

Assisting At-Risk Students

Mental Health & Emotional Well-Being

A Campus Strategy Guide





Topics Covered in this Campus Strategy Guide

In this resource, you will find information, fact sheets and worksheets on:

- Understanding At-Risk Students' Mental Health and Emotional Well-being Needs
- Supporting Students as They Work Toward Improved Mental Health – Before Reaching Crisis Points
- Helping Students Develop a Sense of Agency and Self-Advocacy Skills
- Identifying Students Who are Most At Risk for a Mental Health or Emotional Well-being Emergency
- Creative Strategies to Address Campus Case Management and Staffing Issues
- Implementing Healthy Supports to Help Students Succeed and Persist to Graduation
- Connecting Increased Mental Health Services and Resources to Student Retention
- What's Working at Other Institutions to Support Students' Mental Health and Emotional Well-being



Students' Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

Mental health is an ever-present concern for today's college students who face more challenges and pressures than ever before, including in unprecedented ways such as having to cope with the recent coronavirus pandemic, heightened social unrest, financial difficulties and political conflicts.

The mental health conditions and emotional issues our students face include depression, anxiety and stress, all of which outpace those found among the overall general population, according to a December 2020 report from the *AIMS Public Health* journal (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

Unfortunately, these and other mental and emotional health conditions can adversely impact any of our students, even those who may outwardly seem to be successful and well-adjusted.

There are some factors, however, that predispose some people to mental and emotional health challenges, which will be covered in the next section.

“Mental health problems are common phenomenon among students with a higher prevalence compared to the general public.”

– The *AIMS Public Health* Journal, 12/25/20

“Symptoms of mental health conditions were already high among college students before the start of the pandemic. Depression and substance use were prevalent on campuses, and COVID-19 only increased these existing concerns.”

– University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign case study by Kognito, 2022

In the Headlines

Several college student athletes who seemingly “had it all” have died by suicide in recent months, proving no student is exempt from mental health risks:

- “Death of Stanford Goalie Katie Meyer Ruled Suicide, Sheriff’s Office Says,” *Cox Media Group National Content Desk*, 3/5/22
- “Family Speaks Out About Pressures That Led Star College Runner Sarah Shulze to Take Her Own Life at 21,” *CBS News*, 4/25/22
- “James Madison University Cancels Remainder of Softball Season as Student Athlete Lauren Bennett’s Death Ruled a Suicide,” *CNN*, 5/3/22
- “Northern Michigan Track and Field Athlete Jayden Hill, 19, Dies,” *Detroit Free Press*, 4/7/22
- “Binghamton Graduate Student Goalie Robert Martin Dies by Suicide,” *USA Lacrosse Magazine*, 4/4/22



Helping Students Develop a Sense of Agency and Self-Advocacy Skills

In your work to help students, it can be tempting to take on several roles and responsibilities for them. In some circumstances, that may even be appropriate. However, research shows that in most situations, guiding them to handle certain tasks and advocate for themselves can empower them to successfully navigate challenges and obstacles in the future.

This doesn't mean washing your hands of the current situation and leaving them to figure it all out on their own, of course! The key to fostering this development in them is balance: showing students *how* to identify and access needed resources is often all the boost they need. Letting them take over from that point enables them to take ownership of the process and feel more in control of their lives, feelings which are especially important during times when they may have been feeling helpless or powerless.

Defining a Sense of Agency

“Sense of agency refers to the feeling of control over actions and their consequences.”

– The National Library of Medicine, “What Is the Sense of Agency and Why Does it Matter?”, 8/29/16

Engaging and Empowering Students

Below are a few examples of ways in which various campus officials could actively engage and empower students in need of help, rather than taking over a process completely for them:

- A faculty member who learns that a student has been absent from class due to food insecurity can connect the student to a campus or neighborhood food pantry.
- An athletics coach can inform a team member with a long, dangerous early morning commute before practice how to contact the campus housing office to inquire about on-campus housing.
- A residence life staff member can help a resident with a question about class registration find the contact info and hours for the registrar's office.
- A teaching assistant can inform students in need of academic help how to access tutoring services on campus.
- An academic advisor who is meeting with a student thinking of changing majors can connect the student with relevant faculty members for further guidance.

