

UB op-ed: Counseling centers help students with mental health disorders graduate

By: [Diane E. Melby](#) | April 22, 2019



A recent study from the American Psychological Association (APA) confirms what college presidents already recognize: There is a growing mental health crisis in higher education.

According to APA research, more than one third of first-year university students in the U.S.—and seven other industrialized nations—report symptoms consistent with a mental health disorder. The most common was major depressive disorder followed by generalized anxiety.

“The finding that one-third of students from multiple countries screened positive for at least one of six mental health disorders represents a key global

mental health issue,” said lead study author Randy P. Auerbach, professor of medical psychology at Columbia University.

For context, consider the growth of the mental health challenge in the U.S.

“In the 1980s, at any given point, perhaps one in 10 college students could be readily characterized as needing/wanting/using some form of mental health treatment,” *Psychology Today* reported in November 2018. “Now that number is one in three with trend lines rising.”

If that doesn’t open eyes, perhaps this will: An increasing number of college presidents view mental health as the No. 1 challenge in higher education—more important than accessibility and affordability.

Biggest problem

Consider the observation of Harvard researcher Howard Gardner, a noted professor and author who has been studying higher education trends since 2012. He recently concluded, “Indeed, the majority of individuals participating in our study indicated that mental health was the biggest problem on campus, and that was in comparison to other well-known problems, such as academic dishonesty, alcohol and substance abuse, peer relationships, and safety.”

The mental health challenge relates directly to another: degree completion. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, only 58 percent of college students who enrolled in 2012 had earned a degree within six years. An unknown number of students struggling with depression, anxiety or suicide ideation did not graduate.

Conversely, college counseling centers have helped a large number of students work through mental health challenges. According to the 2017 Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors annual survey, 66.8 percent of students said counseling helped their academic performance. And 65.2 percent said counseling helped them stay in school.

Challenges remain

Reports from my school, Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU), support the national data and underscore the critical role counselors play in retention and degree completion.

At OLLU, student surveys indicated 86 percent found counseling therapists “very helpful” during the 2017-18 school year. Seventy-three percent said they would feel comfortable calling their therapists in the future. More importantly, 75 percent who received therapy either graduated or registered for the fall semester in 2018.

The good news at OLLU and at schools across the U.S. is that counseling centers are helping students with mental health disorders persist to graduation. But challenges remain. A large percentage of students, for example, are reluctant to seek help. According to the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, only 10 to 15 percent of students with mental health concerns seek counseling services.

A second challenge is funding. Many counseling centers cannot hire additional staff to serve the growing demand for mental health assistance. Surveys show most universities have one counselor for every 1,737 students, which is lower than the recommended minimum of one for every 1,000 to 1,500. Many schools rely on grants to pay for counselors. OLLU has secured grants for its counseling center. Presently, four practicum counselors assist our two full-time counselors, but we need more staffing to serve the growing need.

As commencement approaches, I am challenged and heartened. Challenged to find ways to reach students reluctant to seek mental health care—and challenged to secure funding for more staffing at our counseling center. At the same time, I am heartened by the positive interventions that occur at schools across the nation.

Some time ago, a student going through a divorce came to the OLLU counseling center while battling depression and suicide ideation. The student had to be hospitalized more than once.

Over the course of many months, the counselor provided helpful treatment and enabled the student to recognize his potential—until he graduated and fulfilled his dream of becoming a school teacher.

As graduates stride across the stage in May to the applause of family and friends, a large but untold number will be celebrating private victories over unseen battles to secure their diplomas.

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