



Center for School Mental Health
Issue Brief
July 2011

**Supporting Mental Health Needs of
Community College Students**

**Mental Health Needs Among
College-Aged Youth**

There is evidence that high school and college-aged students in the United States (U.S.) are reporting more symptoms of mental health difficulties with each successive generation (Twenge, Gentile, DeWall, Ma, Lacefield, & Schurtz, 2010). This is consistent with reports that college counseling centers have observed an increase in the prevalence and severity of psychological issues experienced by students, as well as an increase in the number of students who are taking psychotropic medication (Erdur-Baker et al., 2006; Gallagher, 2002, 2009; Kadison & Digeronimo, 2004; Young, 2003). For example, 93.4% of counseling center directors reported that they are seeing a greater number of students with severe psychological problems on their campuses (Gallagher, 2009). Given these trends, the demand for mental health services across colleges is expected to increase over the next several years.

The Center for the Study of Collegiate Mental Health

(Locke, 2009) published a comprehensive report highlighting characteristics of over 28,000 college students seeking mental health services across 66 university counseling centers during the Fall 2008 semester. Findings suggest that students who experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety also demonstrated academic difficulties. Conversely, students who reported higher levels of emotional social support reported lower levels of academic distress. When students receive mental health services, there also appears to be a positive impact on retention (Sharkin, 2004; Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997).



**Increase in Enrollment
at Community Colleges**

Community colleges across the U.S. have reported large increases in enrollment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Between 2002 and 2007, there was a 25% increase in the number of sub-baccalaureate degrees or certificates awarded, compared to a 3% increase between 1997 and 2002 (Horn & Li, 2009). The American Association of Community Colleges (Mullin & Phillippe, 2009) suggests that this rate may be accelerating, with a 24% increase in estimated enrollment at U.S. community colleges between 2007 and 2009.

As an example, and consistent with the national trend, there has been about a 9% increase in enrollment at community colleges in Maryland from 2009 to 2010, with 49% of undergraduate students (i.e., over 140,000 students) attending Maryland's community colleges (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2009). The enrollment of full-time freshman (i.e., students attending college for the first time) has increased 66% over the past 20 years at Maryland's community colleges (Maryland Association of Community Colleges, 2010).

Community College Mental Health Needs

To our knowledge, there are only two studies that have examined the mental health needs of community college students. The Health Services Association of California Community Colleges conducted an online survey with 7,898 community college students in California (Trieu, Bratton, & Perelli, 2007). Results indicated that 17% of students reported having a previous diagnosis of depression and 11% reported having suicidal ideation. Many students reported that depression, anxiety, and/or seasonal affective

disorders affected their academic performance.

More recently, the American College Counseling Association's Community College Task Force conducted a survey of 67 community college counselors across 54 community colleges from 28 different states (2011). Nearly 90% of the counselors reported that the most common presenting problems of students included stress and/or depression, followed by anxiety, academic problems, relational problems, and test anxiety/procrastination.

Due to the lack of research on mental health needs for community college students, it is unclear whether best practices to address the mental health needs of community college students differ from best practices for



Expansion of Mental Health Resources at Colleges and Universities

With the rising student enrollment across U.S. community colleges and the increase in the number and severity of mental health needs among college students, there is a critical need for the field to reassess current mental health resources, policies, and practices for students who attend community colleges. In recognition of this increasing need, proposed federal legislation prioritizes mental health services on college campuses (Mental Health on Campus Improvement Act, 2009) and successful

transitions to adulthood (Healthy Transition Act, 2009). Related to this agenda is the national movement to extend school mental health services downward to include preschool students and upward to include college students, termed the P-16 model (McGrath, 2008). This framework expands the goal of educational systems beyond high school graduation to the successful preparation for entry into and graduation from higher education and training programs.

While the need for quality mental health services has risen dramatically, prior studies have indicated a decline in the availability of on-campus mental health services as a result of funding cuts and a lack of resources and/or staff (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). A more recent survey (Gallagher, 2009) provided national data that suggests an increase in mental health services across college campuses.

