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What Evidence from Research Tells Us: Addressing Mental Health Needs for Postsecondary Students

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Overview

As students navigate the many challenges of higher education, compounded by the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis, mental health[1] is a key issue that can impact their academic and personal success. A growing body of evidence shows that a significant portion of postsecondary students experience mental health issues (figure 1).

Figure 1. Mental health among postsecondary students

Mental health issues are common among postsecondary students in the U.S. More than one in three students experience depression, and almost the same amount experience anxiety. More than one in ten students have thought about, considered, or planned suicide.	**Depression** (positive PHQ-9 screen)	**36%**
	Anxiety (positive GAD-7 screen)	**31%**
	Suicidal ideation (past year)	**14%**

Source: National Healthy Minds Survey Fall 2019

A survey of Washington postsecondary students in 2017 found similar patterns to the national trends. Almost a third of students reported experiencing depression. More than a quarter of students experienced anxiety (*Healthy Minds Survey* as cited in Eckart, 2018). Washington State has taken some steps to address suicide prevention and behavioral health in higher education. These steps include recent legislation that directed the Washington Student Achievement Council to establish a workgroup to address student mental health issues. Additionally, the legislation provided a grant administered by the Washington Student Achievement Council to create partnerships between higher education institutions and healthcare entities to develop suicide prevention programs for students[2]. Now more than ever, postsecondary students will benefit from continued investment in mental health supports.

Without adequate supports, mental health issues can negatively impact students' academic outcomes. Students diagnosed with depression during college have significantly lower retention rates than their peers (Arria et al., 2013). Students with mental health disorders also tend to have lower GPAs and are more likely to drop out of college than their peers (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

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[1] "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices" (World Health Organization, 2018).
[2] See SSB 6514 (2017-18) concerning suicide prevention and behavioral health in higher education, with enhanced services to student veterans. Grant reports can be found here: https://wsac.wa.gov/student-supports#suicide-prevention-grant.

Some students are more commonly affected by mental health issues than others. Racial discrimination, mental health stigma, and a lack of culturally relevant support services contribute to poorer mental health and lower utilization of services (Volpe, *n.d.*). Consequently, the prevalence of depression is higher among students of color than White students. There is also a higher prevalence of all mental health issues among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Healthy Minds Network, 2020). These disparities have been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 Has Worsened Mental Health Issues Among Postsecondary Students

Emerging evidence shows that mental health issues have escalated during the COVID-19 crisis. Among postsecondary students, the prevalence of depression increased by five percentage points, as shown in figure 2. In the same period, students were nine percentage points more likely to report that their academic performance was negatively impacted by their mental or emotional health (Healthy Minds Network, 2020).

Figure 2. Some mental health issues have escalated during the COVID-19 crisis

Source: National Healthy Minds Survey Spring 2020
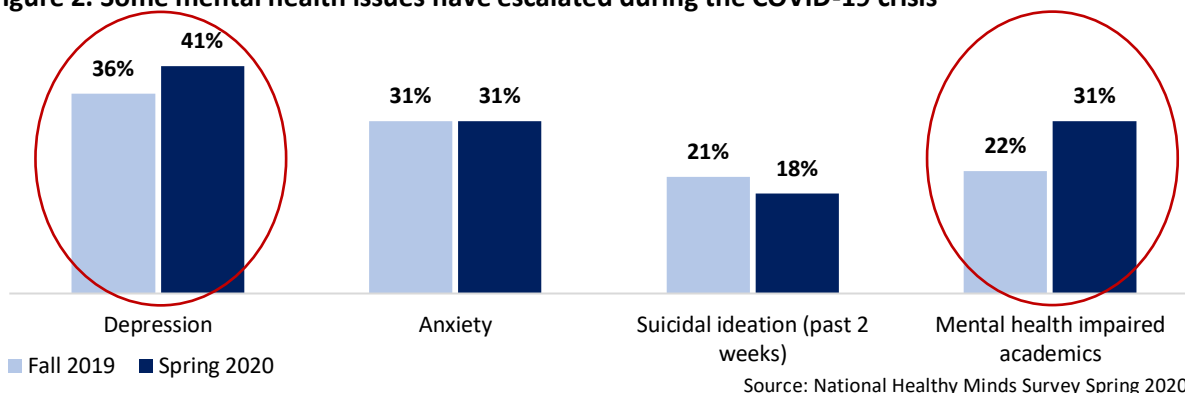
These findings are in line with national mental health trends during the COVID-19 crisis. A survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in June 2020 found that among all adults in the U.S., more than four in ten reported adverse mental or behavioral health (figure 3). Rates were even higher for young adults (ages 18 to 24)—an age group that most closely aligns with traditional college-aged students (Czeisler et al., 2020).

