

Best practices for Mental Health Services in Colleges and Universities

Higher education students and their families look increasingly to college and universities to provide mental health and behavioral health services for their students thus leading to a growing demand for supportive services on college campuses. Tragic events such the Virginia Tech shooting underscore the necessity to address the significant increase in the mental health needs of this population. Understanding the best practices for mental health and behavioral health services in colleges and universities is a crucial step in establishing the necessary comprehensive campus-wide approach to address the multifaceted needs of the college and university students. The college experience is not isolated in the classroom; therefore, colleges and universities are called upon to shift and expand their priorities to address the mental health and behavioral health needs of a diverse student population.

Background. In 2012, 19.9 million students attended colleges and universities in the United States, including 5.8 million enrolled in two-year colleges, 10.3 million in four-year colleges and 3.8 million in graduate school (census.gov). For a significant number of these students their emotional health will be a barrier to academic achievement. According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC), one-fifth of college students experience a mental illness, and increasing numbers of students arrive on campus having received mental health services prior to starting their college careers (SPRC/colleges and universities). In 2013, the American College Health Association (ACHA) National College Health Assessment found that more than half of college students experienced "overwhelming anxiety" at some point in the past year, 32 percent reported feeling "so depressed that it was difficult to function", and eight percent reported seriously considering suicide (ACHA, 2013).

In addition, alcohol and substance abuse are major issues on college campuses. A report from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University found half of all full-time college students binge drink, abuse prescription drugs and/or illegal drugs, and almost 1 in 4 of the nation's college students (22.9%) meet the medical criteria for substance abuse or dependence. Of the approximately 20 percent of students who had been diagnosed or treated for a mental health or substance use condition in the past year, the most common conditions were depression, anxiety, panic attacks and ADHD (ACHA, 2011).

College students can often receive low- or no-cost mental health treatment on campus. Most four-year residential colleges and universities provide counseling services, and many also have established relationships with community providers. Recognizing the necessity for additional services, many community colleges are strengthening linkages to community mental health services. Unfortunately despite more services readily available, a majority of students never seek out the services that are accessible to them. Nationally, an average of only a little more than 11% of students sought the mental health services that were available to them. Counseling center directors report that the vast majority of students who die by suicide never received any of the

services offered by the counseling centers. The staggering number of students with untreated mental health and behavioral health conditions illustrates the need to move beyond a one-pronged approach that only focuses on providing access to high-quality mental health services. Additional steps are needed to target the students who never seek out the services provided by the campus counseling center. To bridge this gap many colleges are expanding prevention efforts, promoting the mental health of all students, and addressing the social and environmental risk factors that influence student mental health (SPRC/colleges and universities).

The growing need for additional on and off campus partnerships and increased access and utilization of counseling services is widely recognized. However, there is no one size fits all approach that will best accommodate all mental health conditions and specifically address the unique needs of a diverse student body. Thus, developing the right array of services and supports is critical to creating a college environment that allows students to both academic success and overall emotional well-being (NAMI, 2012).

Best Practices/ Solutions. Establishing a comprehensive public health approach is the best way to adequately address the mental health and behavioral health needs of a diverse student body (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2011). The Jed Foundation, a leading organization working to promote emotional health and prevent suicide among college students is involved in a number of initiatives to address the mental health and behavioral health care disparity. The Campus Mental Health Action Planning (CampusMHAP) is a collaborative effort between the Jed Foundation and the Educational Development Center (EDC). The CampusMHAP examined existing resources and strategic frameworks to create guidelines for best practices for mental health and behavioral health issues in higher education institutions. A comprehensive mental health action plan implements programs along a continuum of primary prevention, health promotion, treatment, maintenance, and crisis response. This includes efforts to strengthen students' existing resources to respond to stress, reduce risk factors and build protective factors for all students, identify early symptoms in individuals and intervene to prevent exacerbation of problems and their potential consequences, treat those who are experiencing mental health problems and identify those at risk for suicide, and when continued care is indicated, intervene to reduce relapse and recurrence, and provide after-care. In addition, schools must develop protocols and strategies to implement after a crisis or traumatic event, with the aim of alleviating the possible negative effects of the event on the campus community. The CampusMHAP published a guide for campuses to create a structured plan to promote the mental health of all students. This guide outlines the action steps that campuses can take to build infrastructure, engaging in strategic planning, and develop strategies to promote mental health and prevent suicide (Jed Foundation Campus Mental Health Action Map, 2011).

