Supporting Student Success through CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

Info Brief Series for Community Colleges
This Info Brief series describes strategies for community colleges to help students access services, activities, and supports relevant to their individual needs and goals to boost college retention and success.

Mental Health Services

“I think colleges should pay attention to the fact that many more students need mental health services than who actually access them. Some of the students most affected or most at risk for mental health conditions are the hardest to reach because they are secluded in their rooms.”

This quote is from a college student with a mental health condition surveyed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in 2012. Anxiety and depression are the most prevalent mental health concerns among college students and rates of both have increased in recent years (Wilson, 2015). Comparative studies have shown that community college students experience more significant psychological concerns such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, substance abuse, and addiction with fewer mental health resources than students at four-year institutions. (Katz & Davison, 2014).

While the availability of counseling at community colleges is increasing, community colleges are still much less likely to offer psychiatric services for students than four-year institutions. Ac-
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According to the 2014-2015 survey by the American College Counseling Association (ACCA), only 10 percent of community colleges surveyed reported offering these services on-site (ACCA, 2015). In comparison, 58 percent of four-year institutions surveyed by the International Association of Counseling Services reported offering such services (Gallagher, 2014). Community college students may be at greater risk of anxiety and depression than their peers at four-year institutions given that they often juggle more life responsibilities (Chambers, 2012). There is also an increased chance that any clues about students’ distress could go unnoticed at community colleges due to the greater number of commuter students.

Increasing student persistence and success requires attention to resources for supporting students’ mental health needs. Some studies indicate there is a positive relationship between receiving counseling services and students’ persistence and academic performance (Francis & Horn, 2016). Research also indicates that students with mental health needs who develop positive relationships with other students and staff and get engaged in clubs and organizations have higher graduation rates (Salzer, 2012). While not all community colleges will be able to provide their students with comprehensive psychiatric care on-site, NAMI recommends that colleges connect students with mental health resources and services in the community. Many students may feel embarrassed about mental health challenges and concerned about the stigma associated with seeking counseling and treatment. In order to reduce stigma, colleges can integrate education about mental health conditions and wellness into student orientation and student success courses, publicize school policies on health services and confidentiality, and establish peer support programs (NAMI, 2012).

**ALL STUDENTS NEED ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE**

Most counselors at community colleges have many other responsibilities including serving on committees, academic advising, and career counseling (American College Counseling Association, 2015). As a result, college counselors may have limited ability to address the mental health needs of their students. Students who need mental health services may not be aware of the services provided or where to get these services (NAMI, 2012). The unique challenges and stress of late adolescence and early adulthood can make college students especially vulnerable and in need of mental health supports (Podmostko, 2007). In addition, these students are often of the age when mental health disorders may begin to emerge and they need support to understand treatment options (Van Pelt, 2013).

All students need to know when and where they can seek help and that they will not be judged but supported. They need to know that their college cares about their success and will work to help them get there. Learning about the warning signs and symptoms associated with mental health conditions and where they can go if they start to experience challenges can help put students at ease and may increase the likelihood that they will seek help when they need it (Armstrong & Young, 2015). According to NAMI’s survey, college websites are the most common way that students with mental health needs learn about the availability of mental health services followed by the student health center (NAMI, 2012). For this reason, NAMI rec-
ommends that colleges put information about mental health concerns and services on their homepage to ensure that all students are aware of what's available in their communities.

Mental health services at colleges should be located somewhere that is both accessible and convenient for students. Services should be provided in a central location close to other services and at hours that are convenient for students. Colleges also need to take steps to protect the privacy of students who seek services. Some students may be at a stage in which they are uncomfortable with others knowing that they have mental health needs and may feel more comfortable accessing services if they do not think that everyone will know (NAMI, 2012). This can be a delicate balance for colleges to ensure that services are easily accessible while also respecting students' privacy, but a necessary one. A student who is experiencing a mental health emergency may need help right away and a service structure is needed to ensure that they receive immediate support (Wood, 2012).

In order to fully support their students' mental health needs, community colleges need to provide professional development for counselors, faculty, staff, and administrators on the significance of mental health challenges and its impact on student well-being (NAMI, 2012). Faculty and staff should be trained to understand how to appropriately respond to student mental health needs and effective ways to make referrals (Wood, 2012). Professional development therefore also needs to ensure that faculty and staff have the resources to provide their students with the appropriate referrals, support, and guidance.

