

# Mental Health, Substance Use, and Wellbeing in Higher Education: Supporting the Whole Student

March 2021



# The Main Issue

- There has been an alarming increase in reports of student mental illness, substance use and emotional distress in higher education
  - Exacerbated by:
    - COVID-19 and associated economic crisis
    - Increased recognition of the unique challenges for some students caused by long-standing systemic racism

# Some data

- The 2018-2019 Healthy Minds survey reported **40% of students are experiencing a significant mental health problem**
  - Major depression affected **18% in 2018-19**, compared to 8% in 2007
  - Severe anxiety affected **14% in 2018-19**, compared to 6% in 2007
  - Eating disorders affected **10% in 2018-19**, nearly doubled from 2013
  - **14% reported suicidal ideation** in 2018-19, compared to 6% in 2007
  - **2% made a suicide attempt** in 2018-2019, compared to 0.6% in 2007

# Some more data

- Graduate students report depression and anxiety 6x the rate of the general adult population
- Over 25% of medical students report depression
- Mid-COVID, 2020 survey showed significant increases in depression and anxiety
- American Council on Education reported 68% of higher education presidents listed student mental health as among the most pressing issues

# Sponsors

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
  - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
  - National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
  - National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

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# The Task

- Identify and review programs, practices, resources, and policies
- Analyze the challenges institutions face
- Investigate factors related to the funding of and access to mental health services and support for student wellbeing
- Examine, to the extent possible, the relationship between student mental health, wellbeing, and rates of alcohol and drug use
- Produce a consensus report with recommendations

**CONSENSUS STUDY REPORT**

**MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE,  
and WELLBEING in HIGHER EDUCATION**

*Supporting the Whole Student*





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# Some Cross-cutting Points

- Student wellbeing is foundational to academic success
- Incidence and prevalence of mental illness, substance use and emotional distress have been trending up for decades
  - COVID and its economic consequences are compounding the problem
  - Recognition of impacts of systemic racism points out needs of specific student groups
- Current campus resources and counseling centers are often inadequate

# Some (More) Cross-cutting Points

- Institutional culture/environment can exacerbate the problems
- There are no one-size-fits-all solutions
- Requires campus-wide commitment to ensure student mental health and wellbeing is an institutional priority
- There are many unanswered questions - need research

# Moving Forward: Recommendation Themes

1. Institutional culture and policies
2. Prioritizing mental health amid financial constraints
3. Understanding the state of student mental health and wellbeing on each campus
4. Institutional capacity to provide needed services
5. Developing faculty, staff, and student capability to be of help

# Moving Forward: Recommendations

## INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND POLICIES

### RECOMMENDATION 5-1:

Institutional leaders, starting with the president and board of trustees or regents, should **articulate the importance of creating a culture of wellbeing on their campus**, one that recognizes the range of individual behaviors and community norms that affect wellbeing, acknowledges the magnitude of mental health and substance use issues on campus, addresses the stigma associated with mental illness and substance use disorders, and provides a range of resources to support students with different levels of need.

# Moving Forward: Recommendations

## INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND POLICIES

### **RECOMMENDATION 5-2:**

Leadership from all segments of the campus community is needed to promote a culture of wellbeing.

... establish a team that involves all sectors of the institution's community that coordinates, reviews, and addresses mental health, substance use and wellbeing concerns.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5-3:**

Should ensure leave of absence and reenrollment policies and practices will accommodate the needs of students experiencing mental health and substance use problems and the time needed for effective treatment and recovery.

# Moving Forward: Recommendations

## PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH AMID FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

### **RECOMMENDATION 5-4:**

Institutions of higher education and the government agencies that support them should increase the priority given to funding for campus and community mental health and substance use services.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5-5:**

Institutions of higher education should work with insurance companies and health plans and federal, state and local regulators to remove barriers to seeking reimbursement for student mental health and substance use costs for covered students.

# Moving Forward: Recommendations

## UNDERSTANDING THE STATE OF STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING ON EACH CAMPUS

### **RECOMMENDATION 5-6:**

Institutions of higher education should conduct a regular (preferably at least every two years) assessment that addresses student mental health, substance use, wellbeing, and campus climate.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5-7:**

Institutions of higher education should work to ensure students have access to high-quality mental health and substance use treatment services. These services can be provided either on campus or in the local community.



# Moving Forward: Recommendations

DEVELOPING FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENT CAPABILITY TO BE OF HELP

## **RECOMMENDATION 5-8:**

Provide and require faculty training on how to create an inclusive and healthy learning environment.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5-9:**

As a part of formal orientation to college life, all students should participate in structured opportunities to learn about individual wellbeing and the cultivation of a healthy, respectful campus climate. This orientation should also include material on how to develop resilience in the face of inevitable challenges they will experience both in college and in life.

# Moving Forward: Recommendations

DEVELOPING FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENT CAPABILITY TO BE OF HELP

## **RECOMMENDATION 5-10:**

Institutions of higher education should recognize that there is no single approach to promoting wellbeing and dealing with mental health and substance use problems that will be appropriate to all student populations.

# Research Agenda

- Developing, evaluating, and sustaining a campus culture centered in wellbeing
- Factors that affect student mental health, substance use, and wellbeing
- Policies that promote positive student mental health and wellbeing and low levels of substance use
- Mental health, substance use, and wellbeing collaborations between higher education and community providers
- Addressing the limited data and research related to mental health, substance use, and wellbeing in higher education

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**Thank you**

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