Building Infrastructure. Infrastructure needs to be in place to build and sustain an effective mental health promotion and suicide prevention effort. Thus, the development of a

comprehensive and coordinated set of programs and policies designed to reduce risk factors and increase protective factor is essential to creating a positive campus environment. Schools need leadership and administrative support committed to the mental health and overall wellbeing of their student body and willing to allocate funding to develop and sustain behavioral health initiatives. Every campus needs dedicated staff to coordinate programs, policies, and services to address suicide prevention and mental health promotion and a taskforce to further support this vision. Essential campus capacities to ensure that the demand for services does not outpace capacity includes counseling and health services clinicians are trained to assess and manage suicide risk, sufficient mental health services are available on and off campus to serve the number of students who seek help, a crisis protocol is in place and key players such as resident hall personal are trained in plan, and local, state and national hotlines are widely publicized on campus, including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Number, 1-800-273-TALK(8255). Jed Foundation has a number of publications to support campuses as they engage in the steps to secure the necessary infrastructure to support these services such as *Framework for Developing Institutional Protocols to Address the Acutely Distressed or Suicidal College Student* published in 2006 (Jed Foundation Campus Mental Health Action Map, 2011).

Engaging in a Strategic Planning Process. For campus efforts to be effective they must be comprehensive, strategic and well-planned. Strategic well-designed programs can be developed once program planners have insight into the presenting campus problems and how additional programs are expected to address current issues and accomplish desired goals. An assessment of campus climate can identify the programs that are already in place and assess their impact. For many campuses an effective way to integrate mental health treatment into overall wellness to co-locate counseling centers with health centers. This additionally serves to desegregate mental health services and protect students' anonymity (Jed Foundation Campus Mental Health Action Map, 2011).

Strategies for Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Suicide. The Jed Foundation and SPRC comprehensive approach identify seven areas of intervention. These are drawn from the Air Force Suicide Prevention Program which is identified as an evidenced based practice for suicide prevention. This program focuses on simultaneously reducing risk and enhancing protective factors. Based on the success of these interventions the Jed Foundation recommends that other colleges and universities adopt these best practice suggestions.

1. *Identify students at risk-* Schools can assure that medical history forms encompass mental health information, increase on campus screening activities and opportunities, cross train staff to be gatekeepers and have the knowledge, attitudes and skills to identify persons at risk, determine level of risk and make referral when necessary and put these persons. These strategies are not solely the responsibly of mental health professionals, but are a campus wide initiative.

2. *Increase help-seeking behavior*- There is an Interactive Screening Program developed by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention which targets students who may be reluctant to seek traditional psychological services but who be willing to receive anonymous assessment and counseling via the internet. The Jed Foundation provides online provides online screening and information about campus resources through ULifeline and promotes public service announcements, personal stories from students and well known public figures through the Half of Us campaign. The SAMSHA Campaign for Mental Health Recovery, aims to decrease negative attitudes surrounding mental illness and encouraging young people to supports friends with mental health problems. Active Minds, a national peer- to peer organization is dedicated to raising awareness about mental health
3. *Provide mental health services*- Campus counseling centers can initiate practices that meet the service demands of students, strengthen service delivery, and utilize existing staff and resources more efficiently. Examples of these practices include brief, same-day appointments by phone or in person for quick assessment and referral to either campus or community providers or short term psycho-educational groups for students who may not need more intensive therapy. Another step in the provision of quality services include ensuring that mental health clinicians are adequately trained to accurately diagnose students and provide appropriate treatment or referral, use goal-oriented, time-limited treatment modalities, assess and manage suicide risk. Finally, schools can partner with wellness/health promotion staff that can coordinate outreach efforts.
4. *Follow crisis management procedures*- Schools need clear protocols in place to address potential crisis situations. It is critical that administrators understand what actions they should take to meet the needs and ensure the safety of the students and campus community.
5. *Restrict access to potentially lethal means*- Drawing on more than two decades of prevention research, the Higher Education Center suggests campuses addresses five key factors in the campus environment including lack or lack of awareness of adequate social, recreational, and extracurricular options; perceptions that heavy drinking is a normal part of the college experience; aggressive marketing and promotion tactics by the alcohol industry; abundant availability of alcohol in and around campus; and lack or inconsistent enforcement of campus policies and community laws.
6. *Develop life skills*- The college experience is more than an intellectual one. An approach that embraces this would foster development of necessary life skills and critical capacities. Assisting students as they encounter everyday situations to learn adaptive ways to negotiate conflict, solve problems, and handle responsibilities prepares students for challenges they will face at every life phase.
7. *Promote social networks* – Current research indicates that a high quality of social support is more important than a large number of contacts. Colleges and universities are recognizing the integral role they can play in facilitating social connection. Many