“Self-advocacy is a choice even when in the pain of the moment you cannot see it.”

– CPTSD Foundation, “Self-Advocacy: The Basis of Self-Care,” 9/13/21

In these scenarios, the campus professional involved is not simply taking on the task at hand from scratch, nor are they telling the student, “Oh, I don't handle that.” Instead, they are helping the student identify and connect directly with possible resources that may be able to help with the current situation. In fact, the staff member doesn't even need to immediately know the answer to a student's question,



Helping Students Develop a Sense of Agency and Self-Advocacy Skills *(continued)*

but rather be willing to help show *how* to find help. That kind of support and guidance is not only a relief in the moment to a student who is struggling with a specific challenge, but shows the student how to identify resources and reach out down the line. Developing a sense of agency and being able to advocate for oneself in these ways are important life skills.

Working with First-Generation Students

Facilitating these connections is even more vital for first-generation students who have little to no familiarity with higher education. Many of these students will not know about certain resources unless they are told about them. Although details like these may be mentioned in your new student orientation, new students are often experiencing information overload at that time and will not retain all of the information they may need later on, particularly if they don't need specific resources at that time. Also, even when details like these are easy enough to find on the college website, many students will not even think to look for them, so informing students about the existence of these resources *and* connecting them can be a vital lifeline for a student in need of help.

Note: It is also important to follow up to ensure the student is receiving the needed help and hasn't slipped through the cracks.

“First-generation college students can't rely on advice from college-educated parents about navigating college life. They are usually not familiar with the details of college life, academic resources and social expectations, so they can need guidance. For instance, a freshman student I knew did not understand why his professors were not in their classrooms all day, as in high school. In my own case, I didn't realize that it was possible to withdraw from a class for health reasons rather than fail.”

– Alecea Standlee, a College Professor Who Was a First-Generation College Student

Source: *Inside Higher Ed*, 4/11/19



Technological Tools to Support Students

Many campuses are utilizing special strategies and resources to manage their case management loads more effectively to better help students. It's helpful to be resourceful in this area, as many institutions are dealing with underfunded offices, short-staffing and busy schedules.

While many colleges still use in-house procedures to manage their incident reports and help at-risk students, more and more are turning to technological resources to help organize and manage the basic — yet time-consuming — functions involved in these processes. Student conduct software providers such as Guardian, Maxient or Advocate by Symplicity are just a few examples. If your institution is not currently using software of this nature, it may be worth considering.

Tech Spotlight

EdSights

EdSights describes itself on its website, <https://www.edights.io/>, as a retention chatbot which “automatically checks in with students and connects them to the resources they need to succeed.” This tool can help students in ways that staff members can't due to its 24/7 availability and customized content based on what students inquire about. Proactive outreach campaigns can be scheduled, and reports can be generated as to which students are at risk for various issues such as dropping out, low engagement and more. This information enables staff to follow up with students regarding their specific needs sooner than may be possible otherwise.

Starfish

Starfish is an early alert software program designed to help institutions improve student retention and success. It allows various members of a campus community to raise a flag in the system regarding a particular student in need of special assistance, and to indicate the student's particular challenge(s) to relevant personnel. For instance, a faculty member concerned about a student's excessive absences can raise a flag in the system so that student affairs staff members can follow up with that student. Once the concern is resolved, the flag is closed, so that the faculty member knows the issue was seen and addressed, even if additional details cannot be shared about the situation for the sake of the student's privacy. Starfish also has other capabilities involving case management, scheduling and more. For additional details, visit <https://eab.com/products/starfish/>