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Melissa Wood

Hampden-Sydney College, mwood@hsc.edu

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# Breaking Point: An Exploration of the Mental Health Crisis on Campus

Melissa Wood

## Abstract

In the past several decades, the number of college students who experience mental health concerns has increased astronomically. During that time, acts of campus violence have increased as well. Unfortunately, many colleges have been unable to effectively meet the needs of students with mental disorders. This article explores the challenges surrounding the mental health and wellness of college students. It also analyzes the impact of such challenges on students and the institution. Additionally, this paper examines best practices that colleges may implement to assist students in distress and discusses implications for higher education leaders.

## Introduction

*“The staggering increase in the number of college students who are afflicted with mental disorders is reflected in the statistics of college counseling centers nationwide...the mental health problems which they present are more serious and complex... Colleges must be equipped to confront and deal with this new normal.”*

Tragic acts of violence that have taken place on college campuses nationwide in recent years have thrust the area of student mental health to the forefront of the country’s national agenda. According to Paullin and Vogelsong (2022), the mass shooting at the University of Virginia (UVA), in which three students were killed and two more injured by a fellow student in 2022, has led to renewed interest in legislation that is focused on more robust student mental health resources. In addition to the UVA student victims, two campus police officers were gunned down at Bridgewater College earlier in 2022 (Paullin & Vogelsong, 2022). Furthermore, several violent incidents on community college campuses have brought this problem closer to home and have lent urgency to the student mental health crisis. According to Wilson (2018), a student at Umpqua Community College in Oregon murdered a professor and eight students in 2015. Additionally, in 2013, a student at New River Community College, located in southwest Virginia near Virginia Tech, opened fire, shooting two women on campus (Winter, 2013). Similar events continue to plague institutions of higher education across the nation. Mental health practitioners in the collegiate environment have been concerned for some time about the increase in student mental health needs (Abrams, 2020; Biancolli, 2021). These tragic events only served to bring college student mental health concerns to the greater public’s attention.

Violent events that have occurred in recent years on college campuses have led to increased awareness of the need for effective, accessible mental health services at colleges and universities. In addition, increasing numbers of students are seeking assistance from college counseling centers. According to LeViness et al. (2020), “...the vast majority of counseling centers (87 percent) have seen a 30 to 40 percent

increase in [clinical] demand for services over the last decade” (as cited in the American Council on Education, 2023, p. 4).

Unfortunately, many college campuses are not equipped to offer adequate services to students with mental health issues. According to Flannery (2023), many college students, particularly those from underrepresented and rural communities, do not get the treatment and services that they need. Barriers to service include lack of resources, long waiting lists, stigmatization, and counselor burnout (Flannery, 2023).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The alarming rise in mental health issues and the identification of such concerns among college students present many challenges to student services practitioners. According to Lipson et al. (2019), the national treatment rate of college students on campus increased from less than 20% in 2007 to approximately 34% in 2017. In addition, the percentage of college students with lifetime mental health diagnoses soared from 22% to 36%. Moreover, rates of depression and suicidal ideation also increased (Lipson et al., 2019). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2021, p. 5), “... depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors [are] the most common mental disorders among college students.”

With the influx of students seeking assistance, college counseling centers are taxed with providing more services, often with dwindling resources. In many cases, these resources include limited mental health staff. According to Abdu-Glass, Schlozman, and Beresin (2017), there is one mental health counselor for every 1,000 to 2,000 students at small and moderately-sized colleges and, at large universities, there is one certified professional for every 2,000 to 3,000 students (as cited in Adebayo, 2022). However, the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS), advises that the optimal ratio should be one counselor for every 1,000 to 1,500 student clients (2024).

