

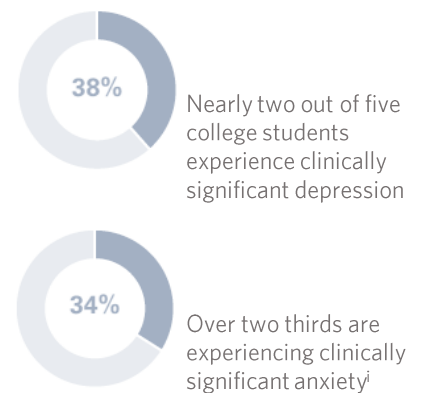


Campus Mental Health

College can be a formative time, shaping young people's futures through education, experiences, and relationships. However, for many students, it can be particularly challenging as they navigate a variety of unique circumstances and pressures. Despite recent data showing a decline in mental health concerns among college students for the first time in 15 years, rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and serious thoughts of suicide remain higher than they were a decade ago.ⁱ Many students arrive on campuses with existing mental health concerns, a trend especially pronounced among those who began college during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{ii, iii}

Mental Health Challenges Among College Students

Factors contributing to student mental health challenges include academics, career prospects, finances, relationships, social media and technology, violence, harassment, discrimination, needs insecurity, political stress, and climate anxiety. Data show increased rates of mental health concerns, such as trauma, suicidality, stress, anxiety, and depression, which adversely impact development and academics.^{iv, v} Over half of college students who have considered stopping out cite stress as the reason, while nearly two-thirds of those who have never enrolled in college report stress being a deterrent.^{vi}



Students of color and LGBTQ+ students who have experienced discrimination have more severe mental health symptoms than their peers who have not been subject to the same.^{vii, viii, ix} Other marginalized students, including those living in underserved and rural areas and those from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, also exhibit higher levels of mental health conditions.^x Furthermore, increasing populations of non-traditional students—such as those who are older, first-generation, veterans, parenting or caregiving, international, or those with disabilities—are attending college, and they, too, have unique mental health needs and challenges.

Colleges are Expanding Mental Health Efforts, but Need More Support

College presidents are increasingly investing in mental health care, yet many believe their institutions still need to improve in addressing student mental health needs.^{xi} Majorities of college students, including those with a mental health condition, are not receiving any type of care.^{xii} Resource and funding shortages, especially at historically underfunded institutions like Minority-Serving Institutions and community colleges, hinder access to mental health care.^{xiii} Such demand, without a requisite increase in resources, contributes to burnout among campus providers, leading to hiring challenges and increased turnover rates.^{xiv}

Many institutions of higher education are expanding mental health and wellness efforts beyond campus counseling centers, viewing it as a campus-wide priority and embedding it in other areas of campus life. A recent survey found that 76 percent of faculty view supporting students' mental health as a job expectation, which aligns with students' own beliefs about faculty responsibility to help students struggling with their mental health.^{xv, xvi} Many students also look to advisers, administrators, residential life staff, and peers for support. While most faculty members report having interacted with students about mental health in the last year, less than 30 percent have received evidence-based training from their institutions on how to have such discussions, and only half feel equipped to recognize a student in emotional distress and provide the knowledge and resources to help them appropriately.^{xvii, xviii} Many faculty also face their own mental health challenges, and for some, the toll of supporting students' mental health impacts their own.^{xix}

Policy Recommendations

Support and Expand Current Programs

Increase funding for the Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Campus Suicide Prevention Grant Program. As the only federal program specifically dedicated to addressing college mental health and suicide prevention, robust funding must be provided to GLS on an annual basis. Additionally, the institutional matching requirement should be permanently waived for Minority-Serving Institutions and community colleges.

Increase funding for the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program. Funded through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, this program provides grants to eligible institutions of higher education to support initiatives addressing students' basic needs, including mental health.

Strengthen Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to expand healthcare coverage for eligible college students. To increase access for college students: (1) Increase the Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP) to meet the growing need for health services, including for eligible college students; (2) Incentivize the states that have yet to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to do so; and (3) Provide flexibility in state residency requirements for Medicaid and CHIP.

Guarantee protections for students on university health insurance plans. Students enrolled in their institution's health insurance plan must receive the same federal consumer protections created by the ACA as enrollees of other health insurance plans.

Establish New Programs and Funding Streams

Establish a permanent college campus-based mental health service program and provide it with robust funding. This program would provide institutions of higher education with the resources needed to:

- Enhance campus counseling centers by hiring, training, and retaining additional staff, and developing strategic partnerships with off-campus mental health and substance use care providers.
- Increase campus-wide mental health awareness through prevention efforts, annual wellness surveys, and resilience and crisis preparation plans that account for natural/climate disasters and severe weather events.
- Provide faculty training on recognizing mental health concerns among students and delivering appropriate support and intervention.
- Improve peer support programs with training and supervision from qualified mental health and/or substance use professionals.
- Invest in telehealth resources and tools.
- Connect students with financial supports and public benefits to reduce mental health challenges related to financial and basic needs insecurity.
- Invest in additional suicide prevention and postvention strategies.
- Support the mental health needs of faculty.
- Embed trauma-informed practices throughout campus activities, including trauma-informed pedagogy.

Improve coordination between the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to better align federal strategies, programs, and initiatives supporting college student mental health. In addition:

- Establish a center of excellence addressing mental health and substance use concerns in higher education.
- Establish an advisory commission on serving and supporting student mental health and substance use needs in higher education.

Establish federal policies that require institutions of higher education to adopt withdrawal policies for students experiencing mental health conditions. Such policies would allow a student to withdraw under extenuating circumstances related to their mental health without incurring costs associated with the cost of higher education such as tuition and fees.

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