

# Moving Towards a Wellness Paradigm for Higher Education



## The Need for a New Approach

On college and university campuses across the U.S., student mental health problems are highly prevalent and appear to be increasing. Schools are struggling to meet the rising demand for mental health services, and campus leaders are asking themselves how to balance mental health services and crises with their traditional academic and educational responsibilities and priorities.

What if we looked at student mental health through a different lens, in which it is not a competing priority but rather a fundamental piece linked to other priorities? What if colleges and universities viewed wellbeing and resilience as critical components of a student's foundation of academic and career success? In this white paper we discuss what this vision might look like, describe examples of implementing this vision, and offer recommendations for campus practitioners, administrators, and other stakeholders.

## Example #1: UNC-Greensboro

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a recipient of the Active Minds Healthy Campus Award, has placed the value of student wellness development at the core of their institution. Among other strategies, the institution defines mental health as part of overall health and wellness; co-locates all health and wellness services into one building; prioritizes health and wellness in the university's strategic plan; and offers preventative services and programs to encourage mindfulness, wellness check-ins that are inclusive of mental health, and peer health education.

This work has not been without its challenges. For example, although they have co-located their wellness services, more work remains to integrate their processes where appropriate and more effectively coordinate across services.



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Additionally, when the new facility was built, they were met with protest from neighbors in the community and students who saw a rise in their fees. Key to their success has been support from leadership, emanating down from administration to student affairs and through academics, as a way to promote student success and retention. All levels of leadership – the chancellor, board of trustees, and board of governors – remained committed to the project. Their unwavering support demonstrated their understanding of the

importance and positive benefits of student health and wellness.

UNCG's mission is to engage, empower and enrich their students to promote them to be engaged citizens. They state that they empower students by creating a culture of care and support for all students which in turn, empowers them to take an active and responsible role in their collegiate experience.

With this mission, they have moved from an illness paradigm to a resiliency framework to assist their students in developing academic and emotional resilience, which results in better retention and graduation rates. In a resiliency framework, students who can persist when things are difficult, who can make a plan and execute it, and who feel a sense of control, as well as have a social network on campus, are the students who succeed (Hartley, 2013). Rather than focusing solely on risks and reacting to student crises, UNCG has proactively and strategically developed marketing, programming and resources to increase students' success and happiness. They have created both a culture and a climate to support student and faculty wellness.

### **Example #2: University of Wisconsin-Madison**

At University of Wisconsin-Madison, a holistic approach to mental health permeates the university via experiences in the classroom, on campus within and outside of traditional counseling settings, with an emphasis on campus-wide collaboration, infusing health promotion into the curriculum, and providing extensive mental health training.

Even before starting their first classes, students are engaged with peers and with UW-Madison resources, including blogs by incoming students at #YouatUW. The First Year Experience includes a one-credit counseling psychology course taught in small groups with both a faculty instructor and an undergraduate teaching fellow. The resulting level of knowledge about campus resources facilitates access to services when needed and enables students to aid one another.

In addition, courses such as "Greek Men for Violence Prevention" are engaging college men in questions about violence prevention and healthy relationships. The institution is also committed to expanding mental health support outside of the counseling center and through collaboration with perhaps unexpected departments, such as the library, the school of education, and the student union. University Health Services counsellors travel to various locations around campus providing brief (<20 minute) individual consultations.



Based on Cornell University's evidence-based program, Let's Talk (<https://health.cornell.edu/services/counseling-psychiatry/lets-talk>) is a drop-in free counseling service providing confidential conversations that are informal and friendly, with no topic off-limits. Students are encouraged to explore personal issues or bring up concerns about friends or family members. The

program has a higher utilization among men, graduate students, and African American students compared with utilization of traditional counseling appointments.

However, responsibility for student mental health is not limited to professional counseling services. Faculty and staff are encouraged to “recognize, respond, and refer” when students show signs of distress. Assistance to concerned faculty and staff is available in multiple formats. Specific recommendations and resources are given in an online “Red Folder” <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/RedFolder2014web.pdf> and in a 15-minute in-person presentation available on request. In-depth consultations with mental health staff address individual or departmental concerns. The university has also created a comprehensive website with extensive links to online wellness information: <http://uwell.wisc.edu/>.