According to the National

Survey of Counseling Center Directors, in response to the increased number of students with mental health problems, 60.6% of counseling center directors (both community and 4-year institutions) have increased the amount of time counseling staff spent training faculty and staff on how to respond to and refer a student in distress (Gallagher, 2009). Furthermore, 53% of centers have expanded external referral networks, 30.5% increased psychiatric consultation hours, 28.5% increased counseling center staff, and 19.9% increased part-time counselors during busy times of the year. Other actions taken by college counseling center staff included more mandated suicide assessments, extended evening hours and increased use of peer education groups. However, 66.2% of counseling center directors also indicated that they were concerned about the growing demand for services without appropriate increases in resources.



Transitioning from High School to College for Students with Disabilities

Nearly half of high school students with disabilities post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In order to be successful, these students will likely require services and supports similar to those received in previous educational settings. While high school students with disabilities may receive support under the auspices of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), college students are covered under different laws (e.g., Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act; Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA]), which have different mechanisms to identify individuals with disabilities, as well as different accommodations. Wolanin and Steele (2004) assert that in high school, “the burden is on the school to find and serve the student...in higher education the burden is on the student...to find the appropriate services and navigate through [their] education” (p. 27). Due to the shift in responsibility and the various challenges associated with obtaining services, there is a need for early and adequate preparation, transition support, and advocacy for graduating high school and college students with disabilities. Morningstar (2010) suggests that high school counselors and other professionals can facilitate college readiness and success by: helping students to develop awareness of their disability, informing students of the types of disability support services that may be available, educating students about relevant disability legislation (IDEA & ADA), and preparing students to become their own advocates.

To help students navigate this process, the U.S. Department of Education (2007) published a brief

“In High School, the burden is on the school to find and serve the student...in higher education the burden is on the student...to find the appropriate services and navigate through [their] education.”
-Wolanin and Steele, 2004

guide outlining the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities who are preparing for post-secondary education. Under IDEA, transition planning for students with disabilities must begin at age 14; however, there is evidence that this planning either does not occur or when it does occur, is insufficient (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Martin, et al., 2006).

Even for the most prepared student, many college campuses lack sufficient disability-specific services, causing some students to go without proper resources or face the financial obstacles of paying for private assistance (Rath & Royer, 2002). When accommodations are provided, they frequently include additional exam time, alternative exam formats, written notes, and help with learning strategies and study skills (Ruae & Lewis, 2011). Fortunately, colleges are increasingly aware of the supports needed by transitioning students (with and without disabilities) and in response, have developed targeted programs (see below).



Spotlight on Transition Programs

Many schools have developed programs to assist underrepresented and underprepared high school students with the transition into postsecondary education (e.g., Gateway to College [National]; Pathway to the Baccalaureate Program [Virginia]). The types of supports offered through these programs include:

- application assistance
- test-preparation workshops
- academic advising

Other programs specifically target transitions for students with disabilities. For example, Howard Community College (Columbia, Maryland) has designed Project Access to:

- assist students with disabilities transitioning into community college
- support student success and retention during their education
- provide career counseling to assist with job placement upon graduation.

More information about these programs can be found at:

<http://www.gatewaytocollege.org/>

<http://www.nvcc.edu/academics/pathway/>

http://www.howardcc.edu/students/academic_support_services/project_access

IN FOCUS

Howard Community College

The Center for School Mental Health, in collaboration Dr. Alissa Putman from Howard Community College (HCC) in Maryland, conducted a qualitative study to explore the mental health services offered at HCC, outline common mental health needs of students at HCC, as well as to understand the communication between high school mental health programs and HCC.

In spring and fall 2010, focus groups were conducted with counseling center staff and HCC students. Staff participants were all females, including 40% African American, 40% Caucasian and 20% did not provide a response. In the student groups, 90% of participants were female, and

predominantly African American (60%), with the remaining participants identifying as Caucasian (30%) or Mixed Ethnicity (10%). Students reported having attended HCC for an average of 4.7 semesters. Forty percent of students reported having used counseling services in

high school and 50% reported using mental health services at HCC.

Topics of the focus groups included: 1) common problems of students seeking services, 2) barriers to accessing services, and 3) information about the link between high school and community college mental health services. Two reviewers conducted a review of the focus group responses, independently categorizing responses into key themes and organizing the themes according to the three topics listed above. Mutually identified themes are summarized below.