Campus mental health is something that affects the whole campus. The lack of residential pro-

gramming at many community colleges means that students needing mental health services may not only lack psychiatric care but may lack a social support system as well. A campus culture should be cultivated in which all students have access to psycho-social supports such as affinity groups (e.g., LGBT, veterans, cultural) and mental health support networks (e.g., NAMI, Active Minds) to assist students with relating to others and in taking care of their mental health needs (Katz & Davison, 2014).

Colleges will have different policies in regard to what is considered an appropriate response, but supporting students should be the focus and ultimate goal on every campus. Administrators need to encourage and support efforts to improve mental health care and services on their campus and develop policies that will support students and their specific needs (Wood, 2012). For example, colleges should develop a medical leave and class withdrawal plan for students experiencing mental health needs and ensure that this is communicated to all students. In addition to the development of peer-to-peer support groups and campus-based mental health support networks, community colleges need to examine how to maintain resource centers for specific student needs and seek input from students with mental health conditions on how to create and improve services, increase support, and reduce stigma across the institution (Jackel, 2015; Katz & Davison, 2014).

WHAT ARE COLLEGES DOING?

California Community College Student Mental Health Program, Calif. – Through funding from the California Mental Health Services Association, community colleges throughout California are collaborating to focus on prevention and early intervention strategies for students.
The program involves campus-based grants, statewide training and technical assistance, suicide prevention training, and program evaluation. Through their website, other colleges can get ideas and find resources to bring mental health services to their campus and enhance existing services.

**Moberly Area Community College (MACC), Mo.** – MACC has partnered with local mental health providers to offer short-term care and referral services. Students are able to receive immediate care through the partnership.

**RESOURCES**

**National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** – NAMI provides resources for teens and young adults, including helpful publications such as *Getting the Right Start* and *Taking Charge*.

**OK2Talk.org** – The Ok 2 Talk Tumblr and website are designed to support people with mental illness and to get people talking about mental health. Through providing their stories, pictures, and thoughts in a safe space, teens and young adults can share what they are dealing with and encourage others to do so as well. The developers hope that through this format, young people with mental illness will no longer feel alone and realize that there are others who are going through tough times as well.

**Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator** – The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a substance abuse and mental health locator application on its website which allows people to find services near them.

**Active Minds, Inc.** – A non-profit based in Washington, D.C., Active Minds seeks to change the way that mental health is talked about on college campuses and bring the conversation into the forefront. Its website provides a lot of resources to colleges and college students, as well as information on how to start an Active Minds chapter on campus. Active Minds also has specific resources for transgender college student mental health with definitions, statistics, stories, and resources.

**The Jed Foundation** – The Jed Foundation’s mission is to “protect emotional health and prevent suicide among college and university students.” The organization’s website provides information and strategies for parents, students, campus professionals, and supporters. *The Campus Program Framework* identifies factors that will promote and support mental health. Through this program, the foundation seeks to empower schools, provide them with resources, and connect them with experts. There is a fee to be a part of the program, but information on the framework is available online.

**The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law** – The Bazelon Center has published a model policy for colleges and universities to help them work through the complex issues that institutions encounter in supporting the mental health needs of their students.

“*Mind the gap: Person-centered delivery of mental health information to post-secondary students*” – This research article highlights the relationship between college students’ knowledge about symptoms of mental health conditions, their ability to recognize when they have mental health needs, and the likelihood that they will seek out services. Colleges may find this useful for assessing their campus-wide mental health supports and designing new ways to support the needs of students.
ALL STUDENTS MAY NEED SUPPORT FOR MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT DISCLOSING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Disclosing a mental health condition to others has advantages and disadvantages. While some students with mental health needs may feel embarrassed or fearful about disclosing their condition, others may feel a sense of relief from sharing what they are experiencing with others who are willing to offer support and understanding (Salzer, 2012; Jackel, 2015). Some students want to disclose their needs immediately at the start of the semester and other choose to wait until they are having difficulty or never disclose at all (Kranke, Jackson, Taylor, Anderson-Fye, & Floersch, 2013). One of the primary advantages of disclosure is gaining access to disability-related accommodations and supports. Some students with mental health needs may be eligible for accommodations from the disability services office due to their condition though many may not realize it. Just like other students with disabilities, the responsibility to disclose and request accommodations lies with the student (NCWD/Youth, 2005). Often, concerns about potential consequences of disclosure prevent students from seeking support (Salzer, Wick, & Rogers, 2008). College students surveyed by NAMI (2012) cited concerns about how faculty and staff would perceive their condition and the stigma that may be attached to it. Some students chose not to disclose based on the opinion that they did not need any accommodations to succeed academically and others said that they did not have the opportunity. Some of the accommodations and supports that students with mental health conditions may be eligible to receive in college include excused absences for treatment, psychiatric referral and services, medical leave of absence, no-penalty
course withdrawals, priority registration, adjustments in testing, extended time or placement in a distraction-reduced environment, and extended homework assignment timelines.