The lack of adequate mental health services on college campuses has led to scores of students not receiving much needed assistance or referrals. These challenges can affect many areas of the college campus, including quality of life for students and personnel, academic performance, and campus safety. Adequate mental health services should be a top priority for college communities. Many institutions have committed to a “culture of care” in their strategic plans, including the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). The VCCS has identified the provision of a culture of care as a supporting goal in its plan, Opportunity 2027 (Virginia Community College System, 2021). Institutions who have indicated a commitment to a culture of care should clearly identify student mental health as a crucial component of its plan and focus heavily on the wellness needs of a diverse student population.

## Literature Review

The increased need for mental health services on college campuses in recent years has been staggering. The changing demographics of college students have led to the need for varying, more comprehensive mental health resources. Pressures facing students on today's campuses include increasing academic demands, personal finance anxiety, loneliness, new autonomy, relationship challenges, gender issues, and continuous social stimulation (The Jed Foundation, n.d.-b). As a result, there has been a staggering increase in the number of college students who are afflicted with mental disorders. According to the Healthy Minds Study 2021-2022 Data Report (2022), 60% of college students indicated that they had experienced at least one mental health challenge in 2021 (as cited in American Psychiatric Association, 2023). The percentage of students in this category has increased by approximately 50% since 2013 (Lipson et al., 2022). In addition to the increase in the number of students presenting with psychological issues, the types of mental health problems with which they present are more serious and complex (Morris et al., 2021).

According to the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (2022), depression and anxiety are the top two mental health diagnoses facing college students. The assessment also found that almost 25% of students reported experiencing both disorders. In addition, approximately 30% of students had a positive suicidal screening on the Suicide Behavior Questionnaire-Revised (SBQR). Moreover, 30% of students indicated that they had experienced high levels of stress in the previous 30 days (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2022). These concerning statistics show that many of today's college students require immediate intervention.

A major challenge that college counseling centers must confront is that of risk management in the area of mental health services. According to Castano and Romano (2023), colleges can mitigate their risk by accurately defining their scope of mental health care and evaluating available programs and resources. Components that should be reviewed include institutional policies, education and prevention programs, early intervention strategies, actual counseling services, and data collection. In addition, colleges need strong internal communications that support not only the student, but also the institution (Castano & Romano, 2023). As challenges surrounding mental health services persist, colleges continue to have trouble meeting them. Mental health counseling centers continue to suffer from funding concerns, staffing shortages, and longer wait-times due to an increase in students who have critical needs (Mantra Health, 2021; Wagner et al., 2023).

Another issue in the field of college students and mental health is the lack of appropriate mental health follow-up on college campuses. According to Roy and Braider (2016), there tends to be limited communication between the college and the hospital when a student has been admitted to a psychiatric facility. As a result, students who already have had to deal with a complicated clinical situation may find

themselves struggling to navigate their academic status, enrollment standing, and possible re-entry to the college. The authors suggest that colleges should collaborate with hospitals and establish protocols that focus on best practices that will help students and prevent them "...from falling through the cracks" (Roy & Braider, 2016).

### **Review of Best Practices**

According to Harris et al. (2022), colleges must prioritize mental wellness and ensure that resources and services are not only available but also utilized. Institutions should be committed to removing barriers to seeking help, investing in awareness campaigns, collaborating with community partners, and increasing awareness of available support services on campus. The authors stressed the importance of multiple methods of communication to students regarding mental health. These methods could include college-wide emails and use of all relevant social media platforms. In addition, employees and students, including faculty, advisors, coaches, resident assistants, and student leaders all can help to communicate the institution's commitment to addressing mental health concerns and provide valuable information regarding programs that may be available. Increased communication regarding mental health involving various college offices and across multiple platforms helps to normalize the topic and leads to more students seeking help for themselves and others (Harris et al., 2022).

In addition to campus-wide communication, mental health training should be integrated not only into Student Life, but also into Academic Affairs. It also should be a part of required annual training for employees. Additionally, these trainings could be integrated into required coursework for students. For example, they could be incorporated into freshman college success courses and student orientation seminars. Training also could be built into various academic curricula (Harris et al., 2022).