Focus Group Findings

Stressors for Students at HCC

- ◆ **Transitioning to College**
- ◆ **Financial Problems**
- ◆ **Relationship Difficulties**
- ◆ **Family Problems**
- ◆ **Balancing School and Outside Life (e.g. work, children)**

Barriers to Accessing Care

Similar to other studies pertaining to barriers in accessing mental health treatment (Mowbray, et al., 2006), students at HCC reported that the primary barriers to accessing care on campus include:

- ◆ **Time Constraints**
- ◆ **Lack of Knowledge of Services**
- ◆ **Stigma Related to Seeing a Mental Health Provider**

Existing Supports

Ensuring a smooth transition from high school to college is important, particularly for students with disabilities or mental health issues. HCC helps to promote an easier transition for incoming students through:

- ◆ Ensuring the Counseling Center is active in new student orientation.
- ◆ Offering counseling sessions to incoming freshmen.
- ◆ Conducting workshops on stress reduction.
- ◆ Hosting open houses with community providers.
- ◆ Visiting local high schools to dialogue with students.
- ◆ Providing an elective class to help new students acclimate to college.

Recommendations

Based on the focus group findings, HCC staff and students recommended the following to enhance the support available to students in transition from high school to college:

- ◆ Connect with local high schools to develop skills related to time management, stress management and help seeking.
- ◆ Link with high school leadership programs
- ◆ Develop a mentorship program to connect high school students with college students.
- ◆ Require new students to attend a meeting with a counselor to discuss academic and personal needs as well as identify available services on campus.
- ◆ Work with high school staff to promote stigma reduction related to mental health in high school.

Recommendations

As community college administrators, faculty, and staff prepare for the influx of students with mental health difficulties, they will look to researchers and practitioners to provide recommendations and resources related to the development and implementation of appropriate interventions for this population. Despite the limited data on the specific mental health needs of community college students and availability of services, the increase in enrollment alone is justification for enhancing services. The International Association of Counseling Services (2010) recommends a ratio of 1 counselor to 1,000-1,500 college students -- a ratio that is challenging for most campuses to meet (Gallagher, 2009). Below, we present several suggestions for stakeholders to facilitate advancements in research, policy, and practice related to mental health services and supports in community colleges.

1. Identify barriers to mental health services and supports for community college students and consider creative ways to overcome these challenges.

Barriers to services and supports may include lack of awareness of services, accessibility of services (e.g., availability, financial, and logistical considerations), and/or issues related to entering or accepting care (e.g., stigma, confidentiality; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Mowbray et al., 2006). In a recent report, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2009) determined that many community college students participate in part-time online courses. There may be opportunities to provide more accessible and efficient services and supports by becoming aware of the findings from research and practice in the field of telemental health (e.g., Grady, Lever, Cunningham & Stephan, 2011) and other online/virtual supports. These supports may include the provision of resources, help lines, support groups, and/or actual services. Opportunities associated with the growing reliance on the virtual environment should be an important consideration in engaging, supporting, and treating the mental health difficulties of students.



2. Create opportunities to enhance awareness and promote meaningful dialogue related to mental health topics on campus.

Opportunities to build relationships, engage in dialogue, and to connect students to resources, services, and supports are critical elements to a comprehensive program that addresses mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention, treatment, and maintenance/recovery. Whether those opportunities are acted upon or missed depends, in part, on awareness, knowledge, and attitudes related to mental health on campus. Several innovative projects on college/university campuses have focused on the use of peers and/or faculty to build awareness, share knowledge, and integrate mental health issues into coursework (e.g., Eisen et al., 2008). There are also programs to reach students who may not readily access formal services (Mier, Boone, & Shropshire, 2009). Further exploration and evaluation of innovative models, along with strengthening the connections among and between students, faculty, and counseling center staff will better position community colleges to address the mental health needs on campus.



Recommendations (Continued)

3. Build a “community” of supports by educating and preparing campus staff (and students) to assist students with mental health difficulties.

For campuses with limited resources, it is important to consider combining efforts with other points of contact for students. For example, admissions counselors and academic advisors should all be aware of basic referral procedures and applicable policies. In addition, health center staff members are often in a position to detect and possibly screen for mental health difficulties. Therefore, health staff should also be skilled in this area and be familiar with the available campus and off-campus mental health resources. This is consistent with the call from the American College Health Association (2010) to integrate health and mental health services on college campuses. Finally, the general student population should have access to information about what to do when they suspect or know that a fellow student is struggling with unmet mental health needs.



