Increased federal funding, targeted specifically for college mental health—including to develop innovative practices on prevention and response and investing in alternative methods of service delivery, such as telehealth—would be a significant step Congress could take.

Evidence of mental and behavioral health challenges on college campuses continues to grow

Loneliness and social isolation, as well as the loss of family members, safe living environments, and support networks resulting from the pandemic, have caused large majorities of college students to experience emotional distress or anxiety. Furthermore, considerable numbers of college students and their families have undergone significant financial distress. Prospective graduates are facing a weakened economy and a depleted job market, while also carrying large levels of student loan debt. Future economic insecurity resulting from the COVID-19 is among their top concerns, further contributing to stress, anxiety, and depression. The highest rates of negative mental health impacts are being seen most among vulnerable students, including students of color and LGBTQ+ students.

Campus counseling centers, which even prior to COVID-19 were the only access point to mental health care for many college students, are seeing significant increases in demand for services, without a corresponding increase in resources, whether through funding, training, or staff. This care is, in part, provided by psychology interns and trainees completing their education, under the supervision of counseling center staff. One of the impacts of the pandemic on college campuses, particularly earlier in the crisis, was either the limiting or outright canceling of these internships, which hamstrung the ability of counseling centers to stay operational and continue training future practitioners. Furthermore, even before COVID-19, the growing demand for services has also placed a significant burden on campus mental health providers, which impacted their own well-being.

A comprehensive preventive approach, which makes mental health and wellness the responsibility of the entire campus community, is necessary. This includes more training for faculty to recognize and address signs of potential mental health concerns. Such holistic efforts can help break down silos between campus entities and improve overall response to both isolated incidents, as well as recognize and monitor concerning behaviors, which may otherwise go unnoticed.

Students must have a clear understanding of both their own and the university’s role in addressing campus mental health needs. It is critical to remain cognizant of the unique needs of colleges students when it comes to their mental health, especially considering the diversity in age, race, and socioeconomic status. International and graduate students are also key populations experiencing mental health concerns, with challenges being particularly prevalent among doctoral candidates. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing campus mental health would be ineffective. Intervention that are targeted, culturally competent, trauma-informed, and remain mindful of the distinctive needs of different types of students have been found to be more effective in reducing stigma and improving mental and behavioral health care.
APA Recommendations

Strengthen Campus Counseling Centers and Services

Provide federal funding for more resources to develop and implement innovative improvements to counseling centers, including by:

• Hiring and training additional staff, including doctoral psychology interns completing practicum work.
• Facilitating community partnerships.
• Investing in telehealth platforms for counseling services.
• Implementing evidence-based practices, such as screenings and assessments; culturally competent care; trauma-informed practices; post-vention planning; and prevention.
• Promoting practices for self-care among campus mental health providers.

Institute Policies that Promote Mental and Behavioral Health on Campus

Engage students in the evaluation and implementation of campus mental health services.

• Conduct periodic climate surveys for comprehensive needs assessments and evaluation of services.

• Implement a statement of policy to increase awareness of campus mental and behavioral health services, which outlines all individual and campus-wide procedures and responsibilities, clearly articulates the institution’s commitment to student mental and behavioral health, and provides clear indication of students’ privacy rights and protections.

Foster a campus culture that promotes health and wellness.

• Integrate mental health and wellness into all aspects of campus environments.
• Provide resilience training for non-mental health professionals including administrators, faculty, and students.
• Provide increased training and resources for faculty on recognizing signs of mental health concerns and substance use disorders and providing appropriate assistance.
• Establish and support student peer support programs.
• Maintain the ability of students with disabilities to request reasonable accommodations.
• Institute mandatory and voluntary leave of absence policies that do penalize the student.

Integrate counseling services and supports into campus crisis preparation and response.

Support Current or Proposed Federal Programs on Campus Mental Health

Reauthorize and increase funding for programs authorized by the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act.

• Including by better targeting the funding towards under-resourced institutions, such as HBCU's, MSI's, and TCU's.

Pass legislation to increase campus-based mental health services.

• Higher Education Mental Health Act. Would establish a national commission to study mental health concerns of colleges students and release a report on current services provided by institutions of higher education.

• Enhancing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Through Campus Planning Act. Would require coordination between the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to encourage institutions of higher education to address student mental health by creating plans for preventing suicide and promoting positive mental health.
References