College-wide awareness and prevention programs should involve college offices, in addition to the counseling center. These departments may include Student Life, Academic Advising, Student Affairs, Student Health, and various academic areas. In addition, the implementation of such programs should include both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. The Academic Affairs division should partner with Student Affairs and also take advantage of opportunities to include mental health topics in the curriculum (Harris et al., 2022).

In addition to campus-wide collaboration, colleges should develop relationships with community partners, legislators, and outside mental health professionals. These types of partnerships are crucial to a successful and comprehensive campus mental health program. Student mental wellness also should be included in a college's strategic plan. Some institutions have started to include these initiatives in their plans. The University of North Carolina System has listed the improvement of student mental health as a key

initiative in its “Higher Expectations” plan for 2022-27. The plan focuses on helping students to navigate their own mental health concerns, reducing stigma, and training administrators, faculty, staff, and students to recognize the signs of a mental health crisis (The University of North Carolina System, 2024).

Other institutions have chosen to develop specific plans solely devoted to student mental health and wellness. In 2023, Dartmouth College released a mental health and well-being strategic plan called “Commitment to Care.” The goals of this plan include focusing on well-being, equipping students to navigate both the successes and failures of college life, and supporting individuals who are struggling with a mental illness (Doyle-Burr, 2023). Inclusion of mental wellness in a college’s strategic plan or the development of a specialized plan should lead to regular administrative reviews and allow the institution to adapt its approach based on changes in student mental health trends and the unique needs of a diverse student population.

Some colleges and universities have established strong programs to fight the nation’s higher education mental health crisis by working with national organizations. Many have partnered with The Jed Foundation to develop and implement comprehensive programs designed to prevent suicide and protect the mental health of students. This approach utilizes customized supports to impact current campus prevention efforts (The Jed Foundation, 2020). There are more than 200 Jed Campuses nationwide (The Jed Foundation, n.d.-a). Another popular campus program is Active Minds. This organization promotes mental health education, awareness, research and advocacy for young people, ages 14-25. Active Minds has more than 600 chapters at high school and college campuses nationwide. There are 23 chapters in the Commonwealth of Virginia, one of which is at a VCCS member institution, Germanna Community College (Active Minds, 2024).

Community collaboration also is a key component of a successful college mental health program. In 2009, Northwell Health formed the Behavioral Health College Partnership (BHCP) in response to increasing numbers of college students from area campuses who were being diagnosed with psychiatric conditions. The BHCP collaborates with college counseling centers to address students’ mental health diagnoses. The program has been instrumental in helping students who have had psychiatric evaluations. In addition, the program assists colleges with emergency evaluations and provides inpatient and outpatient services that are tailored specifically to college students (Roy & Braider, 2016). This collaboration has led to less disruption academically for students. To date, the BHCP works with 93 colleges and universities in New York state (Northwell Health, 2024).

In addition to collaborating with community partners, some colleges have begun to equip their faculty members with the tools necessary to identify students who may be in crisis. According to Abrams (2022), approximately 900 University of North Carolina faculty and staff members have been trained in Mental Health First Aid. This program provides individuals with the skills to identify and support those who

are struggling with mental health concerns or substance use disorders. In addition, Pennsylvania State University has implemented the Red Folder Campaign, a program that teaches faculty how to recognize and respond to students in crisis (Abrams, 2022). The Penn State campaign also provides faculty with a resource list that they may use to refer a student in distress to the most appropriate campus office (Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine, 2024). Not only is it imperative that resources are readily available, but also that faculty and staff are fully aware of them.

There are several additional programs that colleges may implement as they address the student mental health crisis. These options include the development of peer support groups and the creation of programs that promote a sense of belonging for students and more inclusive campuses. This goal can be furthered by the hiring of professionals who are trained to support and treat individuals from diverse backgrounds (Ordway, 2023).