UW–Madison was a recipient of the 2016 Healthy Campus Award from Active Minds, and for the past two years, UW–Madison has been honored for Best Health Services by the Princeton Review, the result of a survey of 137,000 students at 382 top academic schools. <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/front/princetonreview2017/>

## **Recommendations**

Based on these and other examples of successful initiatives to promote student mental health, we offer the following recommendations:



### **1. Align with Leadership**

A key strategy is to gain leadership and administrative support. Speak the language leaders use in framing their goals for student success. Use stories to convey student experiences of stigma, prejudice and discrimination. Give examples of how other colleges have shifted from an illness paradigm to one that prioritizes wellness for all students. When leadership allocates funding to create sustainable programs, positions and services, the message to students, families, faculty and staff is that wellbeing and resiliency is a priority and valued.

### **2. Make the Fiscal Case**

Use data to make an economic case for mental health. Administrators are concerned about attrition and tuition dollars. Administrators appear willing to fund mental health and wellness initiatives if they believe it will avert a crisis on their campus, increase retention, increase GPA or if it will reduce the number of public incidents that bring negative attention to their colleges and universities (Hunt, Watkins, & Eisenberg, 2012).

### **3. Make Wellbeing a Vision and a Mission**

Engage in a strategic planning process for the wellness of all students and faculty. Consider asking how much time, effort and funding is spent on reacting to mental health and behavioral issues on campus that might be better spent on proactive planning and implementation of programs that support student and faculty wellness and success. Examine the student programs, faculty resources, the campus culture, the services available, as well as the policies that shape health and wellness. See wellness challenges as learning problems, as they impact learning and success (Douce & Keeling, 2014). Engage all stakeholders on campus in the conversation of wellbeing and mental health as a critical strategy.

### **4. Use Resilience Programming to Enhance Wellness and Connection**

There is growing evidence that a resiliency framework for college mental health services will help students develop academic, social and emotional resilience resulting in better retention and graduation rates. Feeling connected to one's campus is critical for student success. Consider offering programming, such as classes and services that address resilience, mindfulness, meditation, affirmation and appraisal skills, cognitive flexibility, personal meaning, social network building, and active coping skills, that improve students' ability to compete in a demanding post-secondary environment. Engage students as peer wellness coaches and instructors to tap into their natural and developmentally appropriate desire to create wellbeing with their peers.

### **5. Involve Everyone**

Collaborative planning and communication are needed to create effective wellness initiatives. If we are going to effectively address the growing mental health needs of students, we need to take an approach more geared towards prevention and one that involves the entire community. We need to fund and elevate traditional mental health services as a priority, but switching to a wellness paradigm requires engaging the entire community. Everyone -- faculty, staff, wellness services, campus safety, leadership, custodians, athletics, peers, communications/marketing, etc. -- has a part to play in providing opportunities for emotional support and resiliency.

### **6. Champion Student Voices**

Students know students. They turn to each other when struggling with health and model their behaviors and attitudes after their peers'. They are experts in the best programming, strategies, messaging, and approaches to engage students and create a campus culture and climate that fosters mental health, physical health, and well-being.

### **7. Define Health Broadly and Pursue it Comprehensively**

There is no health without mental health. Applying a wellness paradigm means prioritizing mental health alongside physical health and using diverse strategies to address the multiple factors that influence health.

## **8. Commit to Sustainable Systems Changes and Policy-Oriented Long-Term Solutions**

Working towards a wellness paradigm on campuses requires thoughtful and deliberate policy, programmatic, environmental, and systems changes focused on identified community priorities with a goal of sustaining the impact of these changes over time.

## **9. Cultivate a Deep Commitment to Equal Opportunities for Health**

If we are truly committed to impacting all students' academic and career success through a wellness paradigm, we must work to address opportunity gaps that tend to disproportionately and negatively affect certain populations, such as ethnic minorities and those with limited English skills, lesser income, and/or a marginalized sexual or gender identity.

## **10. Measure Results**

Collecting data-driven measures and outcomes and sharing progress are best practices for continuously motivating, guiding, and focusing action on campuses. It requires a commitment to quality and impact in both process and outcomes.

### **For More Information**

Several frameworks in the field include crucial elements of the wellness paradigm and offer additional recommendations. These frameworks include:

Active Minds Healthy Campus Award: <http://activeminds.org/our-programming/healthy-campus-award>

Healthy Campus 2020 (American College Health Association):  
<https://www.acha.org/HealthyCampus>

Strategic Primer on College Student Mental Health (NASPA): <https://www.naspa.org/rpi/reports/a-strategic-primer-on-college-student-mental-health>

American Psychological Association (APA): <http://www.apa.org/>

American Council on Education (ACE): <http://www.acenet.edu/Pages/default.aspx>

The Jed Foundation/Suicide Prevention Resource Center: <https://www.sprc.org/effective-prevention/comprehensive-approach>

Equity in Mental Health Framework: <http://equityinmentalhealth.org/>

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