campuses have developed living and learning communities where there is routine contact with other students, faculty and staff. This frequent interaction can result in increased identification of students in distress (Jed Foundation Campus Mental Health Action Map, 2011.)

The Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration published recommendations to address attitudinal and institutional barriers and to create opportunities for promoting recovery, *Building Bridges: Mental Health on Campus: Student Mental Health Leaders and College Administrators, Counselors, and Faculty in Dialogue* (2007). This publication shares insight from the firsthand experiences of students who live with these issues and also from professionals with institutional policy, service provision, and research perspectives. Recommendations from this group included to engage mentors and faculty advisors to target department chairs and other faculty to talk about mental health, establish a faculty and staff mental health network that holds monthly meetings, encourage student participation in decision making about the supports and treatments that are provided, implement a standard medical leave or readmission plan that is transparent, flexible and focuses on student well-being; creating partnerships to help minorities access counseling services, such as identifying points of entry such as residence halls, student life organizations on campus, fraternities, and sororities; and implementing a strategy to meet special needs of veterans on campus returning from combat (Building Bridges, 2007).

Additional recommendations surrounding better *mental health response* include a comprehensive, voluntary screening process, including one for substance abuse, with an emphasis on prevention; provide a spectrum of services to reflect an understanding of student needs, including counseling on developmental issues, intervention and care for serious mental illnesses, promotion of wellness and mental health, and prevention of mental health problems. Campus mental health services need additional understanding of the general sources of stress that affect students, encourage proactive student involvement in therapies to promote progress, emphasize understanding the reasons why students discontinue their medications, instead of focusing on the concept of noncompliance. Campus counseling centers can offer same-day appointments for students who call in the morning and offer after hour and emergency services. Faculty and staff need to receive training on how to handle student crises on campus. Peer education and support is another tremendous resource (Building Bridges, 2007).

Recommendations surrounding better *accommodations and policy* included develop and implement flexible accommodation policies based on the ADA and the disability community's experience, understanding that psychiatric problems constitute disabilities; take a proactive approach in describing disability services and other supports to students and parents; adopt flexible attendance policies that do not require students to choose between caring for themselves and attending class; and use academic advisors as points of contact (Building Bridges, 2007).

Additional Initiatives. In addition there are multiple foundations and initiatives dedicated to addressing the presenting needs of mental health and behavioral health programs; each of these current initiatives exists to provide improved mental health and behavioral health services and supports to college and university students. The Jed Foundation supports the JedCampus program which assists colleges create more comprehensive solutions to support their students. The Jed Foundation and the Clinton Health Matters Initiative (CHMI) are instituting a new joint program in the Spring of 2014, The *Jed and Clinton Foundation Health Matters Campus Program* (Campus Program), to help colleges and universities create healthier and safer campus environments. This program helps schools by providing a framework for how they can support student emotional wellbeing and mental health in a comprehensive way and helping those schools develop an action plan to make it happen. The Campus Program is designed to help colleges and universities promote emotional wellbeing and mental health programming, reduce substance abuse, and prevent suicide among 18-to-26 year-olds (Jed Foundation).