Colleges should provide information to all students about the availability of accommodations and support for eligible students with mental health needs and other disabilities through the disability services office. At the same time, it is important to explain the potential benefits of disclosure and how students’ confidentiality will be protected in the case of disclosure. Because the decision to disclose is a very personal one, students may benefit from guidance on potential advantages and disadvantages of disclosing a mental health condition in different situations. Colleges should consider sharing the publication, *The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Students with Disabilities*, and accompanying videos as resources on learning about whether, when, and how to handle disclosure. Guidance about disclosure should include information about disclosing one’s disability online and through social media as well. *Cyber Disclosure for Youth with Disabilities* is a useful resource for students on things to consider related to online disclosure. Offering peer support activities for students with mental health needs is also a valuable way to reduce stigma and isolation while encouraging students to seek out services and support at the college.

**WHAT ARE COLLEGES DOING?**

**Pierce College, Calif.** – Students at Pierce College in California have worked with New America Media (NAM) to share their stories of depression, mental illness, and dealing with losing someone to suicide on the website FeelBetterCA.org. Through this platform, students are able to share their own stories and help others at their college know that they are not alone, they can get through this, and that it is all right to get help.

**RESOURCES**

**Campus Mental Health Rights, Know Your Rights** – Published by Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, this is a guide for college students about the laws in regards to mental health support and services for young adults.

**Getting Accommodations at College: Tools for School** – This Transition Research and Training Center tip sheet written for young adults with mental health needs provides information on the types of accommodations that students might request and what steps are involved in requesting accommodations.

**Peer Support in Mental Health Services** – The Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures at Portland State University has published a document compiling what research teaches us about how peers can provide mental health support to youth and young adults.
STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS MAY NEED SUPPORT IN TRANSITIONING TO THE ADULT MENTAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

There is currently no coordinated system to ensure that youth with mental health needs who are receiving care from the child health system make a smooth transition to receiving services from the adult mental health system (Podmostko, 2007). Adult and pediatric health care systems are often not well-coordinated, which makes it difficult for youth in transition to find the appropriate services (Woolsey & Katz-Leavy, 2008). Young adults face inconsistent care and disruptions in services as they age out of the pediatric system of care and may not have the knowledge and resources to understand how to continue receiving services (Woolsey & Katz-Leavy, 2008). They may be referred to an adult system provider, but this new provider may be ill-equipped to handle a young adult and all the questions, concerns, and uncertainties that they have. The number of changes that students with mental health needs face in their transition to adult care can be both intimidating and stressful. As community colleges support their students with mental health needs, it is important that they provide information and guidance on how to transition successfully in order to limit the amount of disruptions in care. By creating a campus culture that actively seeks to support the mental health of their students, colleges can support this transition. Colleges can make students aware of adult resources in the community that will support their unique needs as a young adult. Community college staff can provide support by encouraging students to advocate for their mental health needs, as well as providing them with a location or a contact person
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on campus that they can go to during difficult times. Whether it is a contact person or a contact office at the college, students should know that they have somewhere to go if they are having difficulty finding support in the adult system. This contact can relieve some of the stress of transition that is experienced by students with mental health needs, while limiting possible disruptions in care. By providing consistent support for mental health needs, students will be able to spend more time focusing on their academic success, which in turn increases the likelihood of their persistence to graduation.

RESOURCES

Helping Youth with Mental Health Needs Avoid Transition Cliffs: Lessons from Pioneering Transition Programs – This Info brief from NCWD/Youth provides helpful information about the transition needs of students with mental health needs.

The Emerging Adults Initiative by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provided five-year grants to seven states to assist youth with mental health conditions transition to adulthood. Findings from this initiative can help colleges to learn more about the mental health care transition and how to better support their students.

Community college students are at a greater risk for diagnosis and treatment for significant mental health conditions (Katz & Davison, 2014). Many students may come to college with a mental health need and others may develop one while in college. It is important for colleges to offer supports that are specific to treating and managing mental health conditions. By providing a supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help, community colleges can prevent mental health needs from derailing students’ educational progress.

REFERENCES


The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C. NCWD/Youth is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into service strategies. This Info Brief series was written by Kathryn Nichols and Mindy Larson. To obtain this publication in an alternate format, please use the contact information below. This Info Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-23804-12-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may reproduce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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