ENHANCING COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

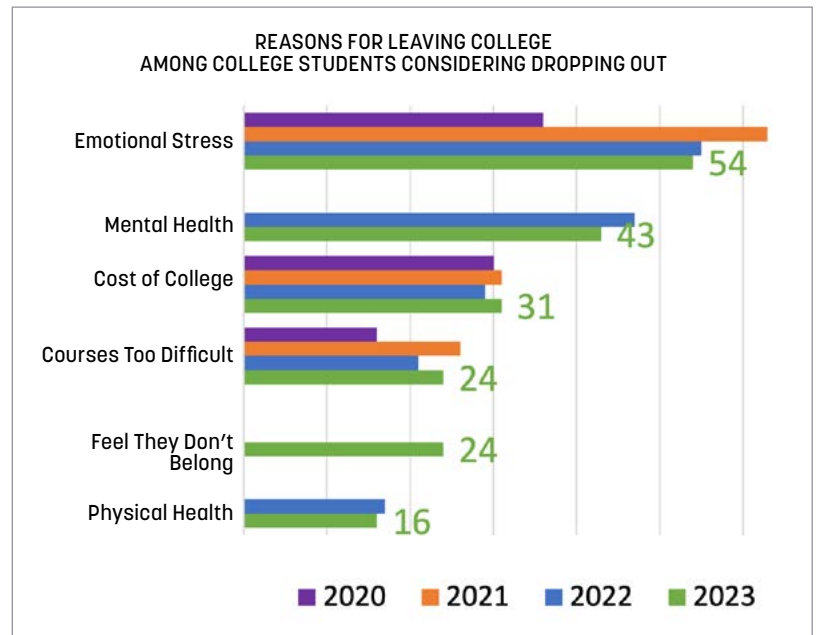WISCONSIN OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

WHY THIS MATTERS

Like adolescents, young adults are experiencing elevated rates of mental health problems. The mental health challenges of college and university students are particularly pronounced. Long-term effects of the pandemic continue to shape young people's mental health. As these students transition into adulthood, it is critical they are prepared to manage their mental health and receive support for their well-being.[1]

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS[2]

The majority of college students report moderate or high stress levels, with many feeling stressed often or constantly.[3] Nearly four in 10 college students experience moderate or severe depression, and a third experience moderate or severe anxiety.[5] Half of college students report feeling lonely.[5] Though preventable, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students.

While 70% of students have struggled with mental health since starting college, only 37% have sought campus mental health care.[6]

Emotional stress and mental health problems remain the top reasons of students considering leaving college.[7]

REASONS FOR LEAVING COLLEGE
AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS CONSIDERING DROPPING OUT

- Emotional Stress — 54
- Mental Health — 43
- Cost of College — 31
- Courses Too Difficult — 24
- Feel They Don't Belong — 24
- Physical Health — 16

■ 2020 ■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2023

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?

The following are examples and not meant to be an exhaustive list of the work happening on all campuses in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin colleges and universities continue to see record demand for mental health services. They offer numerous resources to bolster student mental health.[8]

Institutional support can include on-campus therapy and tele-mental health; help navigating insurance; offering a variety of wellness classes, activities, and events; training in suicide prevention and mental health first aid for both students and faculty; crisis teams who offer care to students with acute needs; and referrals to community resources. Recently, Carroll University began keeping their counseling center open throughout the summer months.

UW-Madison offers faculty the Healthy Academics Instructional Toolkit, featuring evidence-based strategies that build social connectedness, foster resilience, and promote help-seeking. It also provides resources ranging from syllabus statements to trauma-informed teaching practices.

Many schools have peer-to-peer mental health groups. These student-run efforts support mental well-being, raise awareness of mental health issues, encourage help-seeking and wellness, and work to prevent suicide.

Following campus tragedies, UW schools have put enhanced resources and training in place. For example, at UW-River Falls, a postvention plan was developed with leading mental health experts. The postvention plan systematizes how the campus should respond to a student death to ensure consistency with communications, grief support, and suicide prevention.

