

Addressing the Epidemic: Expanding Mental Health Services on SUNY Campuses

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Thesis

To address increases in student demand for counseling services, the State University of New York system must assess the need for services through a voluntary SUNY wide mental health screening program, and provide SUNY counseling centers with appropriate resources.

Background & Analysis

Mental illness is a growing problem amongst college students. Unfortunately, there is still a negative stigma surrounding the discussion of mental health, making it a difficult topic to address. In one study, less than half of college students surveyed who tested positive for depression or anxiety were actively seeking treatment.¹ Three fourths of mental illnesses are present before the age of twenty-five, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death amongst college age students. Students with anxiety and depression are also more likely to have a low GPA and drop out of college.²

According to the SUNY Mental Health Task Force report for 2016, many SUNY schools reported an increased demand for services, with several counseling centers admitting to being burdened by limited resources and staff.³ While many universities have adopted the “brief therapy model”, a short-term, solution oriented treatment model designed to increase the number of students seen, students who require long term treatment may be given referrals for off campus resources.⁴ However, some campuses do not allow freshmen students to have cars, making it difficult to get off campus, and resources may be scarce, particularly in rural areas. The SUNY Task force also found that 68% of respondents believed that off campus services were located too far from campus, or that wait times were too long.⁵

Talking Points

- ▶ Almost one-third of students have reported having difficulty functioning due to feeling overwhelmed or depressed.⁶
- ▶ Demands for services on many campuses are increasing, with one SUNY college reporting a 39% increase in requests for services in the last four years.
- ▶ One college in the SUNY 2016 report admitted to having wait times up to one month in the past year, with only some of the most extreme cases being seen.⁷

The Policy Idea

The State University of New York system must implement a policy that mandates an allocation of resources to provide comprehensive mental health care for SUNY students. By adopting a standardized, voluntary SUNY wide mental health screening program, the SUNY system can assess student needs and ensure that each campus counseling center is equipped with an appropriate number of professional staff and available hours, to reduce the need for off campus referrals, connect students with resources, and better understand the magnitude of mental health problems on SUNY campuses.

Policy Analysis

One university that has taken innovative steps to combat mental illness is UCLA, which is taking part in the Depression Grand Challenge, a campus-wide commitment to better understand and treat mental illness.⁸ Just starting this fall, the university is offering free mental health screenings and services to all incoming students. Students who are found to be at risk or experiencing anxiety and depression are invited to take part in a free, eight-week cognitive behavioral program. By reducing the costs and barriers to treatment, the university and researchers hope to destigmatize and better detect signs of depression. It is one of the first ever university wide mental health screening programs, and uses raffles and prizes as incentives for students who take the online screenings.⁹

By utilizing a campus wide screening program like the one at UCLA, SUNY schools may be able to better assess and understand the need for mental health resources on campus. By making mental health a priority and encouraging students to participate in the screenings, the SUNY system can help ensure that students at risk or experiencing mental illnesses receive earlier treatment. Counseling is important not just for students with mental illnesses, but for anyone struggling to cope with the everyday stresses of college life.

Key Facts

- ▶ The mean professional counseling staff to student ratio around the country is 1737:1.¹⁰
- ▶ 46% of colleges that responded to the 2016 SUNY Mental Health Task Force also reported only have one or two staff, with limited access to psychiatric services.¹¹
- ▶ According to the Association for University and College Counseling, from 2015-2016, 57.1% of colleges surveyed nationwide reported that the severity of student mental health concerns and related behavior on campus increased.¹²

NEXT STEPS

One way the SUNY system can commit to improving mental health is through the SUNY to a Healthier New York Initiative, which has already committed to promoting tobacco free campuses and ensuring that communities are staffed with an appropriate number of health professionals.¹³ It will be important to reach out to the heads of the SUNY Mental Health Task Force such as Paul Marthers, the Vice Provost, and Elizabeth Droz, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. By creating a policy that mandates increased mental health funding and adopting a research based approach through screening services like those at UCLA, the SUNY system can help destigmatize mental health, encourage students to seek treatment, and better understand mental illnesses. Adopting this initiative should be done in coordination with university counseling centers and other campus groups that are dedicated to promoting healthier student bodies.

¹ Hunt, Justin, and Daniel Eisenberg. "Mental Health Problems and Help-Seeking Behavior Among College Students." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 46, no. 1 (2010): 3-10. Accessed October 10, 2017. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.08.008.

² Malmon, Alison. "The Issue." Active Minds. Accessed November 05, 2017. <http://www.activeminds.org/issues-a-resources/the-issue>.

³ Marthers, Paul, and Elizabeth Droz. *SUNY Mental Health Task Force Executive Summary Report September 2016*. Report. SUNY Mental Health Task Force, The State University of New York. September 2016. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/university-life/MentalHealth-TaskForce-Report-Sept2016.pdf>.

⁴ "University Counseling Center." Binghamton University - University Counseling Center. Accessed October 10, 2017. <https://binghamton.edu/counseling/>.

⁵ Marthers, Paul, and Elizabeth Droz. *SUNY Mental Health Task Force Executive Summary Report September 2016*. Report. SUNY Mental Health Task Force, The State University of New York. September 2016. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/university-life/MentalHealth-TaskForce-Report-Sept2016.pdf>.

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⁷ Marthers, Paul, and Elizabeth Droz. *SUNY Mental Health Task Force Executive Summary Report September 2016*. Report. SUNY Mental Health Task Force, The State University of New York. September 2016. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/university-life/MentalHealth-TaskForce-Report-Sept2016.pdf>.

⁸ "FAQs about the rollout of the Check In Survey to screen UCLA students for depression & anxiety." Grand Challenges. October 2, 2017. Accessed November 18, 2017. <https://grandchallenges.ucla.edu/happenings/2017/10/02/faqs-about-the-rollout-of-the-check-in-survey-to-screen-ucla-students-for-depression-anxiety/>.

⁹ Haas, Brian. "UCLA to offer free mental health screening, treatment to all incoming students." UCLA Newsroom. September 14, 2017. Accessed October 15, 2017. <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/ucla-to-offer-free-mental-health-screening-treatment-to-all-incoming-students>.

¹⁰ Reetz, David R., Carolyn Bershada, Peter LeViness, and Monica Whitlock. "The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey." Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors. 2016. Accessed November 7, 2017. <https://www.aucccd.org/director-surveys-public>.

¹¹ Marthers, Paul, and Elizabeth Droz. *SUNY Mental Health Task Force Executive Summary Report September 2016*. Report. SUNY Mental Health Task Force, The State University of New York. September 2016. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/university-life/MentalHealth-TaskForce-Report-Sept2016.pdf>.

¹² Reetz, David R., Carolyn Bershada, Peter LeViness, and Monica Whitlock. "The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey." Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors. 2016. Accessed November 7, 2017. <https://www.aucccd.org/director-surveys-public>.

¹³ Reetz, David R., Carolyn Bershada, Peter LeViness, and Monica Whitlock. "The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey." Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors. 2016. Accessed November 7, 2017. <https://www.aucccd.org/director-surveys-public>.