Figure 3. Reported mental health issues have been common during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among young adults

all adults

41%

young adults
(ages 18 to 24)

75%

reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom

Source: CDC Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic Survey 2020

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Like other equity issues that have been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health concerns have disproportionately impacted low-income students and students of color. Results from a survey in Summer 2020 that includes a breakdown by various socio-demographic characteristics demonstrates that the prevalence for both depression and anxiety were significantly higher for low-income students and Black and Latinx students (figure 4). Students who were caregivers or identified as LGBTQ also experienced higher rates of depression and anxiety (Chirikov et al., 2020).

Figure 4. Depression has been more prevalent among some groups of students during the COVID-19 pandemic

40%	41%	33%	50%	28%
Black	**Latinx**	**White**	**Low-income**	**Wealthy**
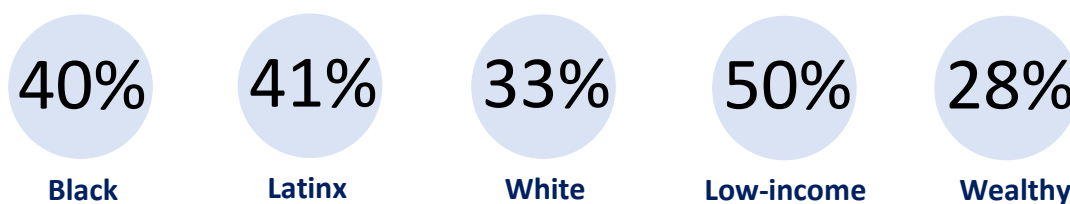
Source: SERU COVID-19 Survey 2020

Despite widespread mental health issues during the COVID-19 crisis, students have reported increased difficulty accessing support. Sixty percent of students who sought services said COVID-19 has made it harder to access mental health support (Healthy Minds Network, 2020).

Improving access to resources, including treatment and support services for students, can help mitigate the negative impact of mental health issues on student outcomes. Ensuring students have the supports they need for their health and well-being is critical for increasing retention, academic performance, and completion rates. This is especially important given that the COVID-19 crisis has worsened mental health issues for students. Addressing mental health issues in higher education can provide needed supports and improve outcomes for Washington residents so they will have the opportunity to lead productive and financially rewarding lives and contribute to the economic success and social well-being of our state.

Helping Students with Mental Health

Providing mental health services to postsecondary students can help reduce stigma and improve student well-being[3]. Insufficient mental health supports on college campuses have consequences for students, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Increasing funding

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[3] Students are also developing their own mental health resources. The Youth Mental Health Guide is a creative effort among young people to help their peers manage stress during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. The guide, written by students for students, compiles advice about practicing self-care, dealing with digital learning, and helping support the mental health of family and friends. The guide can be found at https://unityinc.org/new-state-of-mind-youth-mental-health-guide/.

for mental health services will improve student health and well-being and their ability to thrive in higher education and beyond[4].

In considering programs and interventions to help students with mental health, it is critical to allow data and research to inform solutions. The evidence-based practices below have been rigorously evaluated and proven effective for addressing mental health issues among postsecondary students. Some of these programs can be implemented in a remote learning environment. Additionally, some emerging strategies have shown promising indications of helping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prioritizing students' health and well-being is a key component of ensuring continued access and success in higher education.

 Evidence-Based Programs Evaluated Using Randomized Control Trials

Provide personalized online feedback and counseling for students at risk for mental health issues. Effective online services can reduce mental health stigma and increase students' likelihood of accessing support and treatment. The Electronic Bridge to Mental Health Services (eBridge) program provided personalized feedback and optional online counseling for students. The program utilized motivational interviewing principles to support students who screened positive for suicide risk. Students who participated in the eBridge program were more likely to report readiness to reach out to family, friends, and mental health professionals. Participants also reported lower mental health stigma and were more likely to seek mental health treatment (King et al., 2015). These findings from a randomized control trial of the eBridge program show a significant impact on students' behaviors. Services like eBridge provide valuable mental health resources and referrals for students and are suitable during continued remote campus operations.