4. Engage in “upreach” and “downreach” activities to support the high school to community college transition and transition from community college to four-year institutions for students with mental health needs.

While others have noted the importance of preparing high school students to navigate the academic and social challenges that arise when transitioning to collegiate environments (e.g. *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*), students with mental health difficulties may face additional challenges (Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; Mowbray et al., 2006). By developing mutual understanding of these issues, and building or strengthening relationships among high schools and community colleges, we can design programs to help bridge this divide and support students during this transition. Furthermore, the majority of community college students plan to continue their education at a four-year institution (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). This transition also presents an opportunity to collaborate to proactively support students with mental health needs.

Recommendations (Continued)



5. Engage in outreach activities to promote understanding of mental health and academic services and supports available to students.

Yorgason, Linville & Zitzman (2008) found that some subgroups of students (e.g., off-campus students, males) may be less aware of the mental health services available on campus, which is consistent with findings from the HCC qualitative study (see page 4). In addition to general outreach, community colleges should consider targeted efforts to reach these specific subgroups. Furthermore, the relationship between mental health and academic outcomes suggests that it is also critical to ensure that students are alerted to educational supports on campus. These may range from informally encouraging the development of study groups and tutoring to more formal instructional and testing accommodations.



6. Continue to develop an understanding of the needs of college students and identify effective interventions for this population.

Our examination of the literature reveals that our collective understanding of the mental health needs of students in community colleges, and the availability of appropriate interventions for this population, is limited. This remains a critical need for the field, particularly in light of the increasing enrollments on community college campuses. Researchers and practitioners should collaborate to identify and address gaps in the literature and to promote evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to support these students.

In sum, many opportunities exist to support the mental health of students in community colleges. Through strengthened collaborations among mental health and educational researchers, providers and professionals, we will be better prepared to promote successful transitions, optimal performance, and positive outcomes for this population.



Resources

National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers, <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/researchconsortium.html> The National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education conducts large scale, national research studies on the mental health issues of college students.

Center for the Study of Collegiate Mental Health, <http://ccmh.squarespace.com/> The CCMH is focused on providing accurate and up-to-date information about the mental health of today's college students in order to serve the needs of mental health providers, administrators, researchers, and the public.

Healthy Minds Study, <http://www.healthymindsstudy.net> The HMS is an annual, national survey that examines mental health issues among college students.

American College Health Association, <http://www.acha.org/>
Survey Reports: http://www.acha-ncha.org/pubs_rpts.html
The ACHA-National College Health Assessment (NCHA) is a research survey that can assist colleges/universities in collecting precise data about students' health habits, behaviors, and perceptions.

Active Minds, <http://www.activeminds.org/> Active Minds works to increase students' awareness of mental health issues, provide information and resources regarding mental health and mental illness, and encourage students to seek help as soon as it is needed.

National Survey of Counseling Center Directors, <http://www.education.pitt.edu/survey/nsccd/>
The NSCCD presents data provided by the administrative heads of college and university counseling centers in the United States and Canada.

Association of University and College Counseling Centers, <http://www.aucccd.org/>
The AUCCCD seeks to assist college/university directors in providing effective leadership and management of their centers, in accord with the professional principles and standards with special attention to issues of diversity.

American College Counseling Association, <http://www.collegecounseling.org/>
ACCA is an Association for higher education counseling professionals dedicated to fostering students' development. The AACC has developed a Community College Task Force (<http://www.collegecounseling.org/resources/community-counseling>), which provides a forum to promote dialogue about the needs and issues faced by community college counselors.

ULifeline, <http://www.ulifeline.org/main/page/75/AboutULifeline> ULifeline is an anonymous, confidential, online resource center, where college students can search for information regarding mental health and suicide prevention.

Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know your Rights and Responsibilities, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>
This document explains the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities who are preparing to attend postsecondary schools.

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The mission of the Center for School Mental Health (CSMH) is to strengthen policies and programs in school mental health to improve learning and promote success for America's youth.

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