According to Bonnie, Davis, and Flynn (2011), Virginia community colleges lack many of the mental health resources that are now more prevalent at four-year institutions. The authors cite the Virginia College Mental Health Study which found that "...according to official policy, Virginia's community colleges do not currently provide [in-house] mental health counseling services. Moreover, it appears that very few community colleges in Virginia have clinically trained counselors on their staff" (Bonnie et al., 2011, p. 10). However, community colleges in the Commonwealth are required to have procedures in place to address students who may be capable of harming themselves or others (Bonnie et al., 2011). The researchers also surmise that most community college students "do not have access to off-campus mental health services because they are more likely than students in the 4-year colleges to be uninsured or under-insured and because most community services boards lack capacity to provide timely counseling and psychiatric assistance to college students" (p. 10).

Fortunately, the VCCS has made strides in the area of mental health service provision for its students. In 2021, in response to increasing rates of depression and anxiety among community college students, the VCCS State Board approved a policy adjustment that would allow VCCS colleges to enter into a contract agreement with third-party mental health services providers to offer assistance to students (Babb, 2021).

After the policy update was implemented, most community colleges across the Commonwealth began to utilize TimelyMD, a virtual healthcare provider that offers on-demand and scheduled appointments for both physical health and mental health needs. TimelyMD provides options for distressed students, including mental health supports, psychiatry appointments, self-care navigation, and crisis management. Feedback from students regarding this telehealth service has been positive (Herder, 2022).

While the VCCS's new policy has been beneficial to students, there are some concerns. The new policy allows, but does not require, its member colleges to offer these crucial mental health services. In

addition, these services are not offered to Dual Enrollment (DE) students, even if the DE classes are actually offered on the campus. Furthermore, there is concern that these services may not be available long-term. While funding is available to support this telehealth initiative "...for the next couple of years...", VCCS State Board members "...warned the long-term sustainability of offering mental health services on the campuses of Virginia's Community Colleges has yet to be determined" (Babb, 2021). As of 2024, telehealth services are still available to most VCCS students.

### **Analysis of Issue**

The topic of mental health among college students has permeated professional mental health circles for many years. According to LeViness et al. (2019), more than 86% of college counseling center directors have reported an increase in student demand for mental health services. In addition, serious psychological disturbances are also of great concern (Harris et al., 2022; Roy & Braider, 2016). Moreover, college students face more pressures today than in years past. According to the Jed Foundation (n.d.-b), rising attendance costs and escalating academic demands can be stressful for students. In addition, sexual and gender identity issues and navigating new autonomy can cause stress that contributes to mental health concerns (The Jed Foundation, n.d.-b).

The mental health crisis on college campuses today does not appear to be dissipating. Students are facing increased pressures in their academic and personal lives. Colleges must be ready and willing to deal with these issues if they are to avoid catastrophes in the future. The problems with which recent high school students are faced when they enter college more than likely will continue to present challenges, not only to the students, but also to the institution. It is crucial for colleges to be willing to adapt to the changing needs of students and their mental health.

### **Practical Aspects of the Problem**

It may seem fairly simple to fix the issues addressed in this paper. Many might say that the solution is to find more financial resources to increase the number of staff in a college's counseling center. While additional financial support directed toward the centers would be of great assistance, this resolution is far from all-inclusive. Colleges and universities must make the mental health of their students and employees a top priority. Officials must recognize that a problem exists and commit to the establishment of supportive measures to address the issue. Institutions must recognize that the demographics of today's college students dictate that mental health awareness and intervention be addressed in a multimodal fashion. Online resources can connect with traditional students; however, virtual methods may not be as effective for older, non-traditional, or less tech-savvy learners. In addition, colleges should work to eliminate the stigma of



mental illness by promoting awareness activities. Thankfully, stigma surrounding the utilization of mental health services on campus has decreased and continues to do so (Abrams, 2022).

