IMPROVING STUDENT ACCESS & UTILIZATION OF CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

A MEMO FOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

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INTRODUCTION TO STUDENT AFFAIRS Dr. Laura Sponsler

5 Strategies to Improve Student Access and Utilization of Mental Health Services on College Campuses

INTRODUCTION

Research conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) shows that on college campuses today, one in four students have a diagnosable illness (Crudo & Gruttadaro, 2012). Five of the most prevalent that students are facing are depression, anxiety, suicide, eating disorders, and addiction. More than ever, students are coming to campuses with diagnoses and need mental health and counseling centers support (*Center for Collegiate*, 2015).

According to the NASPA Vice President for Student Affairs census survey, 97% of VPSAs that participated reported that their campus had counseling and mental health services (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014). If that is the case, then why is there rise in mental health needs on college campuses, and why do students report that

VPSA's at Institutions with Counseling Services
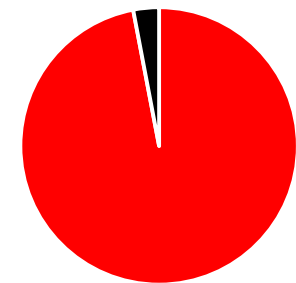
- Have counseling services
- Do not have counseling services

Sponsler & Wesaw, (2014)

How can you, as a Vice Presidents for Student Affairs, work to make mental health services better and more accessible for the students who need them?

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

According to an article by the American Psychological Association mental health on college campus started shifting in the mid 1990's from more developmental and informational services to students coming in with more severe psychological problems and needed services. This shift has continued over the past decade and doesn't show any signs of stopping (American Psychological Association, 2011). Research on the effect of mental health support for students has continually shown that strong support can improve students' lives in areas such as academics, retention, and personal well-being (Francis & Horn, 2016; American Psychological Association, 2011).

1 in 4 college students has a diagnosable mental or psychological illness.

(Crudo & Gruttadaro, 2012)

In a research brief called, "Campus-Based Practices for Promoting Student Success: Counseling Services" the Midwestern Higher Education Compact found that over the last seven years the average percentage of students seeking counseling services on college campuses has stayed around 10-15%. (Francis & Horn, 2016) This percentage shows that higher education institutions can, and should, be doing more to reach the other 85-90% of students who are not utilizing services. However, with a small part of the student population utilizing the services around mental health, and there still being questions about the inaccessibility of services, how are schools supposed to improve access using the same financial and human resources they have now?

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(Francis & Horn, 2016)

RESEARCH BEHIND 5 STRATEGIES

The five strategies were sourced using data from three separate articles: *Campus-Based Practices for Promoting Student Success: Counseling Services, The Mental Health Needs of Today's College Students: Challenges and Recommendations, & Population-Based Intiatives in College Mental Health: Students Helping Students Overcome Obstacles.* (Doerfler, Ellison, Kirsch, Morse, Pinder, & Riba, 2014; Francis and Horn, 2003; Kitzrow, 2003) Campuses need to be creative with approaches to student's mental health and the resources they offer as the need for services rises and budgets remain the same or are cut.

The five strategies presented in this memo utilizes creative options while being cognizant of financial concerns that institutions may be facing. Implementation of these strategies would be budget friendly, although we do acknowledge that it would require more human resources devoted to these initiatives. Institutions should start by assessing the services they offer and the amount of financial and human resources they have to make changes. They can then move onto which of these strategies, if not all, is most feasible on their campus.

Creative Marketing & Outreach

Look beyond the brochures and expected marketing to think of creative solutions that students would want to keep. Some ideas include: magnets, school mascot stress toys, and utilizing social media

Diverse Options for Students

Work to improve access by adding different options for students to receive help such as anonymous walk in hours, group therapy sessions that can be customized, out of business hours' appointments, & a counselor on call program

Campus Wide Notification & Referral System

Create an online referral system available to all community members to notify campus response team about student issues or concerns

5 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACCESS & UTILIZATION

Peer - to - Peer Programs

Students can be one of the best resources for each other and it can be easier at times to speak with another student versus a medical professional, so utilize a peer-to-peer program where student leaders are trained to provide certain services for other students

Constant Assessment of Services

Consistently assess if your programs are working and if they are not working, utilize the students who are using the services to help decide what changes should be implemented to fix that

(Doerfler, Ellison, Kirsch, Morse, Pinder, & Riba, 2014; Francis and Horn, 2003; Kitzrow, 2003)

DIVERSE OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS

The University of Denver has scheduled hours of anonymous walk in counseling each day. Students can walk in at any time during these two hours and be connected to a trained professional, they are not required to go through an intake process or to provide any personal information about themselves and can chose to remain completely anonymous (http://www.du.edu/health-and-counseling-center/counseling/students/).

At the **University of Florida**, group therapy is provided for first generation students, graduate students, international student support (which is offered in different languages), groups for people of color, sexual orientation groups, different themed groups around medical challenges, anger management, sexual assault survivors, and they have three different workshops around anxiety management (http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/group-listings).

CAMPUS WIDE NOTIFICATION & REFERAL SYSTEM

With **Delta University's** campus wide alert and intervention system, you click a button and it walks you through a form to submit student concerns. Staff and faculty are trained on how to utilize the system and what potential signs they should be looking for in students. Once an alert is sent, a member of the Student Success Center staff reaches out to the student and works with them to determine what resources the student might need (Coley, Coley, & Holmes, 2015).

CREATIVE MARKETING AND OUTREACH

The **University of Minnesota's** mental wellness staff participates in welcome week and challenges students to balance a feather on their fingertips which serves as a metaphor for the balancing that students will be facing in college, the activity attracts students to the table and the students then get to keep the feather which has all of the information related to resources around health and wellness that the campus offers (Patterson, 2015).

CONSTANT ASSESSMENT

The **ACHA-National College Health Assessment** is an example of a survey that institutions can use to assess the mental health needs of students on their campus. It provides data around all aspects of mental health, as well as topics of wellness such as tobacco or alcohol usage. Institutions can then use the data they receive from students to assess if they are providing the services that students need around health and wellness (http://www.acha-ncha.org/overview.html).

PEER – TO – PEER PROGRAMS

The Student Support Network at the **Worcester Polytechnic Institute** is a 6-week training program that students can select to take that helps them to be better prepared to support students on campus. Each session lasts 50-minutes and is led by the counseling center staff (https://www.wpi.edu/student-experience/getting-involved/leadership/peer-assistance).

CONCLUSION

College students' mental health is something that institutions have been dealing with, and will continue to deal with well into the future. As stated in *The State of Mental Health on College Campuses: A Growing Crisis,* mental health issues among college students started to rise in 1990 and hasn't stopped rising since, nor do they see it stopping anytime soon. (American Psychological Association, 2011) So with these facts, how come institutions haven't seen a significant rise in mental health services utilization by students? (Francis & Horn, 2016) If you ask the students, it is because the services are inaccessible and unknown to them (Francis & Horn, 2016).

Institutions can, and should, be doing more to serve the mental health needs of students. In *The Mental Health Needs of College Students: Challenges and Recommendations,* Kitzrow (2003) states: "Counseling centers can respond effectively to the current challenges if they have the support and commitment of the administration; and if they take steps to balance the demand for services with existing resources by reviewing priorities, establishing appropriate limits, and employing innovative strategies." The campus mental health crisis isn't going away, and the need for effective student services within counseling and wellness has never been greater than it is right now. (Kitzrow, 2003)

It will take everyone at an institution, administration and student affairs alike, to ensure that we are doing the best we can to combat mental health issues on our campuses.

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