The mental and behavioral health of college students remains an ever-growing area of national concern, particularly as colleges and universities consider reopening campuses. As lawmakers seek to enact policies to address this critical issue, evidence-based solutions developed by mental and behavioral health professionals are essential to support students’ overall well-being as they pursue higher education. Increased federal funding, targeted specifically for college mental health—including competitive grants 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 in addressing this issue.

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

Depression, anxiety, and stress are just some of the concern’s college students face. Research suggests that stigma remains a significant barrier to seeking help, especially among groups more likely to conform to such stigmatized beliefs and who often report feeling apprehensive about addressing their mental health. This includes racial and sexual minorities as well as international students, who tend to be double marginalized as both students of color and non-citizens, and are less likely to have a support system as compared to domestic peers. Graduate students also have unique needs when it comes to mental health, with challenges being particularly prevalent among doctoral candidates.

Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing campus mental and behavioral health would be counterproductive. Intervention efforts 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.

Campus counseling centers serve multiple purposes. They provide treatment for all students with mental and behavioral health concerns—which for many, is their only point of access—and work collaboratively with physical health services to provide integrated care. They are also training sites for psychology graduate students, interns, and postdoctoral fellows, and therefore must retain the ability to provide practicum, internship, and postdoctoral training opportunities.

The growing demand for services has also placed a significant burden on campus mental health providers, which has impacted their own well-being. Thus, a comprehensive preventive approach, which makes mental and behavioral health the responsibility of the entire campus community and where signs of potential distress are recognized and addressed, is necessary. This holistic effort can help break down silos between campus entities and improve overall response to both isolated incidents as well as recognize and monitor troubling behaviors, which may otherwise go unnoticed.

At the same time, students must have a clear understanding of both their own and the university’s role in the mental and behavioral health care process. This can be accomplished by implementing a statement of policy—developed in consultation with the campus community—which outlines all entities, individuals, procedures, and responsibilities as part of the campus mental health care ecosystem.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Campus Counseling Centers and Services

- Establish a competitive grant program to develop and implement innovative improvements to counseling centers
- Provide federal funding for more resources, including to:
  - Hire and train additional staff
  - Facilitate community partnerships
  - Invest in digital support and HIPAA compliant telehealth platforms for counseling services
  - Implement specific practices, such as brief screenings and mental health assessments, and strong collaboration between mental and physical health services
  - Promote practices for self-care among campus mental health providers
  - Maintain counseling centers’ ability to provide practicum and internship opportunities to psychology students and postdoctoral fellows

Institute Policies that Promote Mental and Behavioral Health on Campus

- 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—that is easily identifiable—of students’ privacy rights and protections
- Optimize mental and behavioral health services on campus, which includes provision of culturally competent care; trauma-informed practices; post-vention planning; focus on prevention; changes to mandatory and voluntary leave of absence policies without penalizing the student; and the ability to request reasonable accommodations
- Foster a campus culture where social and physical environments promote health and wellness by providing resilience training for non-mental health professionals including administrators, faculty, and students; integrating strategies related to campus safety and alcohol and substance use; create ‘campus teams’ to better assess student distress and integrate campus entities; and institute service-learning and civic-engaged courses, which can lead to peer-to-peer training
- Integrate counseling services and supports into campus preparation and response to any external emergencies, including pandemics, natural disasters, school shootings, etc.

Support Current or Proposed Federal Programs on Campus Mental Health

- Reauthorize and increase funding for programs authorized by the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act
- Fully fund Title IX, Subtitle C of the 21st Century Cures Act, which includes:
  - Sec. 9031. Mental health and substance use disorder services on campus
  - Sec. 9032. Interagency Working Group on College Mental Health
  - Sec. 9033. Improving mental health on college campuses
- Increase funding and clarify the grant submission process for the Student Support Services Program—a Federal TRIO Program—which provides mental health counseling to eligible students
- Establish and strengthen formal working relationships between the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to better support the mental and behavioral health of college students
- Ensure that the Department of Education provides student loan discharges to all borrowers who qualify for a total and permanent disability (“TPD”) discharge