Target student mental well-being

Mental health and well-being are critical to student success in higher education and beyond but rarely get the attention they need. Colleges and universities in the United States have been seeing increases in mental illness and emotional distress among students for decades. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic consequences are accelerating these trends. Furthermore, renewed focus on systemic racism in many spheres of American life is highlighting the stresses and mental health consequences faced by students from traditionally underrepresented groups and by women who continue to suffer the lingering effects of sexism. The damaging consequences of these problems for students, their institutions, and a modern world that depends on a well-educated, healthy workforce demand a much better response. Promoting student mental health and emotional well-being on campus requires more than a well-functioning counseling center. It calls for a campus-wide commitment and coordinated action plan. For many institutions, accomplishing this will involve a major rethinking of their responsibilities to students.

American undergraduate students have been reporting increasing rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, trauma, and substance use for decades. In the 2018–2019 Healthy Minds Study (HMS) survey, conducted before the pandemic, 40% of about 300,000 students at some 300 colleges and universities reported experiencing a mental health problem, and 60% said they were having difficulty accessing mental health care on campus or in the community. A spring 2020 survey conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic by the HMS and American College Health Association showed that self-reported prevalence of depression among undergraduates had increased by 15% compared to the fall of 2019, and more students reported that mental health problems negatively affected their academic performance. Other studies estimate that the dropout rate for U.S. undergraduate students with diagnosed mental health problems is over 40%, and that the prevalence of mental health problems among graduate students is six times that of the general population. These statistics reflect a major problem that has clear implications not only for students but also for their institutions that depend on, if nothing else, tuition payments.

A December 2020 survey by the American Council on Education reported that 68% of U.S. college and university presidents ranked mental health issues among the five most pressing concerns facing their institutions. Most academic institutions provide some mental health services, often through a dedicated counseling center. But no matter how good that center is, it alone cannot solve the problems. Last week, a U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine committee (which I chaired) laid out recommendations for how institutional leadership, campus mental health professionals, faculty, staff, and students can together address this mental health crisis. An important early step is for each institution to assess the extent of the crisis on its campus and whether there are sufficient treatment services either at the institution or in the local community. Another important question is whether there are elements of the institution’s own environment or culture that contribute to the problems that students are experiencing, like unreasonable workloads or deadlines for assignments. In addition, student orientation should emphasize the value of pursuing one’s own wellness while providing information about campus and community services available to help when needed. The stigma that inevitably accompanies mental health and substance use problems and inhibits students from seeking help must also be tackled. Faculty should be trained to recognize students in distress and refer them to professional services.

Many institutions may need to undergo a change in culture and perception of their mission—from seeing their role as dealing only with severe or acute mental health episodes to promoting the mental health and well-being of all students. Every college and university should implement a comprehensive action plan to achieve this goal. This may require additional resources during a trying time for institutional budgets. But supporting the whole student is important enough that financial priorities should be rearranged, if that is what it takes.

The mission of higher education should be to develop the whole student. After all, physically and mentally healthy, well-educated individuals are what society really needs from academia.

—Alan I. Leshner

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