WHAT HELPS

Belonging: Students suggest colleges can improve the academic experience by promoting opportunities for social connection, building a sense of belonging, and introducing more mental health initiatives.[9] Programs fostering face-to-face interactions and a sense of belonging can help bridge these social gaps.

Skill Building: Small group sessions where students learn how to develop positive coping skills and build resiliency are effective in helping them manage uncertainty and stress.[10] Individual treatment (e.g., counseling) can improve academic performance and reduce student distress.

Suicide Prevention: Suicide prevention programming and means restriction are evidence-based measures that help prevent suicide on campus.[11]

Screenings: Screenings help to identify students with mental health concerns and connect them to resources. These short questionnaires can flag warning signs of anxiety, depression, suicidality and eating disorders. Online screenings are particularly well-suited to college students' schedules and digital lives.
Experts recommend making mental health screenings a routine part of the student experience.

WHAT WE CAN DO

➲ STUDENTS & PARENTS:

- Practice **problem-solving skills** to prepare emotionally for college.
- Parents can help by managing their own anxiety about their child attending college.
- Learn stress management skills, utilize a toolkit like **Life on Campus** or the College **Mental Health Toolkit**, and prioritize in-person activities that build your social connections.
- Understand what promotes and protects positive mental health and embed into daily routines.
- Join a campus wellness group to promote mental health and provide peer support.

➲ POLICYMAKERS & COMMUNITY LEADERS:

- Support funding to reach a standard of minimal care on campus and to hire additional mental health professionals.
- Expand initiatives to help students navigate health insurance.
- Increase funding for peer counseling programs and group workshops.
- Advocate for state-level suicide prevention strategies tailored to college students.

➲ COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES:

- Conduct routine mental health screenings.
- Provide skills training to students on how to adjust to college life.
- Train faculty and staff to **recognize warning signs** and refer students to available resources. Consider using **syllabus statements** to destigmatize mental health and encourage dialogue with students.
- Promote a school-wide culture of care in which the entire campus community supports student well-being.
- Develop resources and support systems specific to student athletes, students of color, and students with disabilities who often experience elevated mental health concerns.
- Build awareness of community resources and encourage help-seeking among students, especially for schools that may lack robust campus options.
- Expand access to care via tele-mental health.
- Respond to mental health crises with a clinical perspective rather than law enforcement.

NOTES & REFERENCES:

[1] Though a portion of college students are older adults, the vast majority of college students are ages 18-25. Because brain development ends around age 26, OCMH defines children and youth as those ages 0-26.

[2] Student surveys on college mental health are scored on a clinical scale so researchers can confirm there has been an increase in negative mental health outcomes in recent years.

[3] Thriving College Student Index Report. January 2024. **https://thrivingcollegestudents.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/TCSI-Final-Report-Jan-2024.pdf**

[4] The Healthy Minds Study, 2023-2024 Report. University of Michigan. **https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/HMS_national_report_090924.pdf**

[5] NCHA report, **https://www.acha.org/ncha/data-results/survey-results/academic-year-2023-2024/**

[6] U.S. News/Generation Lab. March 2024 survey, **https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/mental-health-on-college-campuses-challenges-and-solutions.**

[7] Gallup Poll, **https://news.gallup.com/poll/644645/mental-health-stress-top-reasons-students-consider-leaving.aspx#:~:text=The%20most%20important%20reason%20students,43%25%20reporting%20mental%20health%20reasons.**

[8] **Universities of Wisconsin Counseling Impact Assessment Report, 2023-24**

[9] Inside Higher Ed and Generation Lab. Student Voice Survey. **https://www.insidehighered.com/collections/student-voice/2024.**

[10 & 11] American Council on Education. What Works for Improving Mental Health in Higher Education? **https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/What-Works-Mental-Health.pdf.**

[12] University Health Services, UW-Madison. Health Promoting Strategies & Resources. **https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/healthy-academics/strategies/**

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Children's
Mental Health