Institutions should have effective policies in place that take the guesswork out of how to recognize and help a student in crisis. Every person on campus, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students, should be aware of the signs of mental health distress in themselves and others (Greenberg, 2022). In addition, according to Firestein and Fink (2020), faculty and academic advisors should be able to help struggling students feel connected, safe, and welcomed. In addition, they should be trained to assist students who are struggling with mental wellness. This training should help participants learn about campus and community support services and resources available to students and should help them identify those students who may be struggling with a mental health concern or crisis (Firestein & Fink, 2020). Training that covers these important areas can be completed in as little as one day. An example is Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). The MHFA program teaches participants how to recognize and respond to indicators of mental health concerns and substance use disorders. The training focuses on warning signs and risk factors associated with mental illnesses. In addition, it helps participants learn to assess a mental health crisis, select an appropriate intervention, provide initial assistance, and connect the person in crisis to the appropriate professional help or social support. Those who successfully complete the MHFA course receive a certification (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2024).

### **Implications for Leaders in Higher Education**

Within the past twenty years, college administrators have witnessed mental health issues on their campuses reach staggering heights. This increase has culminated, in recent years, in several college campus tragedies: UVA, Bridgewater, Umpqua Community College, and New River Community College. Each perpetrator implicated in these campus shootings was a current or former student of the institution that he terrorized. College administrators are clamoring to prevent such catastrophes from happening again.

College leaders have a responsibility to keep their campuses safe. In past years, some individuals have been successful in forcing colleges to accept some of the blame related to student tragedies. According to Cohen (2007), Ferrum College, in Virginia, settled a lawsuit with the family of a student who died by suicide after a fight with his girlfriend. The student's family alleged that Ferrum had ignored warning signs that the student might be suicidal. As a result, Ferrum not only conceded to change its crisis-intervention counseling policies, but also admitted that the College shared some of the responsibility for the student's suicide (Cohen, 2007). In addition, the Commonwealth of Virginia, in 2008, agreed to a multimillion-dollar state settlement in order to compensate the families of the victims of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) massacre of 2007 (NBC News, 2008). A panel, formed by then Governor

Timothy Kaine, found that Virginia Tech failed to issue a timely warning notification to its campus regarding the threat (Redden, 2007).

To save lives, and to avoid possible litigation, college administrators must take a proactive approach to educate their campus communities regarding awareness, prevention and early intervention related to crises. Examples of possible crises on campus include suicide, drug overdose, intimate partner violence, and mass homicide. Regular trainings including mental health awareness, substance education, bystander intervention, healthy relationship awareness, active shooter drills, and suicide prevention and postvention are crucial to the health and wellness of the college campus community.

### **Conclusion**

The student mental health crisis that has gripped college campuses across the nation is a critical issue that requires teamwork, dedication, and resources. College administrators must recognize the severity of this multi-layered emergency and prioritize accordingly. It is imperative that institutions have fully-staffed and adequately-trained counseling personnel to assist students with psychological concerns. However, tackling this crisis must not be assigned only to college counseling centers and student services. The entire campus community must be involved in this initiative. There must be a coordinated commitment to creating, supporting, and maintaining a culture of mental wellness. This culture should include open communication, regular awareness campaigns, and stigma reduction. In addition, this approach should include well-trained faculty and staff and the mainstreaming of students with mental health disorders into campus life. With collaboration and dedication, institutional leaders, student services personnel, faculty, and staff can help to promote and provide effective resources that will result in increased awareness and early and aggressive intervention.

The student mental health crisis on campus is a complex one that requires a multifaceted approach. By demonstrating an unwavering commitment to this issue, institutions of higher education can have a more positive and impactful effect on students' collegiate experience. With the implementation of a collaborative, supportive, compassionate, and holistic approach to student mental health, colleges and universities can create a healthy and resilient academic community that promotes student success and leads to enhanced student wellness and a safer campus environment.

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