The American Psychiatric Foundation in partnership with the Jed Foundation is seeking to help teens during the critical transition period from high school to college through a program called Transition Year. The Transition Year helps students and their families focus on emotional health before, during and after the college transition. The "My Transition Year" tools that let families create a profile for students and then complete a "Right Fit Worksheet" for each prospective school so that emotional health and wellness are considered during the college selection process campaign. There are tools that help parents and students collect contact information for campus services related to wellness and emotional health; information and checklists that help parents and students differentiate between manageable emotional challenges related to the college transition and signs of a potentially larger problem; specific information and resources for families of students with a diagnosed mental health condition that help with issues like transferring care and treatment adherence to make it more likely these students will thrive at college (Jed Foundation).

In 2013, the American College Health Association (ACHA) and the National College Depression Partnership (NCDP) are began a joint quality improvement collaborative focused on supporting college health systems and clinicians in providing optimal depression care through the use of outcomes measurements and collaborative learning (NCDP, 2014).

Evidenced-Based Programs. The National Registry of Evidenced-based Programs and Practices identified several programs that are demonstrating positive outcomes with a college and university population. *CARE* (Care, Assess, Respond, Empower) is a school-based and community-based computerized assessment and counseling program that has demonstrated decreased suicide risk factors for at-risk adolescents and young adults. The four-hour program (two hours for assessment, two hours for counseling) is for use by mental healthcare providers. *Kognito At-Risk for College Students* is a 30-minute, online, interactive training simulation that prepares college students and student leaders, including resident assistants, to provide support to peers who are exhibiting signs of emotional distress such as depression, anxiety, substance

abuse, and suicidal ideation. Participants build knowledge, skills, and confidence to identify, approach, and refer an at-risk student to counseling, mental health, or crisis support services through narrative, self-paced training modules. *QPR (Question, Persuade, and Refer) Gatekeeper Training for Suicide Prevention* is a 1-2 hour educational program designed to teach those who are strategically positioned to recognize and refer someone at risk of suicide the warning signs of a suicide crisis and how to respond by following three steps. These steps include: (1) Question the individual's desire or intent regarding suicide; (2) Persuade the person to seek and accept help; and (3) Refer the person to appropriate resources. The *United States Air Force Suicide Prevention Program* is a multi-faceted public health program that demonstrated decreased suicide deaths, among other positive outcomes, in young adults and adults (SPRC-EBP).

Benefits of Providing Mental Health and Behavioral Health Services

Schools with the necessary services and supports to address mental health and behavioral health needs are better equipped to support students in their academic studies. Effective care for mental health and behavioral health disorders is a protective factor against suicide (SPRC). Without adequate support, many students drop out or fall behind academically. However, with the right services and supports, most students can stay in school and experience academic achievement. For students with mental health conditions, accessing appropriate accommodations can make the difference in academic achievement and student retention (NAMI, 2012).

In 2011, 59% full time, first time undergraduates students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4 year institution in 2005 completed their bachelor's degree within 6 years (nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/graduation rates). Since graduation rates are a key factor in ranking colleges according to the closely followed *U.S. News* report on colleges, providing adequate college mental health services is a good investment of resources (NAMI, 2012).

In 2010-2011, colleges and universities spent \$296 billion at public institutions, \$153 billion at private nonprofit institutions, and \$23 billion at private for profit institutions (nces fast facts, 2013). From 2011-2012, 71% of all undergraduate students received some type of financial aid, 59 percent grants, 42 loans 6 percent work study, 4 percent veterans benefits (nces fast facts, 2013). Investing in college campus mental health programs can yield benefits far beyond the contribution these programs make to the personal well-being of students. They can help ensure that the Federal investment in post-secondary is returned to the taxpayers in the form of academically successful and emotionally sound college graduates ready to contribute as members of families, communities, and the workforce (SPRC).

An increasing number of students with mental health and behavioral health conditions attend college. This issue requires an ongoing, coordinated response focused on health promotion and prevention to ensure that students are provided with every opportunity to learn and thrive in an environment that also promotes overall mental health and wellness.

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