Include a cognitive-behavioral skill-building program in students' first-year curriculum. This type of preventative program can boost students' grades and reduce anxiety. Students in the Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment (COPE) pilot program participated in a seven-session online intervention during their first year of college. A randomized control trial of the COPE program found that participants had higher grade point averages than students in the comparison group. Participants who had higher levels of anxiety at baseline also experienced a significant decline in symptoms (Melnyk et al., 2015). This approach is an effective strategy that can be integrated into first-year student programming to help students deal with stress, anxiety, and depression, and ultimately improve student outcomes. Additionally, the online

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[4] The Washington Student Association (WSA), which represents students attending Washington's public four-year institutions, has prioritized mental health as an important agenda item in the upcoming 2021 legislative session. WSA's 2020-2021 legislative agenda can be found at https://www.wastudents.org/our-work.

delivery format can be leveraged during the COVID-19 crisis to reach students who are learning remotely.

Promote a sense of belonging among first-year students. Programs that promote a sense of belonging can improve students' academic performance and health and well-being. An attitude-changing intervention for first-year college students sought to promote a sense of belonging by framing social adversity as common and temporary in adjusting to college (Walton & Cohen, 2011). A randomized control trial of the attitude-changing intervention showed boosts in grade point averages and self-reported health and well-being for students in the program, compared to students who were not in the program. The program was particularly impactful for Black students. Promoting a sense of belonging and resilience to adversity can help improve student mental health and academic outcomes and may be especially important for students of color.

Develop peer-to-peer mental health programs to equip nonprofessionals with the skills and knowledge to help students in distress. Peer training programs can improve students' ability to help fellow students who experience mental health issues. Many colleges offer Gatekeeper Trainings for undergraduate resident advisors and others who interact with many students in their communities. The trainings help nonprofessionals recognize, intervene, and connect distressed students with mental health resources. Evidence from the Mental Health First Aid randomized control trial showed that the training increased participants' knowledge and ability to identify and help students in distress (Lipson et al., 2014). Peer-to-peer models, such as Gatekeeper Trainings, can boost awareness of mental health issues and foster a broader understanding of the supports available on campus.

Emerging Strategies During the COVID-19 Crisis

Communicate consistently, clearly, and with care. Institutions are exploring ways to communicate effectively with students during remote operations due to COVID-19 to ease their concerns and ensure continued access to mental health supports. Some institutions have moved support groups to virtual settings. Other institutions have created a "one-stop shop" website to answer all COVID-19 questions and direct students to resources, including telehealth information. Faculty at some institutions are being encouraged to check in with students regularly and accommodate varying circumstances to demonstrate their care for students' holistic well-being (American Council on Education, 2020).

Consider the mental health and well-being of all members of the campus community. Students are not the only members of the campus community who face mental health issues. Faculty and staff are also experiencing increased stressors in their own daily lives and require additional supports. Institutions have created digital communities to allow for collaboration and

support even during remote campus operations. Faculty and staff can benefit from proven practices, such as Gatekeeper Trainings mentioned above. Gatekeeper Trainings can help improve their ability to intervene when they notice students and colleagues in distress (American Council on Education, 2020).

Continuously assess mental health needs and evaluate services. Students' mental health needs vary between institutions. Mental health needs evolve over time, especially in response to significant events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Campus leaders should continuously engage with students to gauge the prevalence of mental health issues and evaluate existing support programs' effectiveness. Additionally, campus leaders should assess whether service utilization is equitable for all students who need support (American Council on Education, 2020).

Conclusion

Mental health issues are common among postsecondary students. As the ongoing COVID-19 crisis continues to cause increased challenges and stress, ensuring access to quality mental health supports is critical for students' well-being and academic progress. Policymakers can look to numerous evidence-based programs and emerging strategies to address mental health concerns and help students achieve success in higher